

## You've Got to Suffer If You Wanna Sing the Blues

By Karen Green

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"Ma and Pa were down in the cellar;  
Don't know what they were doin', but I heard my mama bellow:

Take your finger out of it  
Take your finger out of it  
Get your finger out of it, because it don't belong to you."

And now that I've got your attention....

I've been back to Mississippi! More fried dill pickles on my very first night, at Rusty's in Vicksburg. Yum! So happy to be back! And, speaking of dill pickles, did you know they've got dill pickle-flavored potato chips in the south? How righteous is *that*?

Was it the fried pickles that brought me back? Well, not exactly. In great part it was the friends I made on my last trip. But, just as much, it was the blues. The amazing, heartbreaking, soul-warming blues. Because September is the month for the Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, and that, my friends, is an event not to be missed.

There are only a few art forms that we Americans can unequivocally call our own. We can't even claim comics, much as we'd like to. But the blues? That's all ours, steeped in African-American suffering, oppression, and persecution. Born out of the growing pains of Reconstruction, the blues, in the words of one bluesman, "ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad." The form of the blues isn't hard: it's a simple 12-bar progression, usually with the first line repeated, so as to give the singer time to figure out a third line. But it's not about the writing, it's about the content: the life experience that goes into the singing. As David Bromberg sings, "You've got to suffer if you wanna sing the blues." Maybe your baby has left you; maybe you lost everything you owned in a craps game; maybe your life of vice is hurrying you to an early grave. The blues burrow deep into the singer's soul and reveal where it all went wrong.

Clifford Gibson (1901-1963) sang about those Bad Luck Dice:

I lost all I had, everything I had to lose  
I lost all I had, everything I had to lose  
Even lost the one I love, but I swear I can't lose these blues

Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929) pleaded to See That My Grave Is Kept Clean:

Well, there's one kind favor I ask of you  
Well, there's one kind favor I ask of you  
Lord, there's one kind favor I'll ask of you  
Please let my grave be kept clean



Big Joe Williams (1903-1982), playing on his 9-string guitar, implored, *Baby Please Don't Go*:

Turn your lamp down low  
Turn your lamp down low  
I begged you all night long  
Baby, please don't go

But it's not all heartbreak; the form supports humor and even triumph over adversity. Mississippi Slim's sly verses open this article, and the Mississippi Sheiks were *Sitting on Top of the World* in 1930:

Going to the station, down in the yard  
Goin' get me a freight train  
Worked some, got hard.  
But now she's gone, I don't worry  
I'm sitting on top of the world



You can hear the resemblance to Mississippi Fred McDowell's *You Gotta Move*, probably better known from the Rolling Stones' cover version on "Sticky Fingers." That Stones cover was my own introduction to the blues, when I was in junior high. The blues spread long tentacles through all the American music forms that followed it, from jazz to rock'n'roll. In fact, British musicians in the 1960s were to a great extent responsible for bringing the blues back to popular consciousness, from the Rolling Stones to Eric Clapton to Led Zeppelin.

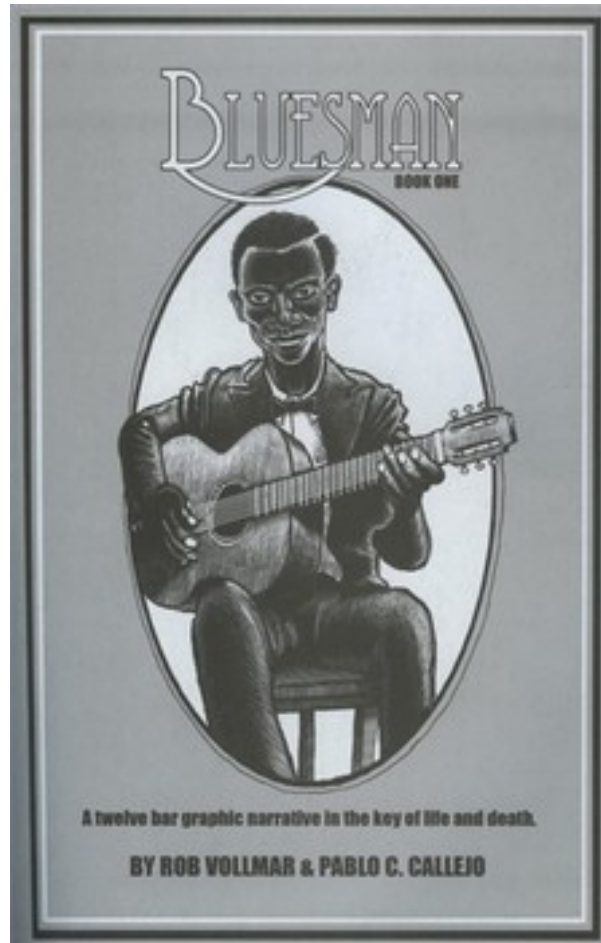
But at the height of the blues' popularity, it was Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, who well-nigh reigned supreme. Her one screen performance was in a film named for her most famous song, the *St Louis Blues*, in which she sings that her "man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea,"

I hate to see that evenin' sun go down  
I hate to see that evenin' sun go down  
'Cause my baby, he done left this town

The images above come from *R. Crumb's Heroes of Blues, Jazz & Country*, a labor of love the artist first conceived as a set of musical trading cards. Crumb's affection for early 20th-century music is legendary—between Crumb and Harvey Pekar, it can be difficult to dissociate jazz or blues from comics. The images Crumb created were based on photos he was able to locate, but perhaps also a preference for the obscure: Bessie Smith makes no appearance, and neither does the legendary Robert Johnson. (Images of Johnson weren't widely available when Crumb was working on this project around 1980, but there were certainly plenty of photos of Smith.)

The book version of Crumb's cards comes complete with a CD of songs, and the volume serves as a kind of reference work—each image comes with a brief bio written by a scholar

of the musical genre. The CD's tracks were picked by Crumb himself, but nowadays such an extra is hardly necessary. You don't have to haunt secondhand record shops and flea markets like the Crumb-alike character in *Ghost World* to find obscure blues songs: 90 seconds with YouTube and almost any song you want, from Robert Johnson's *Me and the Devil Blues* to Bo-Weavil Jackson's *You Can't Keep No Brown*, is buzzing through your headphones.



Music and comics aficionado Rob Vollmar, who had worked previously with Pablo G Callejo on *Castaways*, wanted to tell a story about the blues, a form he's loved since he was in his teens. He chose a twelve-chapter format, to mimic the 12-bar blues progression, breaking each chapter into twelve pages as well. Callejo's art on *Bluesman* evokes the stark, scratchy, WPA feel of the linoleum-cut images in the 1930s *Scottsboro Alabama*, which I wrote about a few months ago. The opening image of the first book is a pair of worn, fraying shoes—a poignant symbol of hard work and hardship. The story Vollmar tells, of a couple of traveling bluesmen names Lem and Ironwood, is filled with the pain, the loss, and the longing that pours out of the blues, this lyric of the human condition.

Lem plays a guitar he carries with him, while Ironwood can tickle the ivories of any piano he's allowed to sit at. Lem is a gentle soul, whose preacher father steeped him in gospel traditions, and this allows him to slide more gracefully between these two poles of African-American community. 'Wood, on the other hand, has a hotter temper and a shorter fuse; he dumps the pair into scrapes and Lem pulls them back out—when he can. A chance gig in Arkansas leads the two men deep into a story of lust, murder, racism, lynching, and more.

One panel in the second book, of two white men holding a chain near their pickup truck while they wait to "talk" to a black saloon owner, chillingly evokes the 1998 story of James Byrd, Jr, illustrating how our fetid, ugly past has continued into our present. Vollmar avoids cheap dialect effects which could coarsen the story, and occasionally cedes the narrative role to Ira Deldoff, author of a 1961 article on southern blues musicians, who offers observations such as this: "While life on the road could be arduous (and sometimes even deadly), the benefits of playing in juke joints surrounded by bootleg liquor, women, and song in an environment where their imagination and creativity were actively encouraged often represented the better of two situations, the alternate being a life of hard labor and uniform squalid poverty." Yeah, that sounds about right.



But juke-joint life was also not without its dangers and temptations and as Lem finds himself separated from his friend, running for his life, hammered by rain, and with his guitar lying in a creek, he lets loose the cry that lives at the root of the blues: "Why us? Why now?"

Because the blues are such an integral part of the history of music, I was excited about how these two books, *Bluesman* and the Crumb anthology, could fit into Columbia's Core Curriculum music course. Columbia University boasts one of the handful of surviving rigorous Western Civ curricula in America and a required course for all undergraduates, "Music Humanities," explores the history of music in western civilization. Imagine my dismay, then, to find no sample of the blues in the online music reserves (although, in fairness, there is some early jazz) and no mention of the blues in the curriculum. In fact, from what I could tell from Music Department staff, no courses on the blues are taught at all.

This just seems so strange to me. No matter how one parses the history of music—that a) America is the culmination of western civilization and so her unique musical forms lie at its

pinnacle or that b) the history of music is the history of regional musical forms that have traveled and metamorphosed via colonialism, slavery, or immigration, which therefore gives all those regional forms equal validity—it seems that the blues, which evolved from African call-and-response work songs through field hollers to become uniquely American, has to be part of that story. There are so many threads to follow for social and cultural history that one hardly knows where to start. One bittersweet fact I garnered from browsing in the *Grove Dictionary of Music* is that plantation owners outlawed drum-playing but permitted the playing of string instruments—the significance of which was hammered home by image after image in Crumb's book of blues singers holding their guitars.

I don't have the energy to become as strong an advocate for the blues at Columbia as I have for comics—I need to pick my battles. That's going to have to be a fight for someone else. But I feel the importunate tickle of Lem's cry, slightly transformed: "Why not us? Why not now?"

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In other news, if you're in Chicago next weekend: the International Comic Art Forum (ICAF), an academic conference on comics and cartooning, will hold its fourteenth annual meeting on Thursday through Saturday, October 15-17, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

ICAF conference events will take place at the SAIC Ballroom on Thursday and Friday and at the Gene Siskel Film Center on Saturday. Programming will begin at 9:00 a.m. each day. In addition, a special event will be held on Thursday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Cervantes Institute of Chicago, featuring talks by Spanish artists Max (Francesc Capdevila) and Pere Joan (Pedro Juan Riera), who are appearing under the sponsorship of the Cervantes Institute.

ICAF will also present talks by three other artists, including American artists Guy Davis (Sandman Mystery Theatre, The Marquis) and Sara Varon (Robot Dreams, Cat and Chicken) and UK artist John Miers (winner of the Web & Interactive Design category at the inaugural Digital Artist awards for his website [www.johnmiers.com](http://www.johnmiers.com)).

More info here: <http://www.internationalcomicartsforum.org/>

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