

To the Deep Water: James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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Sonny, the jazz pianist of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," well expresses the sentiment that E.T.A. Hoffmann had about music, when he called it an "inexpressible longing."¹ Sonny's longing, expressed in the blues, is music on the edge. Sonny's life is captured in the final image of this story. A glass of Scotch and milk balancing on his piano is much like his life, jostling with the excitement of the music, ever on the edge.

"Sonny's Blues" exists in the tension between the communal mystery of jazz and Sonny's poignant individual struggle.

"Sonny's Blues" is about daring and learning to hear the inheritance of life that jazz makes available to listeners. In his essay "The Price of the Ticket," James Baldwin writes of a new experience of music that emerged from his meeting the artist Beauford Delaney: "I walked into music. I had grown up with music, but, now, on Beauford's small black record player, I began to hear what I had never dared or been able to hear." A list of jazz vocalists and musicians follows: Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, Fats Waller. "He could inform me about Duke Ellington and W.C. Handy and Josh White," Baldwin writes. All these, he says, were "part of my inheritance." His character Sonny reminds us how jazz and the blues may lead us into contact with this wider community.²

For it is this inheritance of jazz and the blues that is for Sonny a means of release from the "nausea" and the absurdity of being in the world that Jean-Paul Sartre has spoken of. It is, for Sonny, a way to defend the integrity of existence. The existential character, Sonny, faces what Edmund Husserl once saw as the most serious difficulty of the individual: that of escaping from isolation within the self alone.³ Jazz and blues provide an answer: a kind of communal experience. For in Baldwin's story there is the intimation that in jazz there is an intersubjectivity of rhythmic connection that cannot be accounted for in a Cartesian world-view. This possibility exists in a tension

with what Baldwin has referred to as "the aloneness in which one discovers that life is tragic, and, therefore, unutterably beautiful."⁴

In "Sonny's Blues," music is everywhere; it is the atmosphere and soundscape of Baldwin's story. Communal making of music connects Sonny with his fellow musicians, with jazz listeners, and with his interior life. As he risks expression, his brother, the narrator, recognizes that "his life contained so many others." In the story's penultimate scene in a jazz club, Sonny finally breaks through. He launches into a piano solo flight in which there is a "passing across a threshold" and "a passage from a lower to a higher order of vision."⁵ This essay reflects upon how jazz and blues connect Sonny's eccentric and gifted spirit with humanity and how the music of a musician like Sonny engages us as listeners.

When Sonny finds his groove, he is no longer separate. In becoming the music and expressing emotion, the members of the jazz ensemble become more than separate selves. There is no longer a Cartesian world of separation or isolation at the jazz club and that suits the largely isolated Sonny just fine. When jazz players connect in the music their synchrony creates a social space in which there is a "coupling of their nervous systems," according to jazz trumpeter and neuroscientist William Benzon in *Beethoven's Anvil* (2001). Or as William H. McNeill notes in *Keeping Together in Time*, "a muscular bonding of rhythmic group connection" occurs.⁶

Sonny's musical extension of his spirit reflects that moment in a musician's performing life that Benzon well describes: "Something happens to performers, then, at rare moments- something they did not plan or will."⁷ The communal dimension of this has been described by neuroscientists as the linking of subcortical and cortical systems among musicians and their audience. Antonio Damasio describes this in *Descartes Error* (1991) and the "sharing in the same pattern of neural activity" is observed by Nils Wallin in *Biomusicology* (1991).

Sonny's blues ultimately are about community, as critics have noted.⁸ Indeed, Baldwin's story points to music as communal. In the penultimate scene at the jazz club, the narrator, Sonny's brother, is brought into a realization that music making is about collective dynamics. As Milt Hintal puts it, "music involves more than playing an instrument; it's really about cohesiveness and sharing." Or, as Benzon puts it, "Music is a medium through which individual brains are coupled together in shared activity."⁹ In jazz, Sonny lives in a world of rhythms, ritual, and spontaneous feeling. Jazz music acts as a means of collective intentionality. The narrator of "Sonny's Blues," a member of the audience, likewise experiences the communal emotions. His comments suggest that he has begun to feel that something special is going on in Sonny. He senses that something emotional is going in music- making, just as Leonard Meyer put his finger on it in *Emotion and Meaning and Music* (1956), at about the same time that Baldwin was writing this story.¹⁰

Baldwin begins his story rhythmically, with cadenced sentences broken by commas that give a staccato start and stop effect to the first paragraph. These

lines reflect the repetition of the narrator who is reading, then re-reading, a newspaper note about his brother, Sonny. Here, in Baldwin's opening, the stutter of prose repetition may reflect a narrator who is trying to emotionally hold together life amid memories and loss.

A poetics of repetition marks out Sonny's Blues. It is like "a mental stammer, a sign that the normal operations of consciousness have been thwarted [...]." The release that follows the end of the repetition "has a cathartic or therapeutic quality."¹¹

Repetition is a common feature of the blues and its original 12-bar structure. The three-line stanza of the blues is built upon two lines that repeat and echo each other and express a sentiment that is developed with variations by the third line.

Baldwin's story takes a stance toward time. Rather than proceeding in a linear fashion, Baldwin's narrative moves like music, in time that bends back upon itself. The story is not told in chronological time. Instead, as in musical time, it is structured in sections that evoke memory. Music itself is "saturated by time" and translates time into form. This story, likewise is deeply concerned with change, movement, and subjective inwardness. A liminal character, Sonny himself is an expression of what Lawrence Kramer has described as transitivity.¹² That is, Sonny appears to be always coming apart, or coming back together again. Sonny is a "rootless intensity" for whom time in music brings wholeness or fragmentation, identity or dissociation.

In the story's first reference to music, the unnamed narrator, a school teacher, is inquiring about Sonny. The pervasiveness of music and its effects on his life is immediately suggested by the street scene in which music sounds from a tavern: "the juke box was blasting away with something black and bouncy." We see the barmaid keeping time to the music. The narrator says, "I listened to the music which seemed to be causing the pavement to shake." The idea that music causes trembling in the material world and in the human psyche is reinforced by the final image of the story in which a glass of scotch and milk is set on the top of Sonny's piano.

The portrait we are given of Sonny comes to us through this school teacher brother, whose winding narrative and distinct point of view is our lens upon Sonny and the action. His narrative, at several points, appears to ask, "Who is Sonny? What has my brother become?" Sonny is a character who represents what Lawrence Kramer has called "romantic repetition," in which the state of mind and feeling evoked by repetition is usually one of distress.¹³ The blues so well captures this repetition, reliving, and transformation of pain. Sonny's blues are shadowed by thanatos at every turn. There is in Sonny's blues, as in romantic repetition, a dissolve of personality, what Kramer refers to as "the transit of identity." Sonny, who appears caught between thanatos and the pleasure principle, reflects Sigmund Freud's view of "repetition compulsion, the living-over of a painful action in defiance of the pleasure-principle [...] as a product of the death instinct."¹⁴

Sonny's life is his music. Like music, it is a process of expectancy and patterns of tension. Sonny's consciousness is a dynamic force, the expression of a rhythm. The dynamics of Sonny's consciousness maybe described as "cathetic rhythm."¹⁵ His emotional life is linked with a structural rhythm that unfolds. In psychoanalytic terms, the process by which a subject invests psychic energy in an object, making the object meaning for itself. Freud's term *Besetzung* means "occupation" and "electric charge."

Sonny reaches for ec-stasis. His investment of psychic energy into the music, his effort to make meaning, charges it with psychological and emotional energy. There is a feeling of distress before Sonny breaks free. This corresponds with what Kramer has said of "romantic repetition," which "usually involves distress, disturbance, or turbulence."¹⁶

Baldwin's turbulent and troubled character, Sonny, is also a gifted artist. His subject is music and life, music and the psychology and spirit of one man and his struggle. Baldwin points to the artist and his jazz as an ecstatic fusion between subject and object. Sonny's blues are a search for transformative power and his drug use, in the hazy intervals of his life, is a substitute and a craving for this experience.

The unnamed narrator has chosen the safe family life of a school teacher. However, Sonny's life parallels the tragic life of their father's brother, a guitar player, who was the victim of a hit and run accident. Mama hums "an old church song" at the window, just before she discloses that "Your daddy once had a brother" and the sad tale of his demise. Mama recalls their father's story, much in the manner of a sad ballad. She says, "he was whistling to himself and he had his guitar slung over his shoulder." We see the uncle's lone figure at the roadside and see the father of Sonny and the narrator looking on. Then the sharp image comes of a car filled with drunken white men that hits the guitar player. As he falls, we hear the rhythm of mama's telling the story, vividly recalled to her by their father's auditory memory: "and he heard the wood of that guitar when it give, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day."¹⁷

Inviting Sonny into his home, the school teaching narrator is unprepared for a jazz education, or for Sonny's lifestyle. "But I thought I'd never hear the end of that piano," he tells us. He watches as Sonny buys a record player and listens as Sonny plays piano to the records. "Or he'd play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano."¹⁸

Sonny is not easily understood by his brother the narrator, by Isabel, the narrator's wife, or by others in the society outside the jazz ensemble.

Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with a sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them-naturally. They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though

Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all[...] as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision of his own; and there wasn't any way to reach him.¹⁹

The brother senses that "Sonny was at that piano playing for his life." Indeed, he is. For Baldwin makes it clear that there is the tension of a struggle for life with death in Sonny's music. The narrator wants to rescue Sonny from this but perhaps only music can be salvific for Sonny.

Aware that Sonny suffers, his brother says, "I don't want to see you- die- trying not to suffer." He can see Sonny slowly "killing" himself. Music is Sonny's response to what is otherwise inexpressible.

"It's terrible sometimes, inside," he said. "The streets are cold and there's a storm inside [...] You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally get with it and play it, you realize nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen."²⁰

Music—jazz, the blues—is a resistance against "going to pieces." Observing a gospel group singing at a makeshift "revival" meeting on the street, Sonny says:

"While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through- to sing like that. It's repulsive to think you have to suffer that much."

I said: "But there's no way not to suffer- is there, Sonny?"

"I believe not," he said and smiled, "but that's never stopped anyone from trying."²¹

Again gospel music creeps in as an answer to the blues and dwells for a time in tension with it. The gospel message in song is familiar but it falls short of having any real saving effect. Outside the living room window on Seventh Avenue is a "revival meeting" with "three sisters in black and a brother" with Bibles and a tambourine, into which goes donations. The theme of rescue is underscored. The song is familiar to everyone, the narrator tells us, and "not one of them had been rescued." At best "the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them."²²

The memory of their mother's gospel music comes back to Sonny and his brother.

"What a warm voice," he said.

"They were singing *If I could only hear my mother pray again!*"

"Yes," I said, "and she can sure beat that tambourine."

"But what a terrible song," he said, and laughed.²³

It is not so much their mother that Sonny recalls but the effect of the drugs that he has been taking. The maternal, the voice of music, and the drug that brings solace, escape, and a sense of control mingle in him: "When she was singing before," said Sonny abruptly, "the voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes—when it's in your veins. It makes you sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—and sure."²⁴

Sonny wants this feeling of being in control. "Sometimes you've got to have that feeling," he says. Yet, jazz asks for a flexibility, a control that paradoxically is also a letting go of control as well. Sonny's brother sees Sonny looking at him "with great, troubled eyes." Sonny makes it clear that his involvement with music is what sustains him. "It's not so much to play. It's to stand it, to be able to make it at all. On any level. In order to keep from shaking to pieces."²⁵

Sonny's suffering reflects what Baldwin, in "Down at the Cross," called "the depths out of which much ironic tenacity comes."²⁶ In "Down at the Cross," Baldwin suggests a tension and interaction between gospel music and the blues. Yet, in both, he implies, is a search for freedom: "This is the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz. In all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged [...]. Only people who have been 'down the line,' as the song puts it, know what this music is about."²⁷

For Baldwin, Sonny clearly represents the struggle of the artist in society: the creative person who he describes as being in a lover's war with his or her society. In "The Creative Process" in *Creative America* (1962) Baldwin wrote of the artist: "he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very vigorous rules" to "discover the mystery of human being." The artist knows that "all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen."

The essay may be said to extend the image of Sonny's glass of scotch and milk balancing on his piano to a wider view of society.

A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven [...] The artist must not and cannot take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.²⁸

We see the social critique implicit in "Sonny's Blues" made explicit in Baldwin's later essay "On Catfish Row" in *Commentary* (1959). Baldwin is sharply critical of the society that "produced and destroyed" Billie Holiday. He speaks of a "brutally indifferent world" and writes, "We are altogether quick to disdain responsibility for the fate which overtakes—so often—so many gifted, driven and erratic artists. Nobody pushed them to their deaths, we like to say. They jumped."²⁹

The question in "Sonny's Blues" is whether Sonny will dissolve into drug addiction and death or take the leap of faith into life. Sonny is learning the

blues with his life and the music challenges Sonny to follow Charlie Parker and the other great players who swirl in his thoughts into "the deep water."

Sonny, a blues note bending toward dissonance, will not fall to pieces. He meditates on needing a fix, seeking a place to lean. "I needed a clear space to listen," he says.³⁰ His brother needs a space to listen too—and so do we, the readers who listen to his story. With Baldwin's narrator we visit a nightclub and meet Creole, "a coal black cheerful looking man, a musician friend of Sonny's, built close to the ground."³¹ We are in that club in the climax of the story. Baldwin brings us there to where we watch and listen to the jazz ensemble from "a table in a dark corner."

It is clear that Sonny has difficulty getting started, finding his groove, launching into his solo. "His face was troubled, he was working hard."³² It is in this tension, before Sonny can find his musical voice, that Baldwin gives us an extraordinary mediation on music from the listening narrator's point of view:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant too, for that same reason.³³

Sonny, facing the void, is an existential character held back in a duet with Creole, who is listening, challenging. "He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there and he knew."³⁴ The deep water of innovation awaits the assertion of a self in a leap of faith. Baldwin leads us dramatically into this decisive moment for his character poised at his piano.

Sonny will take the risk and make the leap into the unknown, where a musical structure shifts and one has to find one's way. It is a moment when "a piano is just a piano" but "[h]e has to fill it, the instrument, with the breath of life, his own."³⁵

We see Sonny challenged by the piano, as if by life. Baldwin here returns to halting staccato sentences broken by commas. "He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, panicked again, got stuck." With the semi-colon we pause, but then we plunge forward. With the ending period we are stuck. We watch Sonny in "the fire and fury of the battle" within him, within the music.

It is in the tune "Am I Blue," the narrator senses, that Sonny began to play with heartfelt abandon. "Something began to happen." The players answer, draw apart, come together. Sonny has returned to the community. "He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano."³⁶

Baldwin's story here suggests that the blues dwell in liminality. They exist in peril of ruin or death, or in anticipation of a life-giving power, to stretch out human capacity for feeling. Creole and the musicians communicate

what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.³⁷

It is this overcoming of the darkness, the opening up of possibilities, that Sonny, the artist, is about. In his communal rhythm and connection, Sonny has gone into his own space. "Now listen, these are Sonny's blues."³⁸ When Sonny makes the music his own it becomes a gift. In it "that life contained so many others." Sonny has reached a point of breakthrough and he is giving his life back in music. Here Baldwin provides a beautifully lyrical passage suggesting generation and memory, as Sonny plays. Sonny's music restores to the narrator memory, community, and family: "I saw my mother's face again [...] I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died [...] I felt my own tears begin to rise."³⁹

Yet there is an awareness that "this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky."

The blues live in Baldwin's story as a respite from disaster. They suggest a space of suspension between the trouble of life and that breakthrough to wholeness that is temporary, much like the moment of rest in Schopenhauer's will.⁴⁰ Clearly, life plunges on like the next tune the band will attempt. In that final image of the story, a glass of Scotch and milk set on Sonny's piano is described as "a cup of trembling." Fear and anxiety on the edge of piano and soul await the music that will shake and mix that drink. Sonny is that cup and its contents, mother's milk and song of life, the heat, sting, and swirl of hard liquor. These are Sonny's blues.

Notes

¹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, "The Poet and the Composer," *Die Serapions-Bruder*, trans. in *Source Readings in Music History: The Romantic Era*, ed. Oliver Strunk. (New York: Norton, 1965), 36.

² James Baldwin, "The Price of a Ticket (1985) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 830-42.

³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*. (New York: New Directions), 1969; James Collins, *The Existentialists- A Critical Study*. (Gateway, 1960), 27-39.

⁴ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," (1957) in *James Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 831-864.

- ⁵ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," (New York: Library of America) p.861-63. See William L. Benzon, "Blues in the Night" in *Beethoven's Anvil* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 93-115.
- ⁶ William L. Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001) p. 28; William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 27.
- ⁷ William L. Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001) p.96. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. (New York: Avon Books, 1994); Nils Wallin, *Biomusicology*. (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1991).
- ⁸ An often anthologized essay from *Negro American Literature Forum* (1970) calls this story Baldwin's image of black community. John M. Reilly " 'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," *Negro American Literature Forum* 4, no.2 (1970): 56-60. Reprinted in *James Baldwin, A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Kenneth Kinnamon. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), 139-46.
- ⁹ William L. Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 23.
- ¹⁰ Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956).
- ¹¹ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984).
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 31. In Jacques Lacan's view, unconscious repetition is the fate of the ego trapped in imagined alter-egos. See *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilder (New York: Delta, 1968), 174-75.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984), 18-19.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 843.
- ¹⁸ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 850.
- ¹⁹ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 851.
- ²⁰ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 857.
- ²¹ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 854.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 855.
- ²⁵ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 856.
- ²⁶ James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," *The Fire Next Time* (1962) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 296-347. See 311.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" in *Creative America*, (1962) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 669-672. See p. 670.
- ²⁹ James Baldwin, "On Catfish Row" in *Commentary* (1959) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 616-621.
- ³⁰ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 858.
- ³¹ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 859.
- ³² James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 861.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 862.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 863.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol.1, Ed. E.J.F. Payne. (New York: Dover, 1969). Third Book, 52, 255-267.

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