Masters In Creative Writing: Proposal

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Summary

This Creative Writing project is an album of South African songs written specifically in the context of American blues music. Although blues is an intrinsically American genre of Western popular music, it has its roots (along with other African-American forms of musical expression such as ragtime and jazz) in African culture, and as a South African musician and writer, I am intrigued by the possibilities of exploring African-American blues in the context of South Africa. This project therefore attempts some hybridity between these two cultural expressions, and to ascertain what kinds of lyric might be possible in modern South Africa in terms of the formation and perpetuation of a South African identity. Blues songs traditionally have a rather narrow focus as far as lyrics are concerned, but the genre's melodic structure, its instrumentation and its very specific vocal qualities have over the last century formed the bedrock of the whole of modern Western popular music.

As a white South African, I am continually investigating and interrogating my own sense of what it might mean to call myself an 'African'. My cultural heritage suggests that my 'African-ness' is problematic, and yet I feel passionate about my African identity. In a very real sense, African culture in the context of America is as much of an historical anomaly as the presence of European culture in Africa. A musical hybrid of 'African-American' blues music, written and performed by a white South African in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, would, I believe, have a contribution to make towards the questions of culture, identity and belonging that remain, hundreds of years after the fact, vital for the future of South Africa.

Keywords

Blues, identity, belonging, South African music, African culture, African-American music, post-apartheid, postcolonial identity

Background

1.

I have been a recording and performing musician for most of my life. I am also a songwriter, and in the last few years I have taken a greater interest in writing poetry. In order to further my academic interests, I imagined creating a volume of poems, and in the course of discussing this idea I was challenged to consider a project that might incorporate both my literary and musical interests – a solo album of original songs emerging from a self-reflexive engagement with what it means to be a white, male songwriter in post-apartheid South Africa.

I shall attempt an overview of my musical output since 1997 below, but initially I must make mention of a 2012 project of mine that has served as the inspiration for the format of this Masters piece. In 2011 I recorded an album of songs that became my second solo album, which I entitled *Rural*. Two of the songs included on this album were attempts to pay tribute to a particular style of songwriting I had become fond of, that of Bob Dylan's poetic folk-blues. These two songs ("Jack Kerouac's Blues" and "Three-Day Rampage"), similar in style and approach to each other, were writing exercises for me, an attempt at a form of lyric writing that I had not felt capable of before.

The recordings of these songs (and indeed the entire *Rural* album) attempted to capture specific studio performances. All the instrumentation and singing was performed 'live' in the studio and captured by the recording equipment as a 'real time event'. The result was an unvarnished organic sound that for me particularly suited the style of these two songs, and this approach to recording is one I intend to revisit for the MA project I have embarked on.

During initial MA discussions, my supervisor Duncan Brown suggested that I not only attempt an album's worth of music and poetry, but that I consciously limit myself to a particular genre of music in order for that genre to suggest an identity for the album itself. The suggestion was that this would give me something to write with, and possibly 'against'. Duncan mentioned the success I had realized in capturing something authentic in the recording of the *Rural* album, and that the two blues-folk homages in particular had something especially 'convincing' about them. The project he suggested was an album of modern blues music that further explored the stylistic experiments of *Rural*'s two blues-folk songs.

It had not occurred to me before to write songs in the traditional blues idiom. In this modern era (in which the advent of the internet has completely revolutionized how music is produced, consumed and curated), American blues music remains as familiar and popular as jazz. It is a hallowed staple of 20th century popular music in the West, and as such its general characteristics are familiar to the point of cliché. As a songwriter, I had never seriously considered the blues as a genre that would challenge me much, or one in which I could have made a meaningful contribution. Blues music has since the late 1950's been increasingly appropriated and popularised by white European and American artists, and I personally have never wanted to contribute to what I have always seen as the decline of the genre as a mode of truth and authenticity.

My initial reservations, however, gave way quickly when I considered the blues' cultural origins. Blues music has deep roots in traditional African forms of music, and its history and evolution can be traced back to the exportation of African idioms from West Africa to the plantations of south-eastern America during the transatlantic slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries. Seen from this perspective, blues music and the genres of 20th century popular Western music that are considered to have emerged from it (jazz, rock, and soul, for example) contain an innate *African*-ness that to my knowledge has not been fully investigated or explored satisfactorily, except possibly by ethnomusicologists in academia.

This is fascinating to me for the simple reason that I am a white South African, wrestling as many white South Africans do with the concepts of identity, heritage and belonging. As a songwriter, the challenge at hand is what an album of songs might sound like, written and performed by a white South African, using traditional blues idioms and techniques. Immediately, in thinking about this, I am confronted with the challenge of authenticity. Blues music is by its very nature an African response to an immediate historical tragedy and then later, a quintessentially American reality. The genre is also specifically an 'American' one. Being of neither 'African' nor 'American' heritage, it is questionable whether any attempt on my part to appropriate this genre for my own songwriting purposes would carry any cultural weight.

My 2011 *Rural* attempts at a form of blues songwriting have an air of authority about them precisely, I feel, because of their hybridity. Lyrically, I was more inspired by Bob Dylan and the writing of the Beat poets of the 1950s than by 'traditional' blues verse. The rhythms I set those two sets of lyrics to were possibly only superficially 'blues' rhythms, with the recorded outcome being more of a folk version of traditional country blues. Blues lyrics rely by their very nature on traditional African oral forms of communication, which often entail communal repetition and a system of 'call and response'. As such, I have found as a writer that they do not easily lend themselves to subtle, sustained poetic creativity or literary exploration.

Additionally, traditional blues lyrics focused on a relatively small range of subjects, two of the more common being religious yearning (which gave way in time to black American gospel music) and intimate vignettes of personal relational strife. When the traditional country blues of the impoverished American South began its gradual migration to the industrialized northern cities of America after the Stock Market Crash of 1929, blues songwriters and performers tended towards lyrics detailing the hardships of urban survival and, once again, the melancholy of the vagaries of human relationships. It is this melancholy, this sense of yearning and detailing of unfulfilled dreams and expectations, that pervades the genre and in fact gives it its very name.

As a songwriter and an aspirant poet, I find this traditional emphasis on melancholy and loss the most limiting aspect of attempting to write 21st century blues songs. These are universal themes that are of course explored in all genres of music, but blues music is more often than not wholly reliant on them. My challenge continues to be one of *content*: how do I express my European heritage, my own perceived *African*-ness, my literary interests and my musical influences within the confines of an African-American rural music tradition?

2.

I have been writing prose, poems and songs since my childhood, but it was only in 1997 that my career as a songwriter began to take shape. I had recently started writing songs of a generally 'spiritual' and, later, explicitly 'Christian' nature, and I formed a small band to begin performing these songs. My newfound faith had at the time led me to abandon music as a meaningful future, and so I was surprised when this band I had started began to be noticed by the industry at large. I called the band 'Tree' and agreed to record these new songs I had written, on the condition that the project would go no further after the album had been completed.

The debut Tree album *Overflow* (1997) contained songs that would eventually bring me to the attention of song publishers in the UK and the USA. Initially, however, the album was a humble self-recorded, self-published and entirely self-produced project that contained 20th century rock music (drawn heavily on the influences of UK band The Police and Irish band U2) with blatantly religious, even evangelical lyrics. Having kept my promise and walked away from this project, I was again surprised later to find that the album had caught the attention of the record-buying public of South Africa, as well as interested parties in the UK, and that Tree could be a going concern, should I want it to be.

I spent the next two years writing the songs that would eventually become Tree's biggest commercial success, the album entitled *63* (1999), which was released on UK label Survivor Records. Thematically, the songs of naïve joy-filled spiritual discovery had given way to lyrics of doubt mixed with proclamations of faith and attempts to incorporate religious scriptures into energetic rock songs. *63* contained the three songs that I would become well-known for as a songwriter: "Treasure" (a local and American radio hit and by far Tree's most well-known song), "A Million Lights" and "Stumbling Stone", the band's first chart-topping radio hit in South Africa. These and other songs led Tree further into the European music industry and, inevitably, to the USA.

After a few years of touring and introducing Tree to American audiences (as well as Australian, Canadian, UK and even New Zealand audiences), the band (now rechristened 'Tree63' by the American record label InPop) recorded my next batch of songs for an album eventually entitled *The Life and Times of Absolute Truth* (2002). This album contains what I have grown to consider a complete 'song-cycle': the songs were of a piece and the recordings themselves fit into an organic whole that, for me, truly defined what Tree63 had been trying to accomplish.

The ten songs on *The Life and Times* were a conscious attempt to continue writing the faith-based songs that Tree63 had become known for while exploring the outermost fringes of what was considered 'appropriate music for Christian audiences' by the American Christian music industry, in which Tree63 had become mired. As a writer, my goal had increasingly become one of communicating what I felt to be the edifying, encouraging, uplifting aspects of the Christian faith in a musically relevant medium, so as to appeal to Christians and non-Christians alike. The Christian music industry in America, however, was and remains a highly conservative endeavour steeped in traditional religious values, and songs like those contained on *The Life and Times* were not considered appropriate, marketable or career-enhancing for the album to achieve any notable success in that territory.

In the wake of an apparently commercially unsuccessful album, Tree63 was now under pressure to survive. As a result, I lost my songwriting confidence to a large degree and the only other commercially successful song Tree63 released from then on was a cover version of a song entitled "Blessed Be Your Name", by English Christian songwriter Matt Redman. My own songwriting was now focused on attempting pastiches of other successful writers or writing self-consciously to please a particular audience, and the quality of my songwriting dropped accordingly.

Tree63's follow-up to the 'disappointing' *The Life and Times* was a record-label curated collection of my songs entitled *The Answer To The Question* (2004). Containing older songs I had disregarded as well as one or two of the aforementioned pastiche experiments, the album went on to become Tree63's biggest American commercial success, solely due to the inclusion of the band's version of "Blessed Be Your Name", which eventually became the most played Christian song in America in 2004, according to music industry bible Billboard. The irony for me was seeing songs I had written such as the title track, "But Now My Eyes Are Open" and "Over & Over Again" (songs I had passed over before for inclusion on previous albums) become Tree63's best-known songs in America.

I felt strongly that *The Answer To The Question* did not represent Tree63, either sonically or lyrically, and I was unable to successfully address the growing problem of Tree63's identity. Tree63, thanks to the massive success of a song I had not written myself, henceforth became known as a religious 'worship' act, and although I tried hard to write songs that provided an alternative identity for the band, I was not able to convince Tree63's by-now substantial audience otherwise. In 2005 I devised Tree63's next release, an odd hybrid of live performances of previous hits as well as a few newer songs, optimistically entitled *Worship Volume One: I Stand For You.* This album was consciously intended to offer a wider perspective of Tree63's abilities, but it suffered commercially from a lack of support from the record label.

By 2006, I was beginning to feel that I had exhausted my abilities and inspiration as a songwriter. This was exacerbated by the difficulties of raising a small family in a foreign country (we had had to relocate to America) and a dispiritingly-relentless touring and performing schedule. The record company, InPop, was owed one last album by Tree63 in terms of the initial recording contract, and I managed to deliver eleven songs that would eventually be released as *Sunday!* (2007), Tree63's final album. This album marked a return to some of Tree63's original sonic influences and was more artistically satisfying than the previous two, but by the time it was released, the record company had lost interest and it was an instant commercial failure.

Released from the pressures of being bound to an unsympathetic record company and living almost as an exile in a foreign country, I returned to South Africa to begin new endeavours. I continued to write songs, and inevitably the subject matter changed from having to write specifically Christian songs. I began to address personal and political concerns for the first time in my writing. My return to South Africa, coupled with my lifelong interest and involvement in politics, led me to explore the possibilities of 'protest' songwriting, and in early 2010 I emerged with an album's worth of material for what was to become my first album as a solo artist.

Come Out Fighting (2010) contained ten songs that tried as much as possible to steer clear of religious themes. The subject matter was personal, confessional and even slightly aggressive, being a reaction to the years of creative servitude I felt I had had to endure with Tree63 in America. The album also contained four songs that addressed my political concerns: "Rant", "A Luta Continua", "Government Song" and "Rebels". In these pieces, particularly in "Rebels", I drew on my undergraduate studies in Politics of the fates of African nations in the decades after colonialism. All four of these particular songs were aimed at commentary on the African political climate, and "Rant", "Government Song" and "A Luta Continua" especially, were protest songs in the vein of Bob Dylan and a new songwriting influence of mine, Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn.

Protest music, such an integral feature of Western popular music since its rapid commercialization in the 1950s, has all but disappeared, at least in its original form. It is no longer the soundtrack of socio-political discourse it was in the 1960s, and it is rare for modern artists to write and record overt political protest songs, much less have commercial success with them. It can be argued that the last protest song in the traditional sense released on any large scale and adopted by the music-buying public (an entity which also no longer exists in any recognizable form) was "American Idiot" by American punk-pop trio Green Day in 2004. Protest songwriting still happens, of course, but it no longer bears the cultural cachet it once did.

As a songwriter with an ambition to re-situate myself both culturally and professionally, and with a newly-discovered sense of my South African identity, I continued to pursue writing critically about democratic South Africa. In 2011 I proposed a follow-up to my solo debut album and, after a challenging experience attempting to interpret some of my material accompanying myself on acoustic guitar at that year's Arts Festival in Grahamstown, I chose to make an album's worth of music that could be re-produced simply onstage, without having to rely on too much accompaniment. The resulting album, *Rural*, was envisioned as a return to early record-making methods of some of my song-writer inspirations like Paul Simon and Bob Dylan.

An initial guitar-and-voice demo recording session revealed the various strengths and weaknesses of the material I had assembled since the release of *Come Out Fighting*, and in October 2011 I traveled down to a recording studio located on a farm outside Knysna to begin fashioning the chosen songs into an album. Accompanied only by sparse percussion from noted South African drummer and percussionist Barry van Zyl, who joined me from Cape Town, I managed to realise my dream of recording an acoustic album of songs performed live in the studio, unadulterated by overdubs or studio enhancements. The entire project was accomplished in three days, and contained songs that furthered my interest in South Africa and what it meant to identify as a 'South African', such as "Come Home" (which dealt with my own experiences of dislocation and exile while living in America), "Rights All Wrong", "We Are Not A Nation Yet", and "Wonderful Place", a song inspired by Woody Guthrie's celebration of America, "This Land Is Your Land".

Rural also contained two songs inspired by the example of Bob Dylan's poetry, as I have mentioned above. Once again, "Jack Kerouac's Blues" and "Three-Day Rampage" were experiments in word-play that did not require the traditional approach to 'craft' that other songs on the album like "Sure Enough" or "To Aliena" had. In that sense, the process of writing these two blues-folk experiments was liberating and creatively stimulating, and yet I was concerned about the songs' viability precisely because they were inspired by the styles of a by-gone era.

The songs contained on *Rural* proved, as I had hoped, simple and satisfying to perform onstage. However, an album of acoustic, under-produced songs was not easily marketable and at one point I was encouraged by interested parties at Sony Music, to whom I had begun speaking, to re-record some of these songs in more 'radio-friendly' styles. In 2012 and 2013 I produced a stand-alone radio single for Sony, "Get You", and five new songs collected into an EP entitled *Bush Telegraph.* The EP contained my last attempt at some form of 'traditional' protest songwriting, "Soon There Will Be More Of Us", as well as another songwriting experiment, the guitar-less "Waiting To Be Rescued". None of these post-*Rural* projects achieved anything commercially in terms of my relationship with Sony, and in late 2013 I focused my attention back toward Tree63.

I had felt for years since the demise of Tree63 that the band's legacy had not been sufficiently acknowledged and that I had led the band towards a somewhat ignominious end. I decided to briefly reconvene Tree63 in 2014 in order to help celebrate the 20th anniversary of one of South Africa's foremost music festivals, Splashy Fen. Inevitably, the successful reunion gave way to suggestions of a new album, the first since 2007's unnoticed *Sunday!* Towards the end of 2014, recording sessions began in Nashville, and in mid-2015 Tree63's seventh studio album *Land* was ready for release. This album was an opportunity for me to provide American Tree63 fans with studio recordings of songs that had been rejected for previous albums ("Hard To Believe", "Blood Flows", and a new recording of the band's early South African radio hit "Stumbling Stone") as well as new songs especially written for this album. There were also Tree63 versions of two of my own solo songs, "Never Had A Winter" (a song which had begun life as a poem and which initially recorded for *Rural*) and "Standing On It" (which would eventually be released on my final solo album *Tells*).

Land achieved some noteworthy critical acclaim upon its release, but it yielded no significant US industry attention and Tree63 was finally put to rest, this time for good. At the end of 2015, during which a number of music projects of mine, including numerous trips to Nashville, met with unsuccessful ends, I felt I had finally run out of the necessary energy required to pursue musical endeavours, and I officially stopped writing and recording music.

Since the end of 2015, I have not focused on songwriting at all. I had cause to record and release two albums of songs in 2017, both of which contained older material that had been prepared and put aside in 2014 to make way for Tree63's reunion. In early 2017 I spent a month recording a final solo album of this unreleased material which I entitled *Tells*, and in June of that year plans were made to release an album of Christian material I had recorded quickly in 2014 entitled *Growing Silent*. I am particularly proud of *Tells*. I played every instrument on this album, and I feel the songwriting is the strongest and most consistent of all my albums.

3.

Whether I am writing songs or poetry, I find that I am constantly exploring the theme of identity. Beyond the existential concerns common to so many engaged in similar cultural endeavours, I have found, since I moved beyond writing specifically for Tree63, that I am intrigued with questions surrounding my own political, social and cultural identity. During my undergraduate years, I chose courses that would help me engage with Africa's socio-political realities, and now that I lecture various subjects in modern South African tertiary institutions, I am intrigued more than ever before with notions of identity and the burgeoning development of a national "South African-ness".

I consider myself an 'accident of history': I am a Caucasian male of European descent, thoroughly rooted in Africa and committed to a South African future. My career in music has taken me all over the world, and yet I have chosen to return to South Africa and invest my interests and my talents here. As a South African citizen, I feel obligated toward the further perpetuation of a 'South African literature', and to do that I need to engage my training and education with my professional experience. My 'whiteness' and my 'African-ness' are fascinatingly complex, potentially mutually-exclusive parts of my identity, and by engaging meaningfully with what this may imply for the future of South Africans as a people and 'South Africa' as a nation, perhaps I can offer something about what it means to call oneself 'South African.'

As a 'white' songwriter, I have a limited audience in South Africa. The music industry I was initially successful within has all but disappeared and been replaced by an internet-driven, amorphous, niche-defined entity which has splintered the music-consuming public at large. Interestingly, in this new dispensation, traditional music genres like 'blues' are no longer considered clichéd and bound within a limited space in Western music history. As a result, I am no longer constrained by concerns of 'marketability' or 'commercial viability' when I consider re-approaching songwriting. My 'whiteness' need not count against me in creating something authentically 'South African'; the question is rather, how do I meaningfully engage with my complex and contradictory identity through music and lyrics?

I am attracted to the concept of wrestling with my South African identity through the genre of American blues music precisely because the hybridity of such a project reflects my own. South Africa's music history reflects the post-colonial struggle, in that it is the struggle of traditional African forms of musical expression to co-exist alongside the emergence of a Western capitalist expansion of music as an industry. American jazz music, itself a quintessentially American expression of African-ness, took hold in South Africa more firmly than blues, for example, as did what has become known as 'gospel music'. 'Blues' music has a spirit of its own, a yearning, keening spirit often at odds with the more determinedly celebratory flavours of jazz. Unlike jazz, blues is fundamentally a lyric-driven, vocal music, and as such provides more interesting avenues for a writer of poetry with which to engage.

A ‘South African blues’ has rarely been attempted. Traditional South African musicians, before the importation of African-American styles of music, had and still retain their own ways of expressing the emotions traditionally associated with ‘blues’. In America, the original acoustic-guitar driven blues (‘country’ or ‘Delta’ blues) gave way eventually to an electrified, band-driven, urban blues, which in turn galvanized white American musicians into what became known as ‘rock ‘n’ roll’. None of these genres spoke to traditional South African audiences (save the minority white audience, of course), and blues music therefore mostly passed South Africa by. Its literary equivalent, however, popularized by African-American poets such as Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown, may have had a more lasting influence, as can be seen in the work of black South African poets such as Sipho Sepamla, Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote and Keorapetse Willie Kgositile. These and other poets would have found the spirit of the blues a natural form of engagement with the challenges to South African identity during the decades of apartheid.

The appropriation of blues music by white American musicians in the mid-1950s and the subsequent “Blues Revival” in America and England in the early 1960s created a problematic identity-crisis for the blues. Elijah Wald (2010) notes that white blues stars of the 1980s such as Stevie Ray Vaughan and Bonnie Raitt were grouped together in the “Rock” category by the US music industry, and that the blues as a genre is now considered mostly a historical artefact rather than a vibrant modern art form. Wald’s contention that the blues is ‘a tradition, an approach, and a spirit that permeates virtually all American music, and the music of myriad artists around the world’ (2010:78) may be true, but blues music itself is no longer the industry-sustaining genre it was once was. If anything, the ‘spirit’ of the blues can be said to be found in modern rap and hip-hop. Traditional blues, however, remains a poignant and undeniable source of emotional expression, and the historical progenitors of the genre will be forever revered. Unfortunately, however, the genre itself has morphed since the 1960s beyond all recognition into a form of largely ‘white’ virtuoso entertainment, and as such has little of its original authenticity to offer.

Four South African examples illustrate the transformation of traditional blues into white rock music, as well as that music’s influence in South Africa. The 1960s European blues revival inspired the formation of the Otis Waygood Blues Band in what was then still Rhodesia. These white blues-rock adherents had a major impact on the South African music scene in the early 1970s and in turn inspired apartheid-era Foreign Affairs minister Pik Botha’s son Piet to dedicate his life to blues guitar-playing. Piet Botha’s blues-rock band Jack Hammer were renowned internationally, and South Africa later produced The Blues Broers, a band of young white Afrikaners which featured blues guitar prodigy Albert Frost. South Africa continues to host annual Blues Festivals which are almost exclusively attended by white rock music fans, and Johannesburg blues guitar player Dan Patlansky continues to record and perform blues-rock material around the world.

I therefore approach the blues with considerable trepidation. It is a genre I would not have been interested in contributing to had it not been suggested to me in terms of an experiment in ‘identity literature’. As such, though, the blues becomes a fascinating vehicle for the pursuit of a meaningful discourse between history and the present, inheritance versus conscious choice, and belonging and exclusion. As a songwriter, my immediate challenge is finding a way to express myself within a genre that in many respects appears to have been fully explored. From a musical point of view, there is not much to the blues. In its purest form, it is the relatively-unsophisticated sound of one person self-accompanied on a stringed instrument singing repetitive verses in English. Like so much of traditional African music, it is simple and easily reproduced, a primal, system-defying form of human expression that resists musical or literary refinement. It requires some kind of authentic emotion or lived experience from its performer, and this is where the challenge for me as white South African arises: am I 'qualified' to sing the blues?

Blues music has proved to be the musical foundation stone of virtually all modern Western popular music: jazz, folk, rock, pop, soul, R&B, disco, dance and, most significantly of all, hip-hop. As a young apprentice guitar player in the early 1980s, I was entranced first by the performer who more than any other symbolized the appropriation and perceived 'cultural theft' of traditional African-American music, Elvis Presley. Presley's success ushered in a frenzied era of the rapid commercialization and globalization of African-American music, and later successful British acts such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were his direct beneficiaries. As an impressionable young musician, all I wanted was to emulate these inspirational artists, and it is only with hindsight that I perceive the debt I owe blues music.

As such, I feel ideally placed to attempt an album of 'South African blues'. I am steeped in the cultural history of Western popular music. I am a proficient musician and experienced songwriter. I have a postgraduate degree in English literature, and as the son of long-serving liberal Member of Parliament, I have an abiding interest in the South African politics of identity. I therefore propose a musical songwriting experiment that fuses the African music of the earliest black settlers of America with the poetry of South Africa in order to interrogate the nature of identity in modern democratic South Africa. The immediate questions that arise from this proposal concern the nature of the project's structural authenticity. I am unsure whether 'authentic blues music' is still possible, and whether a white musician can claim any authenticity in performing it. I am concerned as to whether American blues might not be too culturally alien in a South African context. Furthermore, I wonder whether a project such as this might not be a further perpetuation of cultural colonialism, or whether its experimental nature might exclude it from that charge.

In order to acknowledge some of these questions, I intend an oblique approach to this project. My initial concern is to avoid as far as possible the replication of traditional, clichéd blues tropes. I have decided, for example, not to make use of harmonicas or emphasise slide guitar playing, sound which are synonymous with American blues music. I have also consciously avoided the language of the American South that white blues performers mistakenly appropriated as a means towards 'authenticity'. I am interested rather in the actual structure of blues songs themselves, not necessarily in their traditional instrumentation or language. My challenge as a songwriter is to somehow write within the genre without making use of its tropes.

I also intend to find ways to make a wholly South African music. South Africa's musical palette is as excitingly diverse as the population itself, and I imagine a South African blues performed in traditional Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Afrikaner, Indian and 'coloured' styles. This involves studio collaborations with musicians across all styles of South African music, as a means to fully explore this concept of what it means to call oneself 'South African'. An English language African-American blues performed using a Zulu mouth bow and accompanied by a sitar player, for example, seems to me an interesting stylistic experiment that would express a particular 21st-century South African-ness. I can then focus specifically on what lyrics a song such as this might contain without self-consciously trying to avoid hewing too close to the cultural specifics of traditional American blues.

A white South African blues project is a challenging attempt towards a contribution to a 'South African literature'. I have come of age in a society fractured at its very core by questions of belonging, and as I grow older I find these questions unresolved, despite the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy. Art, poetry and music have grappled with possible answers in ways that traditional political discourse cannot, and as a white South African, I hope to suggest a sense of modern South African identity that aids in the ongoing development of my country.

Literature Review

1. Texts

As is to be expected with a popular style of cultural expression a little over a hundred years old, a large body of literature concerning blues music exists. My first instinct regarding some kind of research of the history of blues music was to locate a broad overview of the music's origins, development and principle popularisers. There are many of these types of narrative histories, most notably those of Alan Lomax, Paul Oliver, Samuel Charters and Robert Palmer. I chose to begin with Francis Davis' *The History of the Blues* (1993), in whose introduction I was immediately confronted with the questions I had long been asking myself, whether "[white people] are capable of performing the blues with any credibility; and what it means that the audience for the blues is now overwhelmingly white" (1993:5).

Blues music is unquestionably an African American musical innovation. It began flowering as a commercial artifact in the years prior to the first world war, and by most accounts reached its artistic peak in the years between the United States' recovery from the Great Depression and the onset of the Cold War. Its migration from the impoverished rural areas of the southern United States into the industrialised cities of Chicago and New York led to its gradual assimilation into other forms of African American musical expression, notably jazz and, in the 1950s and 60s, soul and R&B ('Rhythm and Blues'). My research has suggested that blues music, like ragtime or bebop (and, arguably, all musical trends), speaks to the times in which it emerged but is no longer a current, vital musical style.

Robert Palmer's 1981 survey *Deep Blues* is considered an essential addition to the narrative arc of the history of the blues. So is Samuel Charters' groundbreaking *The Country Blues* (1959). Along with Francis Davis' aforementioned *History*, I was able to grasp from these works a clear sense of the development of blues music as a verifiable cultural phenomenon. This was necessary to me in that I am approaching blues music from a distinct disadvantage: I am a white South African, neither 'American' nor 'black', and therefore blues music is not 'my' music. I can and do appreciate it for all that it has offered me as a lover of music and as a guitar-player, but essentially, blues music, in the context of my own cultural origins, is the music of 'the other', and I have found my attraction towards it fascinating in itself.

In all my reading, the insights I appreciated the most were those of Elijah Wald, whose 2004 work *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* effectively unraveled much of the accepted lore that has grown up around blues music. The blues, having emerged gradually from rural, illiterate communities, has its own myths and legends, and while Palmer and Charters' work is useful, these authors do little to get below the surface of the musicians responsible for it, preferring instead to merely recount their exploits. Wald, on the other hand, despite his necessarily perfunctory *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (2010), makes a concerted effort in *Escaping the Delta* to dispel many of the creation myths associated with the blues, most notably the music's supposed 'occult' leanings. Black churches, as Albert Murray shows in his seminal *Stomping the Blues* (1976), denounced blues music as 'demonic' precisely *because* of “the blues musician’s capacity to generate merriment” (1976:24), not because there was anything inherently occultist in the music itself. Modern perceptions of blues music, as Wald and Murray demonstrate, are often wildly simplistic and, accordingly, erroneous.

Albert Murray’s work is especially necessary to my research in that he was one of the few black writers writing about his own music that I could locate. Nelson George, too, in his *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (1988), speaks on behalf of his own African American heritage in regard to the development of black popular music. The majority of blues writers, historians and musicologists seem to be of white American and European heritage, and again, I find this intriguing. What is it about blues music that speaks so undeniably to white music lovers? And more to the point, why have I, a white South African born in the 1970s, been so drawn over the years to this century-old music that originated on another continent?

I have always been aware of the fact that African American blues music has its origins in the slave trade and in the introduction to American shores of African slaves. A key aspect of my project therefore became an enquiry into whether musicologists link American blues music to traditional African forms of expression, and whether African American blues can be said to be quintessentially ‘African’ in origin. This question forms the very basis of my project: can I, a modern African musician, have anything authentic to offer or take from traditional African American blues music? My skin colour and cultural origins preclude me, it has been suggested, from calling myself ‘African’, and yet I identify as such, having been born and raised in South Africa. It seems to me that African American blues music is particularly well-suited to questions of colonialism, postcolonialism, identity politics and cultural appropriation, since that very music emerged from the confluence of all those experiences and ideas.

Blues music has a highly particular sound, and decades of research and speculation have suggested that its idiosyncrasies, so obviously different from traditional European modes of musical expression, must be ‘African’ in origin. In particular, general histories of the North American slave trade show the vast majority of Africans introduced to America originated in West Africa, and ethnomusicologists have focused their attentions on West African countries (such as the Gambia in the case of Samuel Charters’ *The Roots of the Blues,* and Senegal in the case of early folklorist Alan Lomax) as potential sources of African American blues. The general consensus is that traditional West African griot music and ancient forms of African vocal techniques and preferences survived the Middle Passage and took root in American soil. Traditional African instruments did too, an obvious example being the banjo, which, although often associated with white American country and bluegrass music, is actually an instrument (a ‘banjer’) that evolved directly from African stringed instruments made from gourds.

As a way of explaining blues music’s immediately identifiable characteristics, Palmer cites Ghanaian musicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia’s contention that “African music emphasizes rapid succession of durational values or changes in impulses and shows preference for this to rapid changes of tone. A piece of music with a narrow melodic range is felt to be dynamic and satisfying if it has a rhythmic drive” (1981:64). Blues music is at the root of all types of modern American popular music, and one of the earliest white appropriations of blues styles was what became known as “rock ‘n’ roll”. Pop and rock music has been derided from the outset by classicists as being ‘beat music’ that undervalues the more traditional European emphasis on melody, and this is precisely the importance of blues music in the evolution of Western popular music: it is the expression and to a large degree, domination of African musical traditions in the context of white consumer-driven popular music.

The lyrics of the blues make for an equally interesting study. As a songwriter, I had paid little attention over the years to blues lyrics because they always seemed to descend into cliché. My reading has shown me, however, how quintessentially *African* blues lyrical forms are, based as they are on traditional "call and response" techniques. Palmer, Charters, Davis and Wald each offer their own descriptions of what blues songs are 'about'. In *The Poetry of the Blues* for instance, Charters notes that the blues is preoccupied with "the concerns and the emotions of ordinary life" (1963:2). One of the misconceptions that Elijah Wald tries to rectify is the focus of blues lyrics on misery, abject poverty and political oppression. As Albert Murray states, "the subject matter and imagery of blues lyrics are usually nothing if not concrete and specific, and not unlike the subject matter and imagery of lyric poetry in general, they are much more preoccupied with love affairs than with such political issues as liberty, equality and justice" (1976:65).

The word 'blues' itself seems on the surface to refer to a particular ennui, and yet Albert Murray takes pains to show that blues music is an attempt to vanquish the besetting troubles of the world, as opposed to merely documenting them. Peter Guralnick offers this definition of blues music:

"What is blues then? Well, it's a lot easier to keep on saying what blues is not. It isn't necessarily sad music. It doesn't tell a story. It neither makes nor alludes to minor chords. It is for the most part self-accompanied... It is not a music of particular technical accompaniment." (1971:41)

Blues lyrics, traditionally the language of illiterate, impoverished farm workers, evolved to such an extent that modern songwriters such as Bob Dylan could effectively use the blues lyric format as a vehicle for poetry. Wald cites Dylan's appreciation of Robert Johnson's lyrics, praising "the free association that he used, the sparkling allegories, big-assed truths wrapped in the hard shell of nonsensical abstraction" (2010:75-76). My research revealed that blues music actually had very little to do with existential angst and more with the concerns of lived experience. This realization freed me to write my own blues songs without the fear of having to be constricted by some perceived sense of what blues songs 'need to be about in order to be blues'.

2. Recorded Music

For the first year of my research, I immersed myself in African American blues music. I had always been aware of the giants of the blues: B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson and John Lee Hooker. Ted Gioia's *Delta Blues* (2008) however, introduced me to Charley Patton, Skip James and Jimmy Reed, while Elijah Wald alerted me to indispensable music by Lonnie Johnson, the Mississippi Sheiks and Pink Anderson, amongst others.

For broad surveys of various types of blues, I was drawn to compilations, notably the carefully-curated Rough Guide series. I had no prior knowledge of how traditional blues is broken up into various categories, but the Rough Guide discs provided me with focused listening to 'Blues Songsters', 'Hokum Blues', 'Delta Blues' and 'Country Blues'. The casual listener would be forgiven for thinking that all blues music was made by either B.B. King, Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, as these three blues musicians were popularized in the post-World War 2 years by record companies marketing their recordings increasingly to white music lovers. However, Francis Davis showed me that before the domination of blues music by male artists, the first blues 'stars' were actually female singers such as Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith and Ma

Rainey. These women's vintage recordings, created as they were at the outset of the invention of recording techniques, make for challenging but rewarding listening.

Inevitably, I ended my aural blues research listening to white blues artists. The appropriation of African American blues music by white country artists was far from inevitable in the mid 1950s, and yet the revolutionary efforts of Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips created an irreversible surge towards what became "rock 'n' roll" music. Black artists such as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Little Richard maintained an indisputable black presence in early rock music, but by the start of the 1960s rock 'n' roll was becoming a white cultural commercial endeavor. Black popular music in the meantime evolved into R&B and funk, and, as the performance poetry of The Last Poets shows us, hip-hop eventually became a dominant black musical expression. Traditional blues, meanwhile, became thoroughly associated with white rock bands, particularly in England, where young white guitar players such as Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Peter Green and Keith Richards adopted the guitar-playing bravura of older African American blues players. In the 2000s, the principal blues guitar players are still mostly white: Eric Clapton, Joe Bonamassa, John Mayer.

As a young guitar player, I was heavily influenced by white blues-based guitar players, such as Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Mark Knopfler. I am grateful that I chose to be influenced by guitar players who drew from such a deep well of blues music. It has been strange to note, in the course of my research, that any one of these players is far more technically proficient than their black counterparts, particularly in light of the fact that, as Guralnick notes above, blues was never "a music of particular technical accomplishment". Nor was it meant to be. White blues players have applied a typical European fastidiousness to the blues, to the extent that it no longer has anything to do with its humble, rural acoustic-guitar based form. My research has re-introduced me to traditional, pre-modern blues, the country blues of Charley Patton and pre-electric Muddy Waters, and this music feels far more authentic to me than its modern white counterpart. While 'white blues' has its place, it is a mere shadow of authentic African American blues music.

In order to discover the presence of blues music in traditional South African idioms, I re-listened to the South African music I have long appreciated: traditional Zulu maskandi music. This is music made by itinerant musicians and migrant labourers, based, like the blues of the southern United States, on the acoustic guitar. Maskandi was popularized for white South African audiences by Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu in the mid-1970s, who with their group Juluka created a hybrid of white and black musical styles not seen before or since. Although this cannot be classified as blues music, it fulfills many of the criteria of blues definitions, and yet it I personally feel a much deeper connection to it that to American blues because of my own innate 'South African-ness'.

I also investigated classical Indian music, as these profoundly ancient tones and sounds have been ringing out across South Africa since the arrival of indentured Indian labour on the shores of Zululand in1860. Indian music is in no way African, and yet the firm presence of Indian people in South Africa has added a distinct flavor to the wide South African music spectrum. So too has the music of traditional Afrikaners. The folk music of the original Dutch and Huguenot settlers has the same roots as that of the first Europeans in America, and the similarities in approach and instrumentation of American country music and 'boeremusiek' are striking.

Methodology

I intend to write and record pieces of music closely linked in style to traditional American blues music, in order to explore the African roots of American (and therefore 'Western') popular music. In addition, I intend to incorporate a wide range of musical styles that have come to be known as 'traditional South African' music, as well as some that are quintessentially 'South African' by dint of South Africa's long colonial past.

In order for this project to be an authentic 'South African' expression, I intend to collaborate with a variety of South African musicians. The intended end result is a collection of songs written within the framework of American traditional country blues (the most original, earliest form of blues music), but subverted by the fact that they are written and sung by a white English-speaking South African using traditional South African musical instruments and languages. In this way, the questions of what it means to call oneself "African", and especially "South African" in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, will be addressed in music and poetry.

Instead of attempting non-fiction prose in this regard, it seems logical for me to approach the subjects of identity and belonging through music. Traditional South African music (for example, the music of the Zulu or Xhosa peoples) is not culturally "mine", and yet it is the sound of Africa that anybody growing up in this country would be exposed to on an almost daily basis. Likewise, English is my home language, and yet I have spent my life learning to converse in Afrikaans and isiZulu in order to communicate beyond the context of my inherited cultural background.

Therefore, an album of songs exploring what it means to call oneself an African in the 21st century would be a fascinatingly creative and exciting project. I intend to make use of the languages that surround me, in the same way that West Africans began to gradually express themselves in English during the decades of slavery in America. American blues music is an authentic American musical invention, and yet it has all its roots in Africa. My experiment intends to meld the blues idiom with these African roots, but also to cast the cultural net wider and incorporate two other forms of music made in South Africa, those of the historical Afrikaner and Indian communities.

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