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Music Physicianers: Blues Lyric Form and the Patent Medicine Show

MATT SANDLER

Patent medicine shows became popular in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century by selling their products alongside free musical and theatrical entertainments. The "doctors" promised a range of cures, but usually mixed their remedies with alcohol or narcotics – using the promise of health to evade religious authorities and law enforcement, even in dry counties. Many talented black performers toured with medicine shows, including a number of artists later associated with the blues. I argue that the medicine show had a decisive impact on the blues by providing not simply training in performance, but also an impetus for the notorious suggestiveness of its lyric code. The blues borrows from the medicine show its lawless appeal to ailments uncategorized and ignored by socially sanctioned experts.

In 2004, the beverage manufacturer Glacéau signed rapper 50 Cent to an endorsement contract for Vitamin Water, its line of sugary, vitamin-infused beverages in color-coded bottles. A hip-hop star with a lurid criminal backstory marketing a health drink might seem a little strange. At the time, 50 Cent set off a vogue for well-toned hip-hop torsos by featuring his "jailhouse" body prominently in videos and album artwork. The video for his massive crossover hit "In Da Club" (2003) intersperses scenes of the rapper partying with scenes of him exercising in an high-security medical testing facility. The end of the clip reveals that the club is also in the facility, and the viewer is left to surmise that 50 Cent represents a new technological synthesis of nightlife and health science. The song's hedonistic address pays no lip service to vitamins or exercise, but it does take a kind of salesman-like approach to nightlife courtship: "You can find me in the club, bottle full of bub,/Look mami, I got the X if you into takin' drugs/I'm into havin' sex I ain't into makin' love."[1] In

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[1] 50 Cent, "In Da Club," on 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (CD) (Shady Records 0694935442, 2003).

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spite of these promises, the rapper himself purportedly does not drink, and his audience has few qualms about the contradictions in his image. 50 Cent's compensation in the deal with Glacéau involved an ownership stake in the company, and ended up making him more money than he has ever made rapping, reportedly hundreds of millions of dollars.

Many of the most surprising features of this story date back to the late nineteenth century, when traveling medicine shows toured the country selling snake oil with elaborate pitches built around black music. The "doctors" in these shows promised a range of cures, but usually mixed their remedies with alcohol or narcotics – using the promise of health to evade religious authorities and law enforcement, even in otherwise dry counties.[2] Medicine shows could range in size from one to twenty performers on average – with the smallest comprising a black musician, often performing in blackface, and a white "doctor," who would alternate comic sketches, songs, and sales pitches. Many of the most talented black performers of the period toured with medicine shows, including a number of artists later associated with the blues. In this essay, I argue that the conspiratorial context of the medicine show prompted some important aspects of the notorious suggestiveness of the blues.

Scholars have interpreted the role of black music in early twentieth-century American health culture in widely divergent ways. Kathy J. Ogren's *The Jazz Revolution* (1992), for instance, details the ways mainstream periodical editorializing stigmatized Black music as pathological, while Joel Dinerstein's *Swinging the Machine* (2003) finds an equally copious archive making the case for black music's therapeutic effect on the pathologies associated with the mechanization of everyday life. Rather than focussing on white professionals' response to black music, I show how the blues borrows from the medicine show its lawless appeal to ailments uncategorized and ignored by sanctioned experts.[3] I argue that the medicine show thus helped shape the

[2] The southern usage of "medicine" to refer to liquor grows out of this connection. Crusaders against the medicine show, including yellow journalists, Progressive bureaucrats, and temperance advocates, all advocated against this aspect of the patent medicine business. Medicine shows countered their attacks in a variety of ways. Many doctors pitched their patent medicines as remedies for alcoholism or liver conditions (see Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 30). The shows often borrowed bits from popular temperance plays like William Smith's *The Drunkard: Or, the Fallen Saved* (1844) and William Pratt's *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There* (1854). Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil, Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 95, points out that producers could thus "have it both ways: By staging temperance plays, they got 'respectable' patrons into the tent and then sold them alcoholic nostrums in between the acts. Alcohol, when used for medicinal purposes, was perfectly acceptable, even to temperance reformers."

[3] Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity,*

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blues as a commodity form and as a mode of social critique, with what Marshall Stearns calls a "lean matter-of-fact skepticism that penetrates the florid façade of our culture like a knife."[4] I survey reports by musicians who worked on the medicine shows, and who often characterize the experience as formative, both as training in performance and as a site for apprehending the psychological effects of American capitalism. I then turn to a close reading of a selection of songs, and demonstrate the medicine shows' influence on blues lyric encoding. By returning to the medicine show as a point of origin for the blues, this paper finds the music developing out of a performance context that played on popular forms of faith healing and begs skepticism at turns.[5]

The medicine shows drew on a longer history of what Neil Harris, in his study of P. T. Barnum, terms "the operational aesthetic."[6] Harris noticed that nineteenth-century audiences reveled in debating the workings of Barnum's humbug, and that detecting the mechanics of his scams formed a

Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). "Americanitis" was a term in circulation at the end of the nineteenth century that meant to capture the peculiar psychological drawbacks of industrial modernity which by then America had come to represent. Later critics of the blues have long turned to psychoanalysis thinking through blues lyrics. Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), makes a convincing parallel between pre-World War II blues and surrealism. Eric Lott, "Back Door Man: Howlin' Wolf and the Sound of Jim Crow," *American Quarterly*, 63, 3 (2011), 697–710, offers a reading of Howlin' Wolf that combines Freud and historical materialism.

[4] Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 107.

[5] The blues as a concept draws on a dizzying array of cultural and historical sources. In *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1976), Albert Murray deftly weaves pre-twentieth-century connotations of the "blues" – drawn from humoral medicine and Anglo-American Puritanism (he cheekily quotes Thomas Jefferson, writing in 1810, "We have something of the blue devils at times" (ibid., 64)). The ambiguities of the concept allowed it to circulate through health discourse of the turn of the century. One of the most notorious quacks of the period, Albert Abrams, *The Blues: Its Causes and Cures* (New York: E. B. Treat and Co., 1904), 15, argues that "an attack of the blues is nought else but an acute neurasthenia or an aperiodic exacerbation of chronic neurasthenia." He sold machines and guides to percussing the nerves around the internal organs (where he concluded the blues originated) as treatment. The idea appeared in the mainstream press: Orison Swett Marden, editor of *Success* magazine, speaks repeatedly of stamping out the "blues" in *Everybody Ahead: Or, Getting the Most Out of Life* (New York: Frank E. Morrison, 1916). *Ladies Home Journal* recommended music as a home remedy for "the blues" without noting the origin of this concept in African American communities: "Music as medicine in the home [is] better than any system of mental therapeutics … in all nervous illness music is very potent as a sedative, and, strange to say, in cases of despondency and melancholia the minor chords are most effective and act as a tonic." Quoted in Peter Muir, *The Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America 1850–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2009), 99.

[6] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 59–89.

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large part of their attraction. The operational aesthetic suggests that American audiences enjoyed a scam by being in on it as well as being taken in by it. The medicine shows drew audiences into a complex of interpretive ambiguities; the contents of the medicines and the ethnic identity of the performers alike encouraged amateur discernment and argument. Some audience members might have known the inebriant contents of the medicine and some might not. Medical historians tend to cast the audience of medicine shows as dupes, and the shows as the most embarrassing feature of American medicine before the advent of the Food and Drug Administration and the American Medical Association. They emphasize the shows' success in small rural towns cut off from scientific modernity. The medicine shows did rely on nostalgic antimodernism as a part of their charm; they borrowed anachronistic iconography from medieval Europe, the antebellum South, and Native American as well as African American culture. Historian James Harvey Young notes that patent medicine shows were modern in one key respect, however: their sales techniques. The snake oil pitchman "was the first promoter to test out a multitude of psychological lures by which people might be enticed to buy his wares."[7]

The ethnic caricature which pitchmen incorporated into their "operational aesthetic" comprised a crucial aspect of the shows' modernism; it allowed quackery (a centuries-old tradition) to play on the anxieties particular to postbellum America. Redface and blackface had overlapping functions in medicine shows. Both suggested a complex mixture of exoticism, nostalgia, and anti-authoritarianism. Native American redface performers pointed to the supposedly transhistorical and local authority of folk remedies. Some pitches used blithe assurances framed by American power: "The Indian gave you America and now he gives you the magic secret of health and happiness with long life, the greatest blessing of all."[8] Many patent medicines drew on Native American traditional medicines, even if their "fortifications" might offset the potential benefits.[9] In smaller shows, the "doctor" himself might wear a Plains Indian war bonnet to signal his connection to indigenous racial knowledge. Audiences that associated Native Americans with alcoholism would have taken the redface performance and potted iconography as hints at the alcoholic content of the nostrums. Redface performance thus had the double effect of supporting the pitch with the authority of Native American

[7] James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 97.
[8] Quoted in McNamara, 106.
[9] James Harvey Young, "Folk into Fake," *Western Folklore*, 44, 3 (July 1985), 225–39.

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medicine, and flattering the audiences' sense of their own (implicitly white) modernity.[10]

Reports from participants and viewers of medicine shows testify to the ways claims of racial authenticity worked to both agitate and reassure audiences. William D. Naylor, a white blackface performer on a medicine show, told a Federal Writer's Project interviewer in 1938,

> One of the tricks Doc Porter used to stimulate his sales of Kickapoo Indian remedies was the psychology of suggestion. Doc had it down fine. He would always wind up his lecture with a detailed description of all the diseases the Kickapoo Indian medicines were supposed to cure. The way he described those diseases – how anybody would feel when they were getting them, or had them or were about to have them – was enough to make anybody shiver. By the time Doc got through describing symptoms, practically everybody in the neighborhood would be imagining they felt at least some of them. Why I used to listen to Doc's horror stories of diseases; I'd get to feeling the symptoms myself! Doc was a foxy old bird and I guess he wasn't too far off base when he said, "Most diseases people get are just imagination, anyhow!" Doc was sincere in believing that the stuff he mixed out of wild cherry bark, senna leaves, slippery elm bark, sassafras roots, and other "Indian herbs" – which he fortified with about sixty percent of good raw whiskey – were genuinely beneficial medicines and that he was a human benefactor. He used to say, "It ain't what anybody knows, but what they *think* they know for certain that counts, and if people buy Kickapoo Indian Medicine and think it'll cure them, it's darn near sure to cure them. And so they haven't been cheated!"[11]

Naylor depicts Porter as a conflicted individual who believes both in the ancient Native American provenance of his formulae and in the trickster function of his "psychology of suggestion." The hypnotic double-talk of patent medicine salesmen played on audiences' hypochondria, but also their belief in the pseudoscience of race. A disproportionate number of patent medicines promised "blood purification." By contrast, the shows' extravagant complex of cultural traditions and ethnic caricatures offered anything but "pure" entertainments. A journalist described the intensity of this multiethnic spectacle pruriently in *Reader's Digest*: "All of this time the Indians kept chanting monotonously and beating their tom-toms, the doctor himself roaring like a bull, while the minstrels kept up a furious ragtime dancing until the sweat rolled down their black faces."[12]

Like redface, blackface performance hinted at the piquant dangers associated with alcohol – temperance reform in the late nineteenth century still referred to alcoholism as a form of enslavement. Eric Lott's account of

[10] Quoted in McNamara, 106.
[11] Ann Banks, *First-Person America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 196, original emphasis.
[12] David Edstrom, "Medicine Men of the '80's," *Reader's Digest*, June 1938, 71–78, 78.

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minstrelsy's effect on white working-class masculinity holds true for its postbellum second act in the medicine show.[13] Minstrelsy soothed economic tension in the unevenly industrializing New South with anachronistic fantasies of the leisurely life of the antebellum master class. Not only did white audiences feel physically better after a few slugs of narcotic lineaments, they also took in a spectacle designed around black inferiority. At the same time, medicine shows relied on black performers to agitate white men's anxieties about sexual potency. Many medicine shows played to all-male audiences, and kicked up anxieties about impotence by promising snake oil that restored "vigor" and "vitality." W. T. Lhamon Jr. points to the etymology of the word "minstrelsy … from minister, as in minister to," claiming that the form has a "curative genealogy."[14] Minstrelsy in the medicine show confirms Lhamon's suspicions – customers went away from medicine shows drunk and happy, convinced that their complaints had been cured. In the absence of real scientific authority, the medicine show used ethnic caricature to effect a kind of multicultural faith healing. At the same time, the shows' "cure" worked by getting the audience tuned up into states of intense anxiety cut with boozy, druggy, and sugary placebos. Like other forms of burgeoning commodity culture, the medicine shows used African Americans to embody the admixture of health and dissipation that characterized the capitalist good life.[15]

The figure of "Jake," the standard name for the black character in medicine show performance, allowed audiences to feel superior even as they were being conned by the medicine show pitchman. Some sketches even had the doctor scam Jake at making change, a game that some doctors ran moments later on drunken audience members. Minstrel comedies had often joked on the

[13] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[14] W. T. Lhamon , Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

[15] Revisionist music history has begun to complicate racialist ethnomusicological readings of the blues. Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21, for instance, argues that the "folkloric paradigm" and the record industry racialized southern American popular music in distorting ways. Medicine shows also featured white "songsters" as well, thus acting as a shared point of origin for the blues and country music. The earliest field recordings tended to ignore the medicine show as a context for black music, based partly on bogus assumptions about prisons, plantations, and camp meetings as the most pure repositories of African American culture. For African American culture, alcoholism, and the temperance movement, see Denise A. Herd, "Prohibition, Racism, and Class Politics in the Post-Reconstruction South," *Journal of Drug Issues*, 13,1 (Winter 1983), 77–92; and Jon Cruz, "Booze and Blues: Alcohol and Black Popular Music, 1920–1930," *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 15, 2 (Summer 1988), 149–85.

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unreliability of patent medicine and quack doctors: Charles White's *The Sham Doctor* (*c.*1870), John Smith's *The Quack Doctor* (*c.*1850), and George Coes's *The Faith Cure* (1895) all involve bogus medical authorities in interracial farce.[16] Medicine show repertoires, rather than arguing against this popular culture of critique, incorporated it, as it also did set pieces from temperance drama. Far from indicating the folk authenticity of the patent medicine, minstrel performance indicated to the audience the fakery of the proceedings.

The medicine shows, in spite of their obvious racism, attracted African American audiences as well. Since white physicians often refused to treat black patients, and the few black doctors were frequently overworked, African Americans often turned to patent medicines for relief.[17] The medicine show offered an alternative to African American consumers rightly skeptical of white professionalism. Moreover, the broad promises of potted "folk" patent medicines appealed to African Americans invested in the medical aspects of the conjure tradition. Like patent medicine, conjure appealed to people resistant to the particularistic focus of professional Western medicine. Zora Neale Hurston noted that conjure workers were "always referred to as 'two-headed doctors,' i.e. twice as much sense."[18] John Mbiti elaborates a definition of traditional medical practice in Africa that accounts for this doubleness: "the medicine man applies both physical and 'spiritual' (or psychological) treatment, which assures the sufferer that all is and will be well. The medicine man is in effect both doctor and pastor to the sick person."[19] Since lack of access to medical care was a part of the much broader alienation wreaked by Jim Crow, the root workers' broad promises held significant appeal. Some African American entrepreneurs even used the techniques of the medicine show to market the sale of African diasporic *materia medica* known variously as gris-gris, tobies, mojo bags, mojo hands, or conjure bags.[20]

[16] William J. Mahar, "Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840–1890," in Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 179–222, 204.

[17] Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 252.

[18] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 165.

[19] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1989), 165.

[20] Carolyn Morrow Long's *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001) is the definitive account of the transformation of African diasporic religious practice into American commodity subculture. Anderson also draws the parallel in her history of the medicine show (ibid., 97). Banks, *First-Person America*, 186–7, juxtaposes the lives of medicine show pitchmen with that of J. C. Julian, who sold "tobies" in Dust Bowl-era Oklahoma.

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Folklorist Harry Middleton Hyatt interviewed an African American "medicine show man" in Sumter, South Carolina, in the late 1930s, for his vast ethnography entitled *Hoodoo – Conjuration – Witchcraft – Rootwork* (1970). This unnamed individual testifies to having traveled on a two-man show, performing magic tricks and giving consultations on psychological or physical complaints. He offers a host of traditional remedies, and a heavy dose of medicine show humbug. Perhaps his most intriguing suggestion has to do with the "black cat bone," which he claims is the "most lucky bone in the world." He recommends the use of black cat bone in rituals designed for the un-medical purpose of "keepin' de law out yore place."[21] The informant, with a mocking conspiratorial tone, acknowledges the difficulty of acquiring an authentically black cat's bone:

> It do' jes' as well fo' yo' tuh ketch any cat, an' paint it black with any powder or shoe polish, as it is to have him black when yo' do whut ah tell yo' tuh do. De great mistake wit de people of today, dey take too long tuh find de cat.[22]

Here the magician appears to give away his tricks, suggesting that he has used differently colored cats to substitute for black cats when producing ritual bones. This routine jokes on the minstrel tradition and white preoccupations with black authenticity. He undercuts the mystique of professional authority with a vernacular pragmatism, and plays on the dynamic with Hyatt, the white ethnographer, whom he pretends to take into his confidence. The scene rings with the humbuggery of patent medicine shows. After describing the traditional ritual of boiling the cat in a pot over a fire in the woods, the informant returns to a more conventional logic of professional authority, emphasizing that only a "real ole-class root doctor" can "pick out" which bone is lucky, "an' dat's worth a thousan' dollahs to any man."[23] This attitude, equal parts authority and trickery, was born out in the commercialization of conjure practice; Carolyn Morrow Long attests that packaged replicas of "black cat bones" are often just chicken bones, or even plastic.[24] As a result of their unscientific claims, conjurers were subject to the same regulations as medicine showmen, and likewise forced to work outside the law.[25] Samuel

[21] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo – Conjuration – Witchcraft – Rootwork*, Volume II (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970), 1106.

[22] Ibid., 1100.

[23] Ibid., 1101.

[24] Long, 104.

[25] Vivian Cameron, a master's student in Depression-era Chicago, wrote explicitly of the government forces that worked against traditional medicine in contemporary African American communities: "Their [root doctor's] hold must be very strong to allow them to maintain their ground in the face of such powerful interferences as the State Boards of Health, free dispensaries and free education. But the mould for the reception of these beliefs is

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Hopkins Adams, the most vocal muckraking opponent of patent medicines, railed against such fakery. Writing in *Collier's Magazine* in 1906 of a nostrum claiming to cure kidney disease and rheumatism, Adams fulminated, "There is practically nothing about it that isn't a fake. It possesses that rounded completeness, that realization of every opportunity for knavery, which suggests a truly artistic insight joyously bent on fulfilling itself."[26] These lines are fine polemic; they might also provide a starting point for reevaluating assumptions about the blues as a form for the authentic expression of deep feeling.

Commercial considerations structured the "truly artistic insight" of the blues as it developed out of medicine show performance. Amiri Baraka associates the medicine show with "the Negro's entrance into the world of professional entertainment and the assumption of the psychological imperatives that must accompany such a phenomenon."[27] For Baraka, playing in front of white audiences in racist theatrical contexts gave the blues its individualist ethos (as distinct from the racial-uplift-oriented needs of the "group"). It also required a formal reproducibility of what had been the spontaneous, sincere, and passionate community feeling of "folk" music. The context of the medicine show as I have described it so far framed the "psychological imperatives" that Baraka mentions here; the musicians on the medicine show circuit entered into a public space in which activist journalists, medical professionals, patent medicine makers, and vernacular religious practitioners competed for cultural authority. This complex cultural field found its way into the blues.

Some musicians recall primal scenes of instruction at the hands of experienced medicine show pitchmen. In an interview with Samuel Charters, Pink Anderson testifies to learning the tricks of his trade in Dr. W. R. Kerr's Indian Remedy Company:

> He still remembers nervously asking Kerr how he should look at the audience. Kerr sent him out onto the stage with the advice to just look out over everybody's head until he got used to the crowd … Pink says of him that "… he taught me everything I know about entertaining and doing my business on stage".[28]

This old performers' trick likely had special implications for young African Americans performing in front of white audiences for the first time. More experienced black performers often took responsibility for "producing"

set from babyhood in many families and the traditions surrounding these practitioners seem to still retain enormous force." Vivian Cameron, "Folk Beliefs Pertaining to Health of the Southern Negro," master's thesis, Northwestern University, 1930, 59.

[26] Samuel Hopkins Adams, "The Fraud above the Law," *Colliers*, 49, 8 (11 May 1912), 13.

[27] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Quill, 1999), 82.

[28] Pink Anderson, *Medicine Show Man* (LP) (Prestige/Bluesville 1051, 1961), liner notes.

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medicine shows. They saw that performers were "up in all the acts and bits," reconciled the performers' remembered versions of sketches, and arranged a coherent evening's bill.[29] In taking on this role, the musicians often learned diverse regional styles and songs.

As a form of Great Migration-era mobility, the medicine show circuit also allowed musicians to make valuable contacts. In his classic account *The Country Blues*, Charters lays out the role of the medicine show in linking musicians in 1920s Memphis, where many of the medicine shows "made up":

> Furry [Lewis] met Jim Jackson with the Dr. Willie Lewis show, working through Mississippi, selling "Jack Rabbit" salve. They played together in a small jug band, Jim Jackson or Will Shade playing guitar, and Gus Cannon playing banjo and jug. Furry and Jim usually sang together, and went over big with a blues of Jim's called "Goin' to Kansas City." It was Jim's biggest hit for Vocalion. They went up to Chicago in May, 1927 …[30]

This sketch also points to the proximity of medicine show performance to larger networks of nascent mass culture. Race record companies used medicine show pitchmen as contacts for musicians, especially "hamfat" jug bands, which were particularly popular with both white and black audiences.[31]

Most medicine show performers' careers did not lead to fame, however. The responsibilities and opportunities offered by the medicine shows often came with more menial tasks: mixing the snake oil lineaments, selling the product when not onstage, loading trucks, and dealing with the inventory. In 1920, a Dr. Heber Becker advertised ominously for "Blackface Singing Dancing Comedians; must play banjo and guitar. Lady Performer; must sing and dance. Lady to handle and take care of snakes."[32] Medicine show doctors often paid miserably or unreliably. Another musician, Joe Williams, testifies that the "crooked" medicine show he worked on would withhold wages altogether:

> The only way you could get your money, you had to be slick like the show. What you do, if you supposed to sell twenty-five bottles, you take forty bottles and them other dollars goes in your pocket … All of us do it just so we can get something.[33]

Medicine show touring came with the myriad hardships of traveling through small rural towns on a semi-criminal enterprise with a shoestring budget. For all the pain associated with stasis in the Jim Crow South, Mississippi John

[29] McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 138–40.
[30] Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1975; first published 1959), 103.
[31] Ibid., 116.
[32] Quoted in McNamara, 136.
[33] Quoted in Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black and Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 196.

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Hurt refused to join the medicine show circuit: "One of them wanted me, but I said no because I just never wanted to get away from home."[34]

Among the "psychological imperatives" that Baraka notes in the emergence of black cultural professionalism was the impetus to perform racist stereotypes for white audiences. W. C. Handy describes African American culture's acute ambivalence about blackface in his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*:

> It goes without saying that minstrels were a disreputable lot in the eyes of a large section of upper-crust Negroes … but it was also true that the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers – the minstrel shows got them all … For my part, there wasn't a moment's hesitation … I took it for the break it was.[35]

Handy distinguishes his "disreputable lot" from "upper-crust Negroes," and his flamboyant figuration of minstrelsy as a "drain" has an unsanitary darkness. He presents his decision to black up as pragmatic, setting aside its political implications. This detachment could be emotionally draining. Black musicians sometimes turned to alcohol to cope. Gus Cannon recalled drinking before shows to steel himself:

> Had all that cork on our face … made us look even blacker … shit … painted our mouths white … made 'em look big … I had to have a shot of liquor before the show. If I didn't it seemed like I couldn't be funny in front of all them people. When I had one it seemed like them people was one and I would throw up the banjo in the air and really put on a show.[36]

Cannon's shot of courage carries him into a deeply compromising social and ethical situation. And yet his sacrifice is transformative – the audience became "one."

Cannon later went on to fame as the leader of the Jug Stompers, and their most famous song, "Walk Right In" (1929), subtly recalls and reconstructs a medicine show pitch:

> Walk right in, sit right down, and baby let your mind roll on.
> Walk right in, stay a little while, but Daddy you can't stay too long.
> Now everybody's talking 'bout a new way of walking …
> Do you want to lose you mind?
> Walk right in, sit right down, and Daddy let your mind roll on.[37]

[34] Mississippi John Hurt, *Avalon Blues: The Complete 1928 Okeh Recordings* (CD) (Columbia/Legacy, 1996), liner notes.

[35] W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo, 1969), 33.

[36] Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 153.

[37] Gus Cannon and Noah Lewis, "Walk Right In," *Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 2* (CD) (Document Records 5033, 1990).

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Starting from the pitchman's conventional opener – "Walk right in" – Cannon proceeds to set into motion all the elliptical promises of the medicine show. Delivered in falsetto, and alternating its address to "Daddy" and "baby," the song plays on the anxious masculinity that sought renewed vigor in patent medicines. In a late recording session for Stax Records in 1963, Cannon introduces the song by recalling its origins in a romantic scene:

I went to old lady's house one day, and she told me, "Walk right in," and I said, "Well, thank you," and she said, "Will you sit down," and I said, "Well thank you, ma'am" and she says to me, she said, "Well, how long you gone be here?" I said, "I'll only be here but a little while." And so that night somewhere or another I commence to dreaming, and I got up there about 12 o'clock one night there … I said "You know one thing Bessie?" I said, "you told me to walk in here, now you know I might get something on there," and this is the way it went …[38]

Even in light of this explanation setting the scene against the background of the unstable sexual marketplace of the Great Migration, the song still disorients the listener's expectations. Cannon suggests a new dance, "a new way of walking," after inviting the listener to "sit right down." He balances references to physical mobility with psychological wandering – "Do you want to lose your mind?" – hinting that his "new way of walking" might be a euphemism for narcotic inebriation. Like a patent medicine pitch, the lyric conceit of "Walk Right In" relies on ambiguous suggestion for its excitement; it pushes medicine show hucksterism into a hermetic inaccessibility that the blues would make distinctively black.

As the blues became a distinct musical form, musicians incorporated medical concerns into its definition. The blues have a homeopathic effect – blues music should cure the blues as a set of complaints. Albert Murray came up with the pseudoscientific phrase "blues counteragent" to describe this aspect of the music.[39] Folk-song collector Newman Ivey White recorded lyrics from anonymous singers of Monroe, Alabama in the 1910s, attesting to the medical aesthetic theory of the blues. One song claims, "De blues ain't nuthin/But a poor man's heart disease," while another wonders about the duration of his illness: "Some folks say them four day blues ain't bad; it must not have been them four day blues I had."[40]

[38] Gus Cannon, *Walk Right In* (CD) (Stax 702, 1999), my transcription.

[39] Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 16.

[40] Newman Ivey White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 392. The earliest mention of the blues as a style of African American musical performance demonstrates its emergence from medicine show and vaudeville performance circuits. On 16 April 1910 the Indianapolis *Freeman*, a nationally distributed black newspaper, noted John W. F. "Johnnie" Woods's ventriloquist act in the Airdome Theater in Jacksonville, Florida: "This is the second week that Prof. Woods, the

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Blues musicians took on medical personae, and made outrageous claims about the curative properties of the music.[41] They explicitly conceived their work as medical and thought of themselves as "music physicianers." Roosevelt Sykes, for instance, claimed,

> Blues is like a doctor. Doctor studies medicine; course he aint sick, but he studies to help them people. A blues player ain't got no blues, but he plays for worried people. He don't really have no blues when he plays them but he has a talent to give the worried people. See they enjoy it. Like the doctor works from the outside of the body to the inside of the body. But the blues works … on the insides of the inside, see.[42]

Sykes makes an argument, like Baraka's, for the objectivity of musicianship: a "player" should produce the effects of the blues with a clinical detachment. He draws the distinction that blues professionalism "works … on the insides of the inside," on the spiritual and psychological registers of the listener. The popular audiences of the medicine show demonstrated to blues musicians that their work could be just as effective as doctors' remedies.

The conceits of blues lyrics balance professionalism with the confidence tricks of the medicine show and the spiritual claims of African diasporic tradition. In "Snake Doctor Blues" (1932), J. D. "Jelly Jaw" Short sings, "I know many of you mens wondering what the snake doctor man got in his hand/He's got roots and herbs, steals a woman, man, every where he land."[43] Short makes the snake that plays a key figurative role in both patent medical advertising and voodoo iconography over into a jokey phallic metaphor. Short's role as a snake doctor has a conventionally bluesy mobility: "I'm a snake doctor man, everybody's trying to find out my name/And when I fly by easy, mama I'm gonna

ventriloquist, with his little doll Henry. This week he set the Airdome wild by making little Henry drunk. Did you ever see a ventriloquist's figure get intoxicated? Well, it's rich; it's great; and Prof. Woods knows how to handle his figure. He uses the 'blues' for little Henry in this drunken act. This boy is only twenty-two years old and has a bright future in front of him if he will only stick to it." Woods toured with vaudeville and medicine show troupes in 1909, like the Plant Juice Medicine Company, with whom he worked as a "buck and wing dancer, female impersonator and ventriloquist." The *Freeman*, 14 Aug. 1909, reported that his "little wooden-headed boy" sang "Trans-mag-ni-fi-can-bam-dam-u-ality." For a detailed reading of blues in the *Freeman*, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," in David Evans, ed., *Ramblin' on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2008), 49–104, 60–61.

[41] With one important exception, Tommy Johnson's "Canned Heat Blues," which refers to "Jake," an alcoholic Jamaican ginger extract sold as a patent medicine. Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 134.

[42] Quoted in Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 75.

[43] Eric Sackheim, ed., *The Blues Line* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1969), 371.

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fly low low distant land."[44] He comes up against charges of fraud but backs up his romantic tall-talk with the pitchman's bogus guarantee: "I mean to be a real snake doctor man, and you know I don't mean to be no *quack*."[45]

Other instances of the medical-authority-as-erotic-attraction conceit are equally rich. Doctor Clayton's postwar "Root Doctor Blues" (1946) again incorporates these resonances into a romantic solicitation:

I'm a first class root doctor and I don't bar no other doctor in his land, (*twice*)
My remedy is guaranteed to cure you, pills and pain ain't in my plan.

You claim your regular doctor makes you feel like a real young girl, (*twice*)
Doctor Clayton's root treatments make you feel like an angel flyin' round in another world.

After you receive my special root treatment, woman please don't start no signifyin', (*twice*)

Don't clown because some woman beat you to my office, Lord I'd love to work overtime.[46]

Like Short, Clayton bolsters his erotic entreaty by anticipating accusations of quackery – his "remedy is guaranteed to cure you." He compares the merely physical rejuvenation offered by the addressee's "regular doctor" with the psycho-spiritual benefits of his own cure that "makes you feel like an angel flyin' round in another world." The lyric scene is rife with competition – Clayton's women race to get to his office, while he tries to convince them of the superiority of his treatments. Paul Oliver claims that the song features "a studied disrespect for the beliefs of the older generation," presumably the Victorian sexual mores of uplift culture and the superstitions of conjure.[47] Like medicine show pitches, both Short's and Clayton's lyric arguments offer new superstitions about health, the market, and sexual prowess. They have taken Cannon's conceit and incorporated the "operational aesthetic" of the medicine show – hinting throughout their lyrics at the listeners' doubts and suspicions. The dialectic of the conventional blues stanza (its repeated proposition and emphatic resolution) abets a series of puns that intensify the songs' eroticism but also play on the listeners' receptivity to braggadocio.

The best-known blues musician associated with the medicine show is Blind Willie McTell, a Georgia-based singer active from the late 1920s until the late 1950s. As a young man, McTell travelled with medicine shows as a part of his

[44] Ibid., 370.
[45] Ibid., 371, original emphasis.
[46] Quoted in Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 130–31.
[47] Ibid., 130.

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musical apprenticeship. He incorporated a rich variety of Mississippi Delta and Piedmont blues styles into his twelve-string guitar playing, and mastered the shows' broad repertoire of rags, hymns, and other traditionals.[48] As the popularity of the race records grew during the later 1920s, McTell graduated from small-time country shows to produce a series of sides under a few different aliases that made him one of the most distinctive male voices in the prewar blues. He never mentions the medicine show directly in his lyrics, and never uses the conceit of the doctor's pitch, yet his music everywhere embodies the hard-bitten spirit of the medicine show. Between Cannon's countrified jug band music and the conventional blues of Short and Clayton, McTell articulates a blues lyric interiority that maximizes the effects of the music's "operational aesthetic." Like a medicine show pitch, his blues suggests a range of possible etiologies: poverty, disease, romantic dejection or lust, other more vague forms of ennui. In his compression of the historical concerns of the Jim Crow South, McTell's music turns the medicine shows' dubious rhetoric of cure into an ironic and critical poetics.

McTell's "Talking to Myself" draws on the dynamics of quackery and authenticity. Recorded in Atlanta in 1930, and released later that year under the name "Blind Sammie," "Talking to Myself" is in every respect a dazzling side – done apparently in one take, with a harmony tripping and ambling through inverted chords on McTell's solo guitar. It opens with a strange yodel-scat that sounds both country and jazz at once. The lines are not arranged into traditional blues stanzas and there is no refrain; instead, the lyrics unfold in a series of couplets. The song does not sustain a consistent narrative or metaphorical conceit. Instead, the couplets ring with the frenetic syncopation of self-confidence and anxiety that characterizes American nervousness.

The lyrics, in full, are as follows:

[48] Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 48–50, speculates that blind musicians were drawn to medicine shows because of white doctors' mistreatment. McTell's biographer, Michael Gray, points out that McTell learned music in blind schools, which funneled African American blind people into music. He also guesses that McTell was on the John Robinson Circus Show, unable to find the "Robertson's sideshow" and "John Roberts' sideshow" that he refers to in later-life recorded interviews. Michael Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 151. McTell made ends meet in the 1930s on medicine shows, marveling at "the finest 12-string guitarist of his generation, bar none, playing hokum songs for small-town audiences." Ibid., 259. McTell recorded sparsely through the 1940s and 1950s until his death in 1959 – thus missing the blues and folk revival of the 1960s. Throughout this later period, he continued to play standards he learned in travelling in shows, and to include rags and traditional melodies into his own compositions.

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Good Lord, good Lord, send me an Angel down.
"Can't spare you no angel but I swear I'll send you a teasin' brown."
That new way of loving, mama it must be best,
These here Georgia women just won't let Mr. Samuel rest.
There was a crowd out on the corner, wondered who could it be?
It weren't a thing but the women trying to get to me.
I even went down to the depot, with my suitcase in my hand,
Crowd of women runned crying: "Mr. Samuel won't you be my man?"
My mama, she told me, when I was a boy playin' mumblepeg,
"Don't drink no black cow's milk, don't you eat no black hen's egg"
Black man give you a dollar mama, he won't think its nothin' strange,
Yellow man will give a dollar but he'll want back ninety-five cents change.
If they call me cheater, pretty boy I'll real treat you.
If you will allow me a chance, I'll gnaw your backbone half in two.
I took a trip out on the ocean, want the sound of the deep blue sea.
I found a crab with a shrimp trying to do the shimmy-she.
I want to tell you something mama, seem mighty doggone strange.
You done mess around gal and made me break my yo-yo string.
Honey I ain't gonna be your old work ox no more.
You done mess around baby let your doggone ox get poor.
My mama she got a mojo, place she try to keep it hid.
Papa Samuel got something to find that mojo with (Take it from me).
I even heard a rumblin' deep down in the ground,
It wasn't a thing but the women tryin' to run me down.[49]

The singer begins by asking God for an angel, and God replies by promising that he will send a live woman. Then the song turns to a perhaps spiritually inspired "new way of loving," and the speaker becomes a sensation, driving a crowd of small-town women mad. These lines play on the conventions begun in Cannon and later consolidated in Short and Clayton, of a modernized sexuality causing spontaneous public expressions of collective desire.

McTell then recalls a childhood memory of playing "mumblepeg" – a game of chance in which two boys throw their pocket knives at one another's feet, stepping closer until the game's ominous end. His mother interrupts to deliver him conjure-related superstitions about the color symbolism of food animals ("Don't drink no black cow's milk"). McTell projects this memory onto a taxonomy of skin-color phenotype in relation to honesty and generosity in economic transactions ("Black man give you a dollar mama, he won't think its nothin' strange"). The lyric address then turns again, this time to intimidate a male listener with an extravagantly violent boast: "I'll gnaw your backbone half in two." The erotic jubilation of the early lines transforms, through a memory of corrupted racial innocence, into an angry exchange of threats

[49] Blind Willie McTell, *The Classic Years, 1927–1940* (CD) (JSP Records 7711, 2003), my transcription.

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suffused with market racism. In a kind of ring composition, McTell ends the lyric with women chasing him, but this time hearing a more devilish "rumblin' deep down in the ground."

The kaleidoscope of images juxtaposes the psychodynamics of black life in the era of Jim Crow and the Great Migration. McTell finds the fraudulence that I have associated with the medicine show bleeding across a wide swath of everyday life in the South, corrupting the emotional truths of love, family, and community. Recall Joe Williams's assertion that he "had to be slick like the show" – McTell as well imbibes the shows' trickery, and has become a part of the snaky atmosphere of mobile modern America. His clear falsetto moves through moods, from confident to anxious, seductive to violent, and spiritual to earthy, that indicate a trickster persona, but also the transformative character of his virtuosity, and the curative powers of the blues. Jelly Jaw Short argues that the solitary blues singer seeks "to make hisself confident" through song; McTell takes blues boasting to metaphysical dimensions.[50] Cannon, Clayton, and Short's takes on the erotic entreaty as a kind of medicine show pitch turns, in McTell, to a nightmare of possessive individualism. The "operational aesthetic" of Barnum and the medicine shows demonstrated to blues musicians that audiences enjoyed negotiating lies and authenticity. McTell's blues, with their extraordinary violence and jubilant hedonism enmeshed in contradictory signals of fraudulence and authenticity, turns this dynamic to an aesthetic critique of racial capitalism.

The Pure Drug and Food Act of 1906 and the more stringent Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 augured the end of the medicine show by requiring that products explicitly advertise their content, but the shows lumbered on past World War II, ducking spotty regulatory authority. Medicine show historians customarily point out that quackery has simply taken up residence elsewhere. The blues fared much better through the second half of the twentieth century through various revivals, often as not by white critics and musicians. Robert Palmer famously asked about the blues, "How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string?"[51] The medicine shows beg that this question be read in terms of the music's obliquity – its relation to history read as a winking code. In spite of the death of the embarrassing spectacle of the medicine show itself, and the consignment of the blues to a residual role, American culture continues to rely on African American music to reconceive the body, its complaints, and its cure. 50 Cent's humbuggery for Vitamin Water offers an exemplary instance of post-medicine show aesthetics. In one

[50] Leonard Goines, "The Blues as Black Therapy: A Thematic Study," *Black World*, 23, 1 (Nov. 1973), 28–40, 36.

[51] Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 277.

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memorable ad for Vitamin Water, he conducted an orchestra in a rousing version of "In Da Club," only later to admit cheekily that he doesn't know how to conduct. His stunts represent a fairly innocuous variation on the complex dynamic between African American music, American health culture, and American drug culture. Other instances of this intersection have had much more pernicious historical effects. The disproportionate consequences of the "war on drugs" on African American communities have long relied on racist associations first deployed in the medicine show. How hip-hop musicians have turned that ideological trap to their own ends is a story for another day.

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