B.B. King's Blues' Aesthetics: a Landmark in American Culture

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Résumé:

La présente étude est une reconnaissance de la contribution du défunt B.B. King, également connu sous le nom de *Roi du Blues*, au Blues. Elle vise à montrer l'esthétique particulière qui se dégage de l'art de ce musicien Africain American. Soutenue par le concept philosophique de l'esthétique, cette contribution démontrera que B.B. King a revisité le Blues pour devenir une figure emblématique et un repère dans la culture Américaine. Cette étude montrera en effet que le Blues qu'il jouait représente fondamentalement un changement de paradigme par rapport au Blues joué avant lui. Elle démontrera également que la musique apolitique de King, associée à sa performance scénique unique, a permis au Blues d'avoir une plus grande audience tout en lui apportant la renommée dont il a joui tout au long de sa vie et dont il bénéficie encore à titre posthume.

Mots clés:

B.B. King, Blues, Roi du Blues, esthétique, changement de paradigme, scène, performance, expression faciale, émotion, siège.

Abstract:

This study is an acknowledgment of the contribution of the late B.B. King, also known as the *King of the Blues*, to the Blues. It aims to show the aesthetics that radiates from this African American musician's art. Backed by the philosophical concept of aesthetics, this contribution will show how B.B. King revisited the Blues to become an iconic figure and a landmark in the

American culture. The study will go on to demonstrate that the Blues that he played represents in essence a paradigm shift with regard to the Blues performed before him. It will also show that King's apolitical music, coupled with his unique stage performance, helped the Blues go mainstream and brought him the fame that he enjoyed in his lifetime and still enjoys posthumously.

Key Words:

B.B. King, Blues, King of the Blues, aesthetics, paradigm shift, stage, performance, facial expression, emotion, seat.

Introduction

"The Blues has lost its king, and America has lost a legend."[1] These are some of the words that President Barack Hussein Obama expressed and that the official website of the White House posted immediately after the death of Riley Ben King, best known as B.B. King, was announced to the world. Prompted by a desire to stress the incredible contribution of the late King to American culture in general and underscore his immense talent as a musician and entertainer, the president of the United States even went further to say that "there's going to be one killer blues session in heaven tonight."[2] In this original and metaphorical homage, this head of state was joining his voice to that of hundreds of thousands of both anonymous and renowned people around the world. In chorus, they all felt the necessity to pay tribute to the *King of the Blues* and acknowledge his outstanding legacy moments after he passed away at the age of 89.

[1] This statement made by President Obama was reported by Tanya Somanader on May 15, 2015, on www.whitehouse.gov

[2] Ibid

On that day of May 14, 2015, indeed, after they had broken the news of the death of King to the world, hundreds of television channels and radio stations made important changes to their regular programs to show their respect to the formidable artist he had been all his life. Heavily relayed by the social media and the printing press, not only were the last days of this iconic figure who died peacefully in his sleep in Las Vegas, Nevada, debated at length but his discography was also revisited and played hours on end. This tribute was in perfect harmony with the songs that Blues aficionados and B.B. King's fans who poured into the streets of major cities in the United States and all around the world sang to hail the discography and rich life of their idol.

It is true that with the innumerable music productions, discs, concerts, interviews, awards, and countless of other types of acknowledgments that he received all through his long and rich career, B.B. King definitely stands out as an important figure of the American culture. And yet the aesthetics of his music and stage performances has not received much attention from scholars so as to be formerly studied to this day.

The present article intends to do so by showing that B. B. King's Blues bears a unique aesthetics representing a paradigm shift that ultimately enriches the Blues itself and American culture as a whole. Mainly supported by the philosophical concept of aesthetics, it will first present the views of some scholars on the aforementioned concept then demonstrate the uniqueness of King's form of Blues. The third and last part of this study will analyze and emphasize the aesthetics of his unique stage performances.

1. Aesthetics and Art

Aesthetics which can literally be defined as beauty or the theory of beauty is a term that has been around for centuries. First, it started to be formally used to critique the

geometric proportions of architectural works and harmony in music, in particular, and art, in general, as of the eighteenth century. Long before that era however, some philosophers questioned the very existence of art and its beauty. Plato, for instance, had expressed in the *Republic* his aversion for art which he believed was just a pale and imperfect reproduction of the perfection of nature and therefore had the potential for harming the Republic if it was not able to impart ethical and moral values to the society. And even though he does not get to the same conclusion about the possible harmful impact of art in society, Immanuel Kant shares this vision of art when he links beauty to morality. For him, aesthetics, or pure beauty, does not lie in any work of art which has been crafted with the intention to please. It does not call on the audience's sensuality either, let alone the desire to possess the aforementioned work of art. Pure beauty, he contends, is to be found in the unique and shared sensation of pleasure that the random arrangement of nature, for example, or any work of art has on us after having pushed our imagination to interact with the contemplated object. In short, as reported by S. Houlgate (2016, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy),[3]

> the effect produced by the 'beautiful' object is to set our understanding and imagination in 'free play' with one another, and it is the pleasure generated by this free play that leads us to judge the object to be beautiful.

Such a vision of art, however, did not make a lot of followers. Rather, numerous scholars and critics underscored the importance of art for its own beauty and merit and the emotional appeal that it can generate. Among them was Aristotle, one of the disciples of Plato who viewed art in a much different way. For him, art, in general, and drama and poetry, in particular, are highly important for society as they are able to move the audience in ways that either produce their satisfaction and enjoyment or elicit catharsis, that is, spawn strong emotions that can range from fear to pity in the audience[4]. As a whole, a song, a plot, a

[3] Immanuel Kant's ideas summarized here by Stephen Houlgate are available on the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* which is an online encyclopedia. Cf. the list of works cited.

[4] This sentence that encapsulates some views expressed by Aristotle is a paraphrase of Stephen Houlgate's words taken from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

character, the language used and the rhythm and many other features of the work of art have the potential to arouse these feelings.

Hegel, who extensively reflected over the concept of aesthetics, is in complete agreement with this view. Nevertheless, he points out that beauty should not just be seen in the harmonious fusion of form and content but also in "the sensuous manifestation in stone, color, sound or words of *spiritual freedom and life.*"[5] For him, art, which he sees as the "creation of beautiful objects,"[6] particularly manifest in the sculptures of ancient Greek heroes and gods and human beings in general, is not intended to be the mere portrayal of what humans live daily. It rather rises above the simple imitation of nature by revealing to us the truth about ourselves, or reminding us about who we really are, that is, free people that the contingencies of life might make us lose sight of.

Reflecting specifically over music's aesthetics, Hegel claimed that music is a medium that permits the artist to express his inner subjectivity. Indeed, the experience the musician goes through is unique, and so is the experience of the audience. The fact is that when music is played, it triggers a dialectical interaction between the soul and the harmonious sounds and rhythms it hears. After having expressed its inner emotions through the musical notes that it has come up with and played, the soul itself experiences other emotions in return when listening to the tune it has composed. This view regarding the existing interchange between the soul and music is shared by most thinkers. But what will make Hegel's views on music aesthetics the leading theory for visiting B.B. King's Blues in the present article is the purpose he assigns to music. For him, as paraphrased by S. Houlgate (2016, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), "the purpose of music is not only to arouse feelings in us, but –as in all genuine art –to enable us to enjoy a sense of reconciliation and satisfaction in what we encounter." Houlgate goes on to say that for Hegel, this is "the secret of truly 'ideal' music." In his book

[5] Here, Stephen Houlgate paraphrases Hegel on the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[6] Ibid

Aesthetics, as it is quoted by Houlgate in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, he indicates that "tranquillity of soul is never missing [in the presence of this ideal music]; grief is expressed there, too, but it is assuaged at once." Such are the feelings that the music of B.B. King imparts.

2. B.B. King's Form of Blues

If one considers, like the German post World War II philosopher Theodor Adorno would put it, culture and society to be part of the same paradigm or historical totality, then the birth of a specific genre of music is the direct response given by its creators to fit a specific social context.[7] In this dialectical relationship, society is then the spark that gives life to a certain form of music that in turn will influence it and again give birth to new variations of that same music or see the rise of other forms of music. In the specific case of the blues, this pattern appears to be the one at work in the American society as this music has known important variations, and even made a complete U-turn at a given point of its history at the beginning of the "reign" of B.B. King, the *King of Blues*.

Historically, the Blues can be traced back in the 19th century, even though its initiators did not leave any written trace that could permit to date it precisely. Historians agree however that it was born in the Delta of the Mississippi in the southern part of the United States towards the end of the 19th century. In fact, the Blues is known as a music that flowed out of the black community right after the Civil War and the realization that all the promises made before, during and after the war would never be translated into the everyday life of the Negro. It exclusively voiced the sorrows of a community that dreamt of freedom and equality with

[7] The views expressed here are derived from Lambert Zuidervaart's study of Theodor Adorno's body of work. This study is available on the website of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

the whites after the Emancipation proclamation but whose living conditions had not changed much since slavery.

Based on a three-line verse format which can broadly be represented by the A-A-B or 12 Bar Blues pattern, the Blues was indeed an outlet for these Americans of African descent to express the grief and sorrows their existence was regularly made up of. The first line expresses the complaint that the second reinforces with the repetition of the exact words found in the first, adding more intensity to the gloom that first line introduced. As for the third, it comes as the conclusion or explanation of the desperate situation announced in the two first lines.

In essence, however, the Blues was more than a sad song laid on a sad rhythm. It was rather a combat music with an underlying political and social agenda, like most of the music genres that emerged from the African American community. This is what the theomusicologist J. H. Cone (1972, p. 6) indicates in the introduction to his book entitled *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* when he says that:

> Black music is also social and political. It is social because it *is black* and thus articulates the separateness of the black community. It is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of western culture. Black music is political because in its rejection of white cultural values, it affirms the political "otherness" of black people. Through song, a new political consciousness is continuously created, one antithetical to the values of white society.

This new political consciousness did not depart the first Blues singers as they all embraced the cause of the Black people in the country and became the pennant bearers of their frustrations and anger. Thus, their music was often used by African American activists, the Black Power movement and scholars from the African American community to affirming the uniqueness of the cultural identity of the Negro in America. Among them was James Cone who, according to L. G. Collins and M. N. Crawford (2006, p. 233), "defended the blues in the name of black identity-formation." For him, as they quoted in their book,

> The political significance of the blues is not very impressive to those who have not experienced black servitude. Neither is it impressive to persons who are fascinated by modern theories of political revolution. But for black people who live the blues, who

> experience and share that history with their black fathers and mothers, the blues are examples of Black Power and the courage to affirm black being (L. G. Collins and M. N. Crawford, 2006, p. 233).

B.B. King himself felt that strong connection with this black community he was part of. More importantly, he never missed an opportunity to assert his pride to be an African American and to play a music that is black in essence, as one can read in his autobiography.

But contrary to his contemporaries who were more concerned about keeping alit the revolutionary message that their blues imparted, especially in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, B.B. King focused all his attention on the aesthetics of his music. In its post on Reuters's website on Friday 15, May 2015, Bill Trott reported King's deepest aspirations when he unequivocally declared that "while the civil rights movement was fighting for the respect of black people, I felt I was fighting for the respect of the blues." And this is what he did as his Blues evolved very rapidly from verses filled with lamentations to themes celebrating lust, pleasure, ambition, success and the like. More than any other Blues artist, King was at the origin of the paradigm shift that occurred in this African American music genre. He definitely broke with the sad ballads and lyrics that had long characterized this music. In fact, King's music aesthetics lies in the purpose that he consciously or unconsciously assigned to his art. By writing and performing songs that, for the most part, appealed to all races through the simplicity and politically-free messages they sent out, he was able to make the Blues go mainstream, and even cross the borders of the United States of America. An example of his international fame is evidenced by his tour in the Soviet Union in 1979; a feat no bluesman before him had accomplished.

At a time when African Americans were denied their basic civil rights in the United States and were often subject to multiple forms of racism and discrimination, King's popularity soared indeed way beyond the limits of the African Americans' entertainment venues. In 1968, for instance, he was invited to perform at festivals where he was introduced

to a white audience. That year, he played at the Newport Folk Festival, for example, and was chosen a year later to tour with the Rolling Stones for whom he opened 18 of their American concerts along with Ike and Tina Turner. He even played at some Republican political rallies during that period to finally play at the White House in February 2012, at the invitation of President Obama and his wife. This exceptional fame finds part of its explanation not only in the beauty of the melodies that support his songs but also in their content.

A close look at King's discography evidences indeed the softness of his themes which happened to meet the aspirations of a generation of Americans who had just known World War II and which was yearning for tranquility; a tranquility that they found in B.B. King's Blues which, in a way, brought out their inner emotions and revealed who they really were, that is, human beings whose life should be filled with the frivolity of youth and the pleasures life had to offer rather than the horrors of the war. Indeed, such songs as "Please Love Me," "You Upset Me Baby," "Why I Sing The Blues," "Everyday I Have The Blues," "Payin' The Cost To Be The Boss" were sang on themes that all Americans, regardless of their races, easily identified; songs that called more for sheer pleasure than political resistance. King's biggest success, *The Thrill is Gone*, which was released in 1969, epitomizes this mindset and aesthetics. When played live, all these songs also projects emotions that King has always wanted to share with his public.

3. A Unique Stage Performance

Watching B.B. King perform live is indeed a unique experience that many people have had the pleasure to live before his death. For those who did not have this opportunity, the plethora of videos of his concerts stored by television channels around the world or the ones available on the Internet can help get a glimpse of what made King keep his crown as the

King of Blues for so long. In fact, beyond the beauty of his music, lies the aesthetics of his unique stage performance that sets our minds in what Immanuel Kant called "free-play," a state in which all the viewers of the work of art which is considered to be beautiful find themselves after having interacted with it. And it is probably this outstanding feature of King's music that pushed William Thompson, Phil Graham and Frank Russo, three psychologists, to use his facial expressions for a study entitled "Seeing music performance: visual influences on perception and experience" in 2005.

It is true that in the music realm, B.B. King's performances are among the most fraught with gestures and postures that each person in the audience can identify and interpret at will. For the purpose of the present article, two of them that stand particularly out and participate in setting the uniqueness of this talented artist's stage performances will be analyzed. The first is to be found in his noticeable and unparalleled facial expression and body movements while the second relates to the sitting positions that he often adopted during his performances.

But before discussing B.B. King's singular facial expressions and gestures in general, it is important to premise that facial expressions are a form of nonverbal communication that are executed with the help of facial muscles. As such, they have the capacity to send a lot of information to any interlocutor who will in turn decipher them according to his or her own sociocultural background. The "yes" gesture in India, for example, which consists in wobbling the head side to side is in stark contrast with the "yes" that is expressed in, say, most parts of the Ivory Coast, where the head goes up and down in a nod. Such a distance can be observed in the interpretation given to the *thumbs up* sign. While it simply means "well done" or "great" in many countries around the world such as the United States of America or Great Britain, it has an offensive connotation in the Middle East where it is associated with the meaning that the middle finger represents in the aforementioned countries, for instance.

Giving eye contact or looking down or up in communication situations also has different meanings from one culture to another.

With this in mind, it can be assumed that B.B. King's facial expressions and body language will unavoidably trigger different interpretations depending on the type of audience that sees him performing as he displays his whole battery of facial expressions and more. But the beauty of it all is that all the people who will come in contact with his stage performances will get to the conclusion that the artist is living his art to the fullest and is virtually becoming one with it. This has been evidenced by the study mentioned above where the three researchers indicated that "in the instrumental performance by B.B. King (*Blues Boys Tune*), facial expressions often function both as *affect displays* and as musical *illustrators* to emphasize occurrences of dissonance and 'blue' notes" (W. Thompson, P. Graham and F. Russo, 2005, p. 181). Indeed, the study demonstrated that the participants to the experiment, Judge A and Judge B, lived different musical experiences while watching the same filmed performance by King. While Judge B simply indicated that "King's movements help him to get into the feel of the music" (p.183), Judge A provided an elaborated response to the stimuli that represented the filmed performance by saying that "King's facial expressions often functioned to signal that certain passages were difficult but satisfying to play" (p.182). He went further to suggest that "King's open-mouth expression conveys a sense of letting the sound go free" (p.182).

It is true that scores of interpretations could be given to this singular expression that King displays when opening his mouth without uttering a word while looking up as if he was transported in a vision to an unknown place. Some could give it a spiritual meaning while others could see it as the expression of his ultimate pleasure, the climax of the satisfaction to be doing what he has always wanted to do, that is, share his passion for the Blues. Even when he closes his eyes while executing his solo parts, King projects scores of feelings that the

viewer only is free to decipher and give meaning to after having interacted with it with his or her intellect. This interplay between what is seen and the intellect is underscored by Luc Benoist, for example, in his book entitled *Signes, Symboles et Mythes*. Wincing too that is generally synonymous to pain finds new meanings with B.B. King as it denotes more than the execution of specific notes. In fact, "King frequently adopts an introspective demeanor, with eyes closed and a pained expression, yet stubbornly shaking his head. This *affective display* conveys an expression of stoically reflecting upon but not surrendering to difficult emotions" (W. Thompson, P. Graham and F. Russo, 2005, p. 181).

These emotions, King also imparted with his sitting position during his performances. It is indeed very unusual for music artists to sit down when giving a concert, especially when that musician is a guitarist. And yet King has served this position for years now to his audiences during long parts of his concerts; something that unavoidably pushes the viewer to ask a certain number of questions or come to conclusions that his or her own interpretation of the scene might prompt. Before going any further, it is opportune to indicate that age, weight, and fatigue are in great part responsible for this posture that King started to adopt years before he passed. Still, a close look at it adds to the aesthetics of his Blues and stage performances.

Metaphorically, the seat is the embodiment of power. It is regal and calls for respect in many traditions around the world. A King's dominance and reign is often symbolized by the existence of a throne. In our modern times, winning a seat, for a politician or any other person seeking representation in a parliament, for instance, is the achievement of a lifetime. In the *Académie Française*, a numbered seat is attributed to each member of the institution that is also known as an *immortel*, that is, a member for life. Symbolically, it represents the member but also the power that he or she has for making changes to the French language. By analogy, King's seat, wherever he performs, is his throne, and his sitting posture which is none but that of the *King of the Blues* gives a regal aura to his performances.

Conclusion

Today, no other name among the bluesman is as well-known as that of B.B. King's, the *King of the Blues*. Before him, none of them had gained the kind of fame and recognition he experienced all through his long and rich artistic life. And more than before, his legacy endures, even after his death. But this is not due to chance. His outstanding longevity as the King of Blues has to do with the particular aesthetics his blues has always carried at a time when this music was denouncing the ugliest features of a racist America. Mainly concerned for the beauty of the blues itself, indeed, he stepped out of the rhetoric that consisted in sending a political message to white America. All his attention was devoted to writing songs, rhythms and granting his audiences with a music performance that would forever make them appreciate the beauty of the Blues.

Just like Jessie Owens who raised his right hand up in support of the black cause in America but whose actions and words were always in favor of the coming together of all the races making up the American salad bowl, B. B. King's music had a fundamentally playful and entertaining quality to it that was very rapidly accepted by all audiences both locally and internationally. And yet, all this was supported by a rhythm that was initially revolutionary.

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