

Transcript

The Relevance of the Blues

By Mboya Nicholson

It never sleeps, not long anyway; the blues, I mean. Not the music but the feeling; that collaring of the spirit that tints the day with a certain character; that's the blues as a devious head of steam; a fog on your plans; pits in your prospective day's glass of juice. That's the blues as antagonist. Albert Murray christened that kind of fog of feeling, the blues as such.

Now, you might peer around the corner and down the street, thinking, phew, well that's that. But no no, just wait. The blues don't ever call in sick; they're just late. That's when you beckon the specialists: Ellington, Monk or Bessie Smith. Robert Johnson, Memphis Slim or Basie. Sir Charles Thompson or Sir Roland Hanna. Irrespective of era of any of the specialists mentioned, the prescription for that fog of feeling is, yes, the blues - the *music*, that is.

Sometimes, the blues - the feeling- that azure-skinned, indigo-hearted hobgoblin who plays anarchist with your aspirations and intentions, is mistaken for being interchangeable with the music called the blues, like when two people are accidentally mistaken for one another.

Not a big deal, unless the mistaken identity is by a third person who mistakes one of the first two for someone he dislikes. This too is not that big a deal in itself, unless of course, the third person is bigger than the first two mentioned. That's when the blues and the black and blues illustrate through regretfully painful demonstration, that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Given a choice, naturally, a situation in which one only gets the blues is preferred.

But I digress.

The blues, this fog of feeling is an emergency, so yes, call in the rest of those doctors whose steps stride across time, from Jay McShann to Brother Jack McDuff. From Sonny Terry to Sonny Rollins. All these doctors of rhythm and specialists of tune are the real-life descendants of Elegba, the trickster Spirit, symbolized in infinite protagonists, whose fates shaped folk tales across the African diaspora.

The blues doctors mentioned are simply storytellers in tones and rhythms, relaying the same stories of Elegba, as what were verbally passed down by ancestors, about the African trickster whose identity changed depending on geographic location. Previously Anansi the spider, of West African lore, and eventually the Caribbean or cunning little Br'er Rabbit, popping up in the southern U.S. The only difference later was, Elegba, no fool by any means, looked around the corner and down the street and when the coast was clear, walked out into the 20th century disguised as a shuffle with three chords: the blues- the music, that is. What a coup!

But don't let the distracting garb of a different era, or the Great Migration's movement northward and eastward later on, cover up the fact that deep in the heart of each blues bent note, rural or urban in character, is still the pulse of that Mississippi Delta residing, country road smart as a whip, Brother Rabbit. Smart enough to look dumb enough to fool anyone intent on his demise, thereby staying out of any cast iron post, be they real or a metaphor. Yes, Elegba knew how to play the blues to beat the blues.

And we had real life Elegbas, whose dane steps were always one set ahead of Br'er Fox.

Frederick Douglass, learning to maneuver through life, despite all manner of unspeakable cast iron pots, sharpened fangs, and despite baring witness to rabid human evil. Douglass knew from childhood, you had to be the trickster to stay alive. Walking up to a little boy who was white, saying, 'you reading?' You can't read!!'ll bet you don't even know what that says right there!' "What? Of course I know what that says, dummy! That's cat: c,a,t, CAT!' And through his fake indignation, little Frederick Douglass tricked the child into teaching him how to read, when learning to read would have gotten him killed. Brother Rabbit. Smart enough to look dumb enough to fool any chefs of disaster, thereby staying out for all cast iron pots you might call peril. Elegy a knows how to play the blues, to beat the blues.

So, its arguable that maybe Elegba planted and watered the music called the blues on a patch of soil near the Mississippi, saying 'they're gonna keep needing this'.

Of course, before all that - twisting and turning through the endless incarnations and permutations; time-travelling through years - the Middle Passage-surviving Elegba touched down in the Caribbean: Anansi the Spider, the most cunning trickster, who'd gone to bed one night in Ghana, only to find himself kidnapped and waking up in Jamaica the next morning.

Anansi had his work cut out for him! You could say he was the blues in a different way, long before there was blues music per se. There he was, staying one step ahead of colonial fangs, dancing a masterful trickster's ballet. That's Elegba: the ultimate, definitive practitioner of all tasks intended to outwit the antagonist called the blues, regardless of its form and variation: over seer; slave owner; politician; cane field; cotton plantation; or systematically racially biased bureaucratic set up, complete with invisible lever and trap door. Hm! Now that's some real blues as such, to borrow from Mr. Murray, uh, Albert, that is.

That's when we turn to those bluesians; when we call those musical descendants of Elegba, the trickster, when we ask "what say you, piper, who decongest the spirit's main thoroughfares? What say you Count? What do you have for me, Robert Johnson? How will we make it, Bessie? Stomp it off, Bennie Motion; make it all right, Jay McShann. Keep our souls alive, Mr. Five by Five!

"Don't your house look lonesome, when your baby packs up to leave..."

They are the concoctors of the only remedy; the masters who conjure the only elixir that sets these blue goblins cursing under their breath, running, clanging and banging, *tempus fugit*, with all the urgency and percussion of a riveter's animated protests, from under the lid of a pot. That is when the trickster, by way of the blues artist, makes a clean marksman type shit, squarely wounding the blues- though rest assured, the sure goblins will be back. And sometimes Elegba isn't a marksman, but a charlatan again, using a slow, seductive tempo and the bluest of tinted notes out of necessity, instead of stomping, diving and knocking the blues out, these musicians caress, cajole and compliment the indigo troublemaker into believing that fleeing the scene was their idea all along. Sometimes you can catch more blue devils with a ballad than with fast stride piano, depending on the disposition of the old ennui, and the situation.

Sometimes you have to pretend you fear one outcome to avoid the other, while the azure toned antagonist, delighting in its only talent - anarchy, and believing you've you are once and for all, outdone, pulls out all its proverbial rabbits-in-the-hat, only to wear itself out. And suddenly, the tables have turned.

And this is how Elegba's children avoid ultimate peril. There's always the hubris of the despotic and the devilish. And if you wait it out, they usually trip over their own inadequacies, like a pair of courderoy pants that are a little too big. And all Br'er Rabbit, Anansi have to do, is push with one finger and *down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier!*

But, what really enrages that ethereal indigo adversary of human inner space (A.K.A. the blues) is what Ma Rainey and all those Elegba descendants figured out: liquifying the blues from big navy colored jagged rocks into melody and rhythm, makes the despotic and the devilish less like an ogre and more like a caricature. Humor? No, the blues - the feeling, that is, - the blues hates hearing laughter. Laughter takes away valuable time that a victim could spend on the obligatory hand-wringing,, sighing, crying, and dying; hobbies of which no self-respecting blues music - minded personality-type would partake. They'd rather find ways to laugh at set backs and drawbacks, than melt in the desolate, toxic sand of self-pity. And so any despot will tell you, once people smirk at the sight of you, turn in your tyranny license. It's over. Fear is no match for mockery.

The big bravura brahma bull-spreaders - you think they really fear the rock you threw, or the stick you carry? You think they shake at the sight of you pushing back? Merely a children's playground game for them.

But let a lyricist enter, or a musician, or a poet. Suddenly even the ominous start to get nervous.

No, that craven hearted ogre tends to be comfortable with a lot of noise; with reactionary, base level actions. These are things that take no reasoning, no thought, no strategy. And so, that makes combat a level playing field for those of limited capacity. But they're not ready for Ellington.

When Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn got hold of the blues, wait! Better put your coat away and sit back down. Order another drink, because the blues is about to find itself twisted, turned around, speaking with varied accents and wearing different colored hats. But always, still the blues. Because just when first impressions make us think things ain't what they used to be, Clark Terry or Ray Nance or Johnny Hodges can be heard peeking out from behind a crescendo of some sort, letting us know the room's not new, it's just re-furnished. And the blues is the blues is the blues.

Clark Terry, the mischievous one, musically cartwheeling and laughing much to the chagrin of those azure antagonists. They hurriedly clear out, embarrassed and defeated. *That's* how you cure the blues.

Irreverence infuriates antagonists. And those gallows-spirited evil elves have no patience for instrumentalists of that burst the bubble of their bravura, and deflate their self appointed authority. Of course, the blues - the antagonist, that is, always gets wise. It is never down for the count permanently.

Just wait; the blues never calls in sick, it's just late.

And, just as with the the most reptilian politician, there are always conspirators ever so eager to contribute to the sinking of a ship, oblivious to the consequences of their actions, so long as the illusion of personal gain and immediate gratification can be seen as an alternative to the seemingly desolate horizon of long term effort toward a distant goal.

Like the despotic and the devilish who prey on their simplicity, the minions can *get* the blues, but they are not bluesians. They are not the type of people Amiri Baraka would have called *blues people*; their hearts couldn't use the music of the blues to push out the blues. Their concept of blues would go no further than their concept of people - the surface trappings. Their vague notion of the blues would extend only to sunglasses, black suits and smoky rooms; like how a movie about jazz distracts the audience with paper maché archetypes and well worn storylines about mobsters, scenes with people wearing fedoras and frantically speaking in mangled versions of what they think is transatlantic speech.

Now the blues - the antagonist, that is, has expanded to what W.C. Handy called Loveless Love - milkiness milk and silkless silk. We are growing used to soul-less soul.

Instead of us against them - them being the blues and us being an army of Elegbas - there's been a change. The devilish and the despotic now boast up-to date designs on the emperor's new clothes, and eager aficionados of the lowest common denominator climb aboard, chanting their praises, cheering rhythmless, futureless, formless doctrines. That lowest common denominator finally figured out how to fake its way into the party and usurp its position at the head of the table, broccoli in its teeth, and gravy stains from the banquet line all over its tie.

Smiling, pleased with itself, the lowest common denominator, uh, the LCD - all modernity *must* involve acronyms - the LCD has finally achieved it's ultimate goal, at least for that level of cognition: attention. It doesn't matter if the looks and comments are positive, disapproving or critical, so long as it is attention. That is what matters. Grinning from ear to ear, napkin still shoved into the front of the pants, the LCD, beaming, and always a little inebriated, struts around the banquet hall, leaving barbecue sauce stains on the table cloths, furniture, and actual guests who *were* invited to the party.

Watching the over confident buffoon parade about amongst bewildered expressions and snickering smirks, it's safe to say that our hubris- trapped clown, is in no danger of being embarrassed. To use part of Arthur Conan

Doyle's famous quote in a different context, mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself.

The bluesian finds humor in the unwitting jester, but only to a point. Such activities as those of the lowest common denominator are about as lifeless as one of those bubble-gum flavoured, perpetually adolescent *moon rhymes with June* and *Oh, how I pine for you* lyrics, before Louis Armstrong breathed new life into them, via the blues. And Bessie Smith? You think she was going to sit through all that mediocrity? No, she and Louis would've gone and had a drink somewhere, looking for someplace to expound upon a dilemma, with sophisticated vocal and trumpet results, in perfect bluesian fashion.

The devilish and the despot cause neither Armstrong nor Smith to lose any sleep because they both know what power they have in just *one* note. The buffoon, the cynic and all the instigators of all and every low-down lowness, are clueless as to how Bessie, Louis, Robert Johnson or any of the people who follow them into battle, are not overwhelmed by the fang-toothed, cobalt-souled, feeling.

Why do you never see a despot singing the blues? To do so, the despot would have to admit the the clean slate possibility suggested in the blues is universal. It holds no allegiance to any status, economic group, genealogical background, classe system or level of education.

Those with despotic tendencies believe they are immune to the blues, simply because their sole talent is giving the blues. Little do they realize when the proverbial tables turn, the blues are a one man act. There are no real co-owners; no co-op share owners; there's no board of directors with an equal amount of authority or immunity from the policy of the blues, which is to mess you up. The blues never asked for confidants, co-partners, collaborators or vice presidents in charge of operation. The blues is a soul proprietorship, and the owner ain't dyin', nobody's going on vacation, sabbatical, or taking paid leave to find themselves.

No, no. Just wait. The blues don't call in sick. They're just late.

And all the effort in the world to do wrong does not make an imprint of an impression on the blues. That won't put you on the blues's 'exemption list' or good graces. There's no such document. Two cat burglars nod with acknowledgement passing each other silently: I won't bother you, you won't bother me. Well there may be honour among thieves but thieves get the blues too.

And so, there they sit, confused: the hollow-hearted: the connivers, the backroom politicians, the wide variety of egomaniacs, sociopaths, and any given combination of humanity's nemesis, stuck in an odd sort of limbo after executing what they thought were tasks of apprenticeship on behalf of the blues, towards their sacrificial victims, in service to well, themselves. (Didn't I mention ego?) And there they sit feeling sorry for themselves; sentimentality dripping and dripping.

But the blues doctors wipe out the egotists and the sappy sentimentality stuck to the bottom of self indulgence. Bessie Smith wouldn't have floated in limbo, sobbing, sipping self pity from a cracked glass. Bessie didn't sit and cry if you changed your ways and left. She was no torch song melody whose notes bounced off a ceiling and floated down waiting by a window until you returned. She had better things to do than sit up there and try to *will* you back. Naw, Bessie was going to thank you form leaving. That's the music called the blues: humor, even in the belly of a bad situation. That's why Bessie was too busy moving on, to deal with your raggedy ways. Whoever the person is she's singing about in "Lost Your Head Blues", the point is clear and beyond any danger of misinterpretation.

*I'm gonna leave you baby, ain't gonna say goodbye.
I'm gonna leave you baby, ain't gonna say goodbye.
But I'll write you and tell you the reason why...*

And lord help the chump waiting for that letter of explanation. He's probably still waiting.

*When you were lonesome, I tried to treat you kind.
When you were lonesome, I tried to treat you kind.*

See? Bessie saw you adrift, playing unhappy solitaire, and gave you the benefit of the doubt; gave you the gift of empathy. But she continues:

...Since you got money, it done changed your mind.

Man, you messed up with *Bessie*; with the *Empress of the Blues*! She gave you a grace period and when your circumstances changed, so did you.

They wouldn't think of asking Langston about the blues- the music, that is. Langston knew Elegba lived in Harlem, and he knew that the best way to sing or play or write the blues was to listen to all those clues Elegba whispered; all those notes Elegba played; all those steps Elegba danced, cheered on by

throng of blues-music-minded people, rollicking and swinging the Savoy out of its own roof and walls. Langston knew the stories Elegba was swinging. He knew what the cynics don't- that Br'er Rabbit, Anansi and all permutations and incarnations of the trickster, transformed into all manner of blues, from stomping to stride to gut bucket.

Langston sat at in his chair, singing through the typewriter and Elegba became Jesse B. Semple; became the mother telling her son she was not resigned even though life for her was no no crystal stair (No Crystal Stair); and made sure he had his one way ticket when he said "I pick up my life..."(One way Ticket). Taking it with him in all directions east and west, during the Great Migration. (You think Elegba wasn't Harriet's navigator all those centuries ago? Why do you think that rabbit and that spider know so much about hiding places and escape routes?)

Sometimes Mr. Hughes, Langston, that is, would use the cadence of the blues singer's voice and sometimes literally use the blues form itself. In someone else's hands, the same thought would be dripping with tooth aching sentimentality. But Mr. Hughes would cook up something deeper, by reaching up in the pantry for a handful of the blues; like Louis Armstrong did when he'd turn some here-today-gone-tomorrow syrup and cotton candy flavored, adolescent pining ballad, into something that lived up to the expectation of elegance, love and intimacy. Louis used his horn, Langston used his pen.

Said pen was what Langston used to put us in a little club, as we sat and listened to a man sing the Weary Blues. And Langston Hughes' words seemed to ruse with the navy blue tinted hue of an old man's melodies sailing on the universal ocean of three chords, and 12 bars:

Poem recited: The Weary Blues by Langston Hughes (*not included in transcript*)

The people who come to hear the old man on that piano, hear Elegba hundreds of times a year, tricking the blues away; playing Harriet Tubman in notes and rhythms, in a contemporary context, to all the children of the children's children's children she could never know she saved by saving the ones she knew she was saving. Weaving magic, making the blues believe its departure is of its own accord: that old man, the blues man, AKA Elegba, AKA the trickster. Because sometimes you sing about hopping a freight train and out fox the blues like Elisabeth Cotten. But other times you're Duke Ellington and you're so slick, you charm the blues right out the door, and it's halfway down the block when it realizes what you said was not a compliment.

But the blues, that musical equivalent of Langston Hughes's character, Jesse B. Semple, the early mid 20th century Anansi the Spider/Br'er Rabbit, the blues - the music, that is, is considered "anachronistic" by some. I guess understanding the context and history behind a sound and the cultural make up of that sound, are too much of an inconvenient sliver under the fingernail for some to bother exploring, or even acknowledging. Short cuts, tropes, easily digestible cliches and pop culture pre-approved watered down narratives of something are so much more uh, what's the word? Oh yes, "palatable". No one gets uh, what's the word? Oh yes, "alienated", by uh, how do I say it? Uh, or right: by having to actually learn and thereby admit I don't know everything:

I'm deeply offended that you say I'm incorrect. How about "creatively diverse in my choice of information?"

Yeah, the music called the blues doesn't buy that crap.

If the blues - the music - isn't relevant anymore, neither are the reasons it came to be; neither are the things its lyrics observe, and the feeling its musical vocabulary depicts with bent notes, slides, dissonant chords with frayed edges in the sound, because the person playing has a couple of scrapes and bruises, just like everybody who listening. If the music isn't relevant, neither are the people it came from. And suddenly nothing comes from anywhere, or goes anywhere, or as a point of view or a texture. Maybe that's where we're headed. Maybe we've almost landed. Remember those lyrics about "milkless milk and silk-less silk"? Well, here we are. Handy made the verse of Beale Street Blues the words of a sage of equal frankness: "If Beale street could talk/If Beale Street could talk/Married men would have to take their beds and walk..."

And as of the musical syntax of the blues, if that is allegedly "passé", then quit adorning ballads about love with it. Quit being seduced by the curvatures of the bent notes, flattened intervals and the infinite array of tonal winds, smirks, side-eyes, and flat out seductions through rhythm and melody. Without the blues, a lot of what has stood up through epochs and eras, would have arguably dissolved into the mist of obscurity.

Not relevant? Then explain the time line of popular music at the point rhythm and blues became rock n' roll, albeit, a name created to try and prevent Peggy-Sue from screaming with delight, at Chuck Berry, the way her mother squealed over Billy Eckstine, in private, of course. But I digress...

Maybe we've hit a temporary impasse. Maybe we're in a time when zeroes and ones are an advancement, and the symmetrical qualities of something purely mathematical is thought to be progress. Perhaps humanity itself is

considered primitive; and the dynamics of being human, something to be suppressed or avoided, and thought to be retrograde evolution.

But the blues sings, 'you see what you get'. It is frank but it's not zeroes and ones. It isn't data. It's not sterilized context removed, leaving only the *what it is*, and a bleached smear that used to be the *how it is*, and the *where it's from*.

Zeros and ones and the clinical baron statement of statistics; and the artless, juiceless, silk-less silk and milk-less milk of bland terms like *content*, to encompass music, literature, theatre, film and such, are fine for the indifference of the Cynic. But the 'C' in W.C. Handy didn't stand for "Cynic". The arid terrain of a cynic's perspective couldn't have come up with a woman dejected and rejected, saying, "My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea." A rock cast in the sea. That's not *what it is*; that's *how it is*.

But pay no mind to the Cynic. What's that line from the song Lazy Bones? *You never heard a word I said*. And they didn't. So We can keep joking about them. It's okay.

That whole world of how it is and where its from - that's Langston's world. And Zora Neale Hurston; and all those endless Elegbas of history in mortal, human form. Some played, some sang, some fought some danced. All were practitioners in their own way, of dragging swinging, throwing stomping, slugging and rug cutting the blues.

Yes, Ms. Tubman conducted the Railway, making it possible for us to keep on living. But at the time we also had the banjo and the godje, then the fiddle, and on down the line to make that existence we'd fought for, more than just *existence*; until generations after the conductor and the train had stopped, we had the Jimmie Luncefords, Fletcher Hendersons, Lucky Millinders, all giving us diverse variations, in a 20th century musical dialect, with that same truth: that the *how* of living is what makes it a life.

That blues-flavoured "how": that's Blanche Calloway; or her younger brother - you might have heard of him - Cab; that's Meade Lux Lewis, turning a piano into a bustling, ebullient freight train; or even more so, it's Duke Ellington, Elegba of all Elegbas, and his 1938 Deep South Suite with the Happy-go-Lucky Local, a southbound blues-based passenger train, letting us all know, regardless of the tint and hue of our time, despite the texture of an era or the shape of our concerns, the blues is the same medication across all epochs; across all times. You're feeling the same rain water your ancestors did when they were running so there'd be a you someday.

Bluesians do things that shouldn't work. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle and Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, at the summit point of their impossible aspiration, their dream of all dreams of insanity: an all Black musical on Broadway. What?

But only a blues-based Elegba in human form, could even dare to sketch that notion in their minds, before even starting the 'scratch' part of starting from scratch. And who, but a bunch of Br'er Rabbits, born a breath-and-a-half away from Reconstruction's interrupted intentions; who but Anansi and his cohorts, using borrowed costumes because the show's own were being held by a hotel for rent, would even cough up a wheeze of an inkling of an idea like, "I know, let's put on a show - on Broadway"?

Whom, but the children of Harriet the train conductor of all train conductors, could have created a phenomenon with such a following that 63rd street in New York City had been a one way street since 1921, originally so throngs of people rushing to see Shuffle Along, the show in question, would be able to do so?

Only blues-based people could get up again and again in vaudeville, drive in rickety cars through even more rickety towns, scraping together a show, money dangling at danger's edge. Yes, disagreeing, yes the blues is coming to grips with a lack of, with a lack of...the blues is...pshaw!

And those young people did it, despite being pushed into the ever popular burnt cork agendas and Uncle Tom's cabin-codes of conduct of the day, these young people closed their eyes and listened to echoes of Conductor Tubman's urgent, silent caravan. And though the burnt cork on the surface of their labors, seemed to make the whole thing in contrast to freedom, they *were* free, using Elegba's satchel of trickery to *build* freedom, even for those later on, who would curse the bridge on which they stood, not realizing who built it, or that at the time, it was the only way to build the bridge needed. Our bluesian-minded forebears knew there can be a rebellion behind a grin, and a means to an end.

All those blues-minded people- the ones who knew you play the blues to exorcise the blues, also knew there's more than one escape hatch. There's more than one mode of operation, just so long as the manifested ending is freedom. There's more than one way to play a phase. You could be Pops; or you could be Little Jazz, or Pres' or Rabbit; Bean or Sas. They were all free. You could be Oscar Peterson or Oscar Pettiford; Benny Golson, or Benny Goodman; Betty Carter or Billy Taylor. You could be Mary Lou Williams, too. You could be Hazel Scott or you could be Shirley Scott, or you could be Shirley Horn. All Aboard the Eleba Local Express, next stop freedom. But not the cliché - freedom as in, the true *you*.

That is what makes it a cloudy proposition to suggest the blues, the music that is, is now irrelevant. Not relevant? All those varied speakers represented the next dimension of freedom. All those sound doctors, those underground railroad conductors of music, the Bennie Motens, the Scott Joplins, the Erskine Hawkins; all do Conductor Emeritus, Harriet Tubman proud; shaping freedom's destination, but through sounds; through sounds encompassing memories, victories, tragedies, hollers, cries, shouts, refrains, exclamations, and infinite manifestations of co-signing, signifying, fable-spinning, hand-holding, hand wringing, swinging, and singing. From the first note, you've already achieved the journey and the destination.

But the blues, the rain cloud that is, is not permanently evaded. And Robert Johnson knew you still had to be Elegba at all times. You always had to have a few pockets-full of melodic hushpuppies, to placate the yapping, snapping deep indigo-coloured hounds, ever insistent but too full of themselves and, therefore gullible enough to be duped.

There are new aspiring "masters", and those with despotic tendencies now, like their colonial predecessors, still have the sale of humanity as their oily-fingered, snaggle-toothed, prerogative. The difference now is, transactions are made but never felt. They who are 'bought' now don't know it, and curse those who alert them that they've been tethered and purchased, preferring a glucose infested diet of false praise, instant gratification and salivating over the prospect of being known; not doing anything worth knowing or even doping anything of worth unless it can be publicized. The despotic and the devilish love the uneducated - well not them per se, more the fact that they're uneducated.

The despotic and the devilish love them for being unfamiliar uninformed, ill-informed, and its even more ideal when combined with a disdain for anything not of their own personal experience- its either a scam, a sham or a waste of energy and time. And slowly comes the callus of the Cynic. But you can't be a cynic about the blues. You can stub your toe and feel bad, but that crunchy sound Duke makes at the piano to make you feel better, will unfortunately be something you're immune to.

The echoes of all the people weaved into that sound, are somewhere out in the stratosphere, wherever spirits applaud our best efforts to be our best selves. There sits Miller and Lyles; Sissle and Blake; there sits Melba Liston and Betty Carter; and now Geri Allen, and now Roy Hargrove and now McCoy Tyler. There sits Waller and Razaf and Lightnin Hopkins and Blind Tom and Bessie and Basie and yes, Ma Rainey; each one taking full command of the other dimension of freedom, by whispering to us through their sound discoveries, the true ultimate freedom: not just being, but *living*.

I like to think Robert Johnson and Harriet Tubman are kindred spirits.

And you say the blues ain't you anymore?