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FORGOTTEN MANUSCRIPTS: “Blues for Emmett Till”: The Earliest Extant Song about the Murder of Emmett Till

The brutal murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi on August 28, 1955 and the heinous acquittal of his killers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, on September 24 ignited a quick and enduring literary response from the African American, as well as white, community. Langston Hughes wrote “Mississippi—1955” for his weekly column for September 24-October 1 in the Chicago Defender and continued to revise this poem (Metress, “Langston Hughes’s ‘Mississippi’ ”). On October 8, T. R. Skelton published “Ode to Mississippi” in the Pittsburgh Courier, an African American newspaper, attacking the Magnolia State—“Bow thy head O state of Mississippi / Let tears of shame course down thy cheek” (qtd. in Metress, “No Justice, No Peace” 90). Other poems about Till appeared in 1955, usually in the letters to the editor section of African American papers and magazines—e.g., Cleveland Call & Post, Masses and Mainstream—and frequently in the Communist Daily Worker. Christopher Metress has included several of these poems in his valuable documentary survey The Lynching of Emmett Till. In a subsequent study, Metress turned to the role Till played in African American literature but focused only on those texts where he is a “disruptive presence who threatens the peace” (“No Justice, No Peace” 102). On these grounds Metress excluded one of the earliest songs about Till, absent also from The Lynching of Emmett Till.

Several songs about Till’s fate were written by composers in the 1950s and 1960s. Famous eulogies were recorded, for example, by Bob Dylan as well as by Phil Ochs and Bob Gibson in the early 1960s.1 In late September or early October 1955, Langston Hughes and Joe Huntley collaborated on the earliest song about Till and the infamous trial of his murderers—“Money, Mississippi Blues.” Hughes included the lyrics without any musical notation in a letter dated October 4 to Henry Lee Moon of the NAACP, which was printed for the first time in Metress (Lynching 295-98). In late October or early November 1955, Aaron Kramer wrote the words for “Blues for Emmett Till” while Clyde Appleton composed the score. The lyrics without the music were published in the National Guardian for November 7, 1955, but a few months later both the lyrics and Appleton’s score appeared as the opening song in the fifth anniversary issue of Sing Out! 6.1 (Winter 1956), a magazine with 20,000 to 25,000 subscribers. (The full text of Aaron’s lyrics is found at the end of this article.) Given the fact that Huntley’s score for “Money, Mississippi Blues” is lost, Kramer and Appleton’s “Blues for Emmett Till” may be regarded as the earliest extant song about the murder of this iconic civil rights martyr.

Sing Out! was a highly appropriate place for “Blues for Emmett Till” to appear. The magazine’s mission was “to preserve and support cultural diversity and the heritage of traditional and folk music” (“Sing Out!”).2 In its first five years, Sing Out! had published more than 400 songs (Silber, “Five Years Old”), and in the 1960s the magazine gave much attention to the freedom songs vital to civil rights marches (Appleton 3). Sing Out! faithfully showcased many black artists, and its editors and contributors were strong advocates of the civil rights movement. Among contributors to the anniversary issue in which “Blues For Emmett Till” was published we
find Paul Robeson, the celebrated singer and actor who broke the color barrier by playing Othello at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1943; Walter Lowenfels, the poet and friend of the Beats who was the former editor of the Pennsylvania edition of the Daily Worker and who compiled Poets Today, an influential collection of experimental and resistance poetry; and Alan Lomax, the foremost scholar of and contributor to American folk music and the man who brought Muddy Waters to national attention. From 1950 to 1967, the magazine was edited by Irwin Silber, a left-wing organizer, provocative editor, song writer, and later editor of The Guardian (1968-1979). Another star in contemporary folk music and civil rights supporter was Pete Seeger, who served on the staff of Sing Out! and in 1968 wrote “The Ballad of Martin Luther King” (Seeger & Friends). In sum, many of Sing Out!’s contributors throughout the 1950s and 1960s were not afraid to speak out against racial injustice, a commitment also reflected in Guy Carawan’s Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs, published by Sing Out! Publications in 1990.

The creators of “Blues for Emmett Till” were passionately involved in civil rights battles. Aaron Kramer (1921-1997) was regarded as “the leading resistance poet of the McCarthy era” (Kramer). A prolific poet, editor, critic, translator, he had recorded for Folkways Recording as well as for the Library of Congress and throughout his long career collaborated with many musicians who turned his rhyming poems into songs. Clyde Robert Appleton (1928-), an African American composer, singer, and educator, was a lifelong activist in the civil rights movement, first in North Carolina and then in Arizona. Graduating from Park College in 1954, Appleton taught at Shaw College, Purdue University, and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In 1965, he led the historic Black Belt Conference (on “Civil Rights and Anti-poverty”) in a round of civil rights songs, and wrote articles for Jazz Educator, The Churchman, and his “Singing in the Streets of Raleigh, 1963: Some Recollections” appeared in The Black Perspective in Music (Autumn 1975), providing a first-hand account of the music that bound together a generation of young African Americans. “Blues” thus underscores a powerful collaboration between a white resistance poet and an African American composer, both determined to denounce the villainy behind Till’s murder. Worth comparing, too, in terms of a collaboration between a black musician and a white poet is Billie Holiday’s anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” based on Lewis Allen’s (the pseudonym of Abel Meeropol) poem, though, admittedly, he did not originally write the words for Holiday (Margolick, Biography of a Song).

“Blues” reflects the spirit of the times—the fear and outrage over Till’s murder and the urgency to seek justice. Written before there was a carefully orchestrated civil rights movement, the ethos behind “Blues” anticipates the subsequent protests that Till’s murder occasioned, e.g., Freedom Riders for Emmett Till, Rosa Parks’s historic refusal to sit in the back of the bus just three months after Till’s murder, and later the marches on Montgomery and Birmingham. Given its publication in Sing Out!, “Blues” quite likely could have been performed at a variety of civil rights marches and rallies. The song even instructs listeners what to do the “Next time you pass a courthouse,” looking toward the protest marches decrying the miscarriage of justice in not passing and enforcing civil rights legislation. Till’s own journey, moreover, had archetypical significance for civil rights activists. As stanza two announces, he was a visitor to Mississippi who, like so many black men before and after him, was “crushed” in that “terrible midnight-time,” a travesty that inflames the righteousness heard in “Blues” and throughout the 1950s and 1960s. “One name is roared by every wind: the name of Emmett Till” declares the final line of the song. Ironically, while Till “went down South for the summer” to be murdered, a decade later the empowered missionaries in Freedom Summer in Mississippi won enormous victories. But composers and writers like those in Sing Out! first wrote and sang blues tunes like Kramer and Appleton’s.
In the blues tradition of giving social commentary and criticism, "Blues for Emmett Till" satirically challenges and subverts the official white (Mississippi) version of the truth. Through Kramer's folk narrative, sung to Appleton's 12-bar blues tune, "Blues" tells the real story of what happened to Emmett Till. As civil rights leaders emphasized, resistance produces reform only by repeatedly speaking/singing and showing the truth, hence the singer's insistence on spreading news about Till's tragedy—"Can't breathe another day, friend, 'less I pass it on to you" (l. 6). As Mamie Till-Mobley, the martyred boy's mother, proclaimed in *The Face of Emmett Till*, a play she coauthored with David Barr III, "I want the whole world to see what's happening in Mississippi. I want them to see what they did to my Emmett" (Face 49). As Silber, along with Betty Sanders, another *Sing Out!* staff member, penned in the "Talking Un-American Blues"—"If you want to be free, you've got to sing it out" (l. 57).

Characterizing Emmett Till as a "little brown bird" was an apt folk image to express political resistance, to declare the truth poetically. Till, the small brown-feathered bird, was easily killed, much the same way a sparrow might fall prey to a stronger force. As vulnerable as a starveling or sparrow, in all likelihood he "chirp[ed]" when he enters Carolyn Bryant's store. "Blues" thus implies that the fourteen-year old Emmett Till was hardly the wolf-whistling sexual predator that the defense and the State of Mississippi portrayed him to be. "Chirp," too, might be a veiled reference to Till's stuttering, a habit his mother tried to remediate by having him whistle when he had trouble pronouncing words, a condition she described at length during the trial (Face 69). Till's flight is also a vital part of telling the truth; it was not just from north to south but from life to death, from the "boiling slum" to the "Tallahatchie," from security to Mississippi "midnight-time" terror. Clearly, his brown feathers symbolize the thousands of black and brown bodies that were shot down or hanged at the ends of lynching trees. Hunting such a brown bird is legal in Mississippi, the "Blues" singer sarcastically notes, for "to kill a young bird's all right / If the young bird is brown and the killer's white" (ll. 17-18).

But the small brown bird image has a deeper metonymy. "Blues" situates the fourteen-year old Till in a mythology of feminine victims personified through avian references, chief of which is Ovid's Philomela, the young woman who is raped and rendered voiceless because her abductors have cut out her tongue. Similarly, as Mamie Till-Mobley said when she saw her son, "his tongue had been chopped out of his mouth" (Face 71). In African American literature, there are several illuminating texts in which a young black woman is metaphorically transformed into a bird symbolizing her captivity, forced silence, or brutal victimization. David A. Hedrich Hirsch has shown how the poet in Angeline Weld Grimké's "The Closing Door" and "Blackness" "recalls the tongueless Philomela" and thus underscores her "songlessness" (459-60). In Adrienne Kennedy's haunting, surrealistic play *The Owl Answers* (1964), the mulatta Clara Passmore is transformed into an owl for trying to pass as a white woman. "She is cruelly erased by a society that outlaws her beauty and her voice, much the same way Philomela was reduced to silence" (Kolin 72). Further, the avian image in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* precisely characterizes her sensitive young black girl from Arkansas whose voice is imprisoned because of the color of her skin. Metamorphosized into a little brown bird in "Blues," Emmett Till, then, is metaphorically linked to Philomela-like young black girls who have been victimized, deprived of their voices and their lives.

"Blues" also sets the historical record straight (sings it out, as it were) by sardonically establishing Mississippi's guilt and Till's innocence, reversing the outcome of the trial. Emmett Till innocently thought he was going to Mississippi to visit family and to enjoy outdoor activities—to "go down to fish" (l. 15). Yet he was brutalized by a geography that branded him as racially inferior, subhuman. "Blues" is developed around that contrast between a brown Chicago and a white Mississippi. He "flew down . . . for the summer" from Chicago's "boiling slum" (ll. 8, 7), ignorant
of Mississippi's custom of murdering unwelcome outsiders, especially black children from the city to which so many African Americans had emigrated from the Delta. "They should have warned that bird" (l. 11) expresses a theme heavily underscored in Mamie Till-Mobley's The Face of Emmett Till. In the urban north, Till did not know that to be brown was a crime. Yet the all-white prejudiced jury in Mississippi punished him for being brown and, inferentially, for being from Chicago, a city viciously attacked for its own racial injustices in the Mississippi press of 1955-1956 (Lynching 59-60). Ironically, being from Chicago contributed to Till's gruesome murder while it ensured his central importance in civil rights history. As the editor of the African American monthly Freedom, Louis E. Burnham, announced: "It is worth noting that if Emmett Till had been a Mississippi farm boy instead of a Chicago lad on vacation in Mississippi, the world would never have known his fate" ("Behind the Lynching" 3). A Mississippi farm boy would have disappeared from history; Emmett Till changed, made history.

Kramer and Appleton's "Blues" also discredits one of the legal arguments marshaled by the defense to acquit Bryant and Milam. In the sixth stanza, we hear that Till's "face was crushed so bad, it couldn't be called a crime" (l. 21). The defense insisted that since the body could not be identified as Till's, because it had been mangled, there was no way to prove who it was and so the defendants could not be accused of killing the young boy from Chicago. Even more horrifying, Sheriff H. C. Strider of Tallahatchie County "could not recognize the body in the [famous] photograph [in Jet Magazine] as the body of Till . . . because he could not recognize the humanity represented in the photograph—the body of a human being in whose name justice was being sought—in the body of . . . an African American boy" (Baker 122). At the trial, Mamie Till-Mobley's testimony that the murdered victim was indeed her son was refuted by the defense that argued Till was alive and living in Detroit, smuggled there by the NAACP just to stir up trouble in Mississippi (Face 76). As "Blues" sardonically enjoins, "[l]augh about 'Justice,' friend" (l. 24). All these historical details resonate in the true story that "Blues" tells—"[j]ury knows who killed him—knows the place and the time" (l. 19). The identity of the brown bird is universally known. His "name is moaned by every wind: the name of Emmett Till" (l. 3).

By allowing this bloodthirsty crime to go unpunished (after Till's murderers were acquitted they boasted about their deeds in Look magazine articles written by William Bradford Huie) all American jurisprudence up to the federal level should be indicted, according to the second to last stanza of the song. U. S. Magistrate Judge Channing Tobias, President of the NAACP, condemned the American system of justice that permitted Bryant and Milam to go free: "The jurors who returned the shameful verdict deserve a medal from the Kremlin for meritorious service in Communism's war against democracy. They have done their best to discredit our judicial system, to hold us up as a nation of hypocrites, and to undermine faith in American democracy" (qtd. in Cameron). Washington was undisputedly implicated in this travesty. "Since the men were protected from further prosecution, an FBI investigation was the last hope for justice, but President Eisenhower refused the go-ahead" (Segall and Holmberg 37). In fact, Eisenhower never publicly commented on the Till case for fear of alienating the Southern states. Keith Beauchamp, who made the documentary film of Till's life and murder (The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till), claimed that "Whatever happens in Mississippi stays in Mississippi was Eisenhower's attitude" (qtd. in Tallmer). Justice made a mockery of itself. "[l]augh about that word," sings the "Blues" dripping with caustic irony (l. 23).

Kramer and Appleton's "Blues" thus takes listeners from Chicago to Money, Mississippi, to Washington, D. C., to the global conscience. It can justly claim the honor of being the first extant song—with music and words—about Emmett Till's murder. The resistance message in "Blues" and its composers' dedication to telling the truth would be heard again on marches and in hearts decades after its publication in Sing Out!4
1. For a full discussion of songs about Emmett Till, 1955-2008, see my forthcoming article “Emmett Till in Music and Song” *Southern Cultures* (Fall 2009).


3. Far more cheerfully, Eudora Welty names the old African American hero/survivor Phoenix Jackson in “A Worn Path” (1941).

4. I am grateful to Laura Kramer of the Aaron Kramer Estate and to Mark D. Moss, editor of *Sing Out!*, for granting me permission to reprint “Blues for Emmett Till.” I am also thankful to Rick Kramer (no kin to Aaron) for his bibliographic help.


—. “ ‘No Justice, No Peace’: The Figure of Emmett Till in African American Literature.” *MELUS* 28.1 (Spring 2003): 87-103.


"Blues for Emmett Till"
Words by Aaron Kramer; Music by Clyde R. Appleton

I've got the blues, friend, don't know how to keep still;
The Mississippi blues, friend, won't let me keep still.
One name is moaned by every wind: the name of Emmett Till.

Been hearing a blue story—that's why I feel blue;
Emmett Till's story makes me feel so blue.
Can't breathe another day, friend, 'less I pass it on to you.

He went down South for the summer: Chicago's a boiling slum.
Flew down like a bird for the summer, but he should've stayed in the slum.
The South's no place for a Negro to buy a stick of gum.

Foolish little bird! His feathers were all brown . . .
They should have warned that bird, if you happen to be brown
Better not chirp when Mrs. Bryant's around.

Poor young Emmett Till! He never will get his wish.
I'm sorry for Emmett Till—it was such a little wish.
He went down to the Tallahatchie, but he didn't go down to fish.

Seems like in Mississippi murder's doing all right;
In Money, Mississippi, to kill a young bird's all right
If the young bird is brown and the killer's white.

Jury knows who killed him—knows the place and the time.
Jury knows just who killed him, that terrible midnight-time.
But his face was crushed so bad, it couldn't be called a crime.

Next time you pass a courthouse, look at the marble word.
Slow down when you pass a courthouse, and laugh about that word—
Laugh about "Justice," friend, and cry for a young brown bird.

I've got the blues, friend, don't know how to keep still;
The Mississippi blues, friend, won't let me keep still.
One name is roared by every wind: the name of Emmett Till.