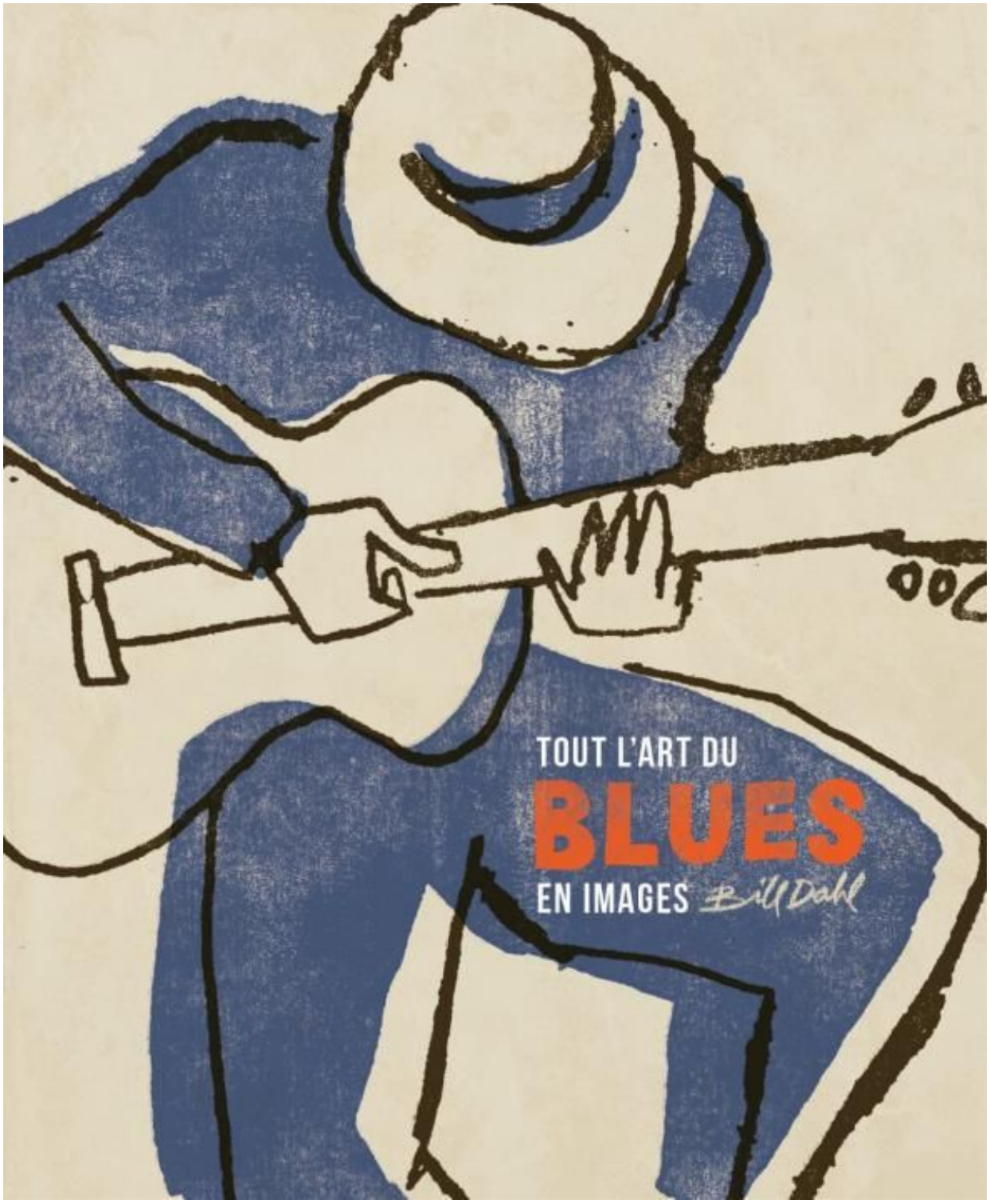
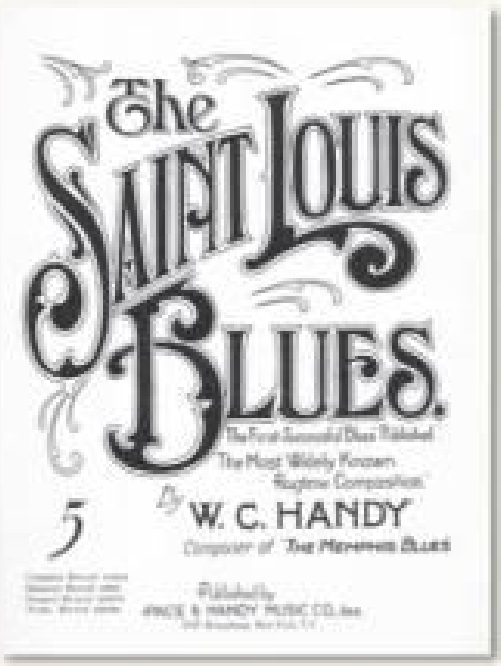
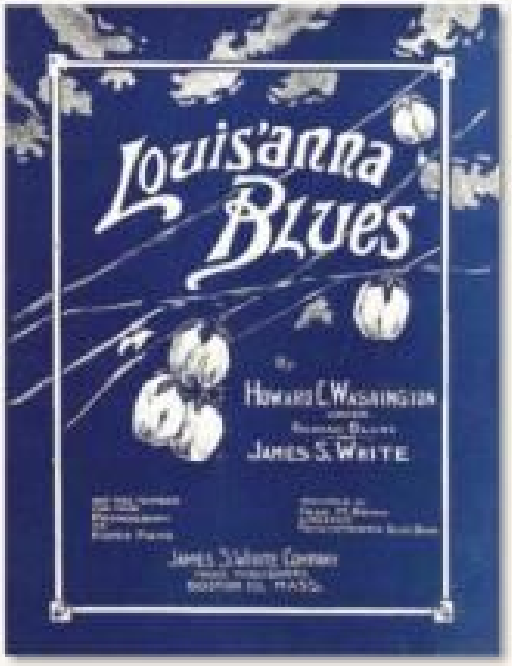

TOUT L'ART DU
BLUES
EN IMAGES
Bill Dahl

CHAPTER
ONE

THE JAZZ AGE

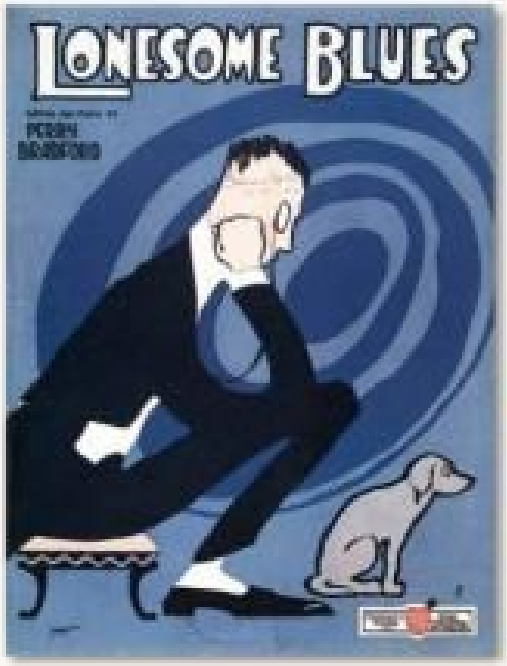
"Of course there are a lot of ways you can
treat the blues, but it will still be the blues."





TOP LEFT: Many of the earliest blues songs to be published as printed form appeared in the traditional style of sheet music from the early 20th century with flamboyant lettering using more than a little of the Art Nouveau movement. This copy of W.C. Handy's 'St Louis Blues' – published by Handy's own company Pace & Handy Music – in fact dates from the 1920's, evidenced by the reference to various recorded versions of the song, and here billed as 'the most successful blues published'.

ABOVE RIGHT: James S White was an African American songwriter and music publisher based in Boston, here billed as co-author of Louis'anna Blues. The main writer was the composer of many rags and early jazz tunes, Howard C Washington, and the sheet music dating from 1920 also credits him with 'Railroad Blues'. It was a time when recorded home entertainment was still in its infancy, and the weighthest consciously getting a copy for 'your phonograph or player piano' – the latter being upright pianos that played music autonomously from pre-programmed rolls of perforated paper.



TOP LEFT: Perry Bradford was an important black songwriter who used southern folk material in his own compositions. Like W.C. Handy and Clarence Williams, he was a key interpreter of blues music to a wider audience via his songs, published as sheet music from the New York hub of popular song publishing, 'Tin Pan Alley'. Although it became a genre to weep for the industry, the actual Tin Pan Alley of the early 20th century was located in the area around West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan.

TOP RIGHT: An altogether more artful songsheet cover for the WC Handy classic, featuring a watercolour image of the city of the title. As with much sheet music, a particular recording of the song/musical be flagged up on the cover, in this case a 1920 Columbia release by Marion Harris. Harris was the first widely-known white singer to sing jazz and blues numbers, and after the success of the Handy song she often billed as 'The Queen of the Blues'.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Perry Bradford became a highly influential figure in both the music publishing and recording industries, and in 1920 was responsible for the Okeh record company taking up the challenge of releasing the very first blues record, his song 'Crazy Blues' performed by Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds. The record sold seventy-five thousand copies in the first month of release, and over a million through the following year. The sheet music design here was basic, produced by Bradford's own publishing company (one of several pioneering companies owned and run by African Americans) but it did the job – after all, Mamie was the star.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND EXOTIC IMAGES OF THE BLUES

Coinciding with the explosion of African-American music, including classic blues and jazz, in the years following World War I, the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance became a by-word for a much broader flowering of black American culture.

WRITERS, PAINTERS, POETS, 'serious composers' and other creative voices made their mark on the social and cultural landscape of a specifically identified group, summed up by the African-American critic and intellectual Alain Locke in 1925 when he said that through art 'Negro life is seizing its first chance for group expression and self-determination'. Centred on the nation's biggest black ghetto, Harlem, the 'New Negro' in the words of Locke 'transformed social disillusionment to race pride.'

At its core the Renaissance was predominantly a literary movement, with its leading names including the poet and novelist Langston Hughes, the novelist and playwright Rudolph Fisher and the novelist Wallace Thurman. Other leading lights included the painters Aaron Douglas, Archibald Motley and Palmer Hayden; much of the subject matter of these artists focused on the everyday life of African Americans, which inevitably included scenes from places of entertainment – dance halls, jazz clubs and so on. So although the movement represented pan-black 'high art' culture, the 'low-art' of the streets and speakeasies to which blues and jazz gravitated was never far away.

Although the movement primarily involved African Americans in its creative input, and depended upon a support system of black patrons, black-owned businesses and the black public generally, it also enjoyed the patronage of various well-to-do white Americans. This latter interest was linked to a faddishness interest in the 'exotic' aspect of black culture, often evident in the artwork and imagery surrounding music promotion, and jazz and blues in particular. In Harlem itself it was the era of the famed Cotton Club, which began presenting extravagant all-black entertainments to exclusively all-white audiences in 1923.

It has to be remembered that even in the relatively liberal North, elements of racism permeated all layers of society, and the Cotton Club was no exception. The club promoted exotic fiascothews, usually depicting African-Americans as noble primitives, with rows of skimpily-dressed dancing girls looking like they had come straight from some tropical paradise – and accompanied, of course, by wild, blues-based jazz, the prevalent music craze of the 'roaring' Twenties'. It was here that Duke Ellington launched his lush big-band sound (dubbed 'jungle music' at the time), deeply influenced by the club nuances of the blues.

> **"WE NEGRO WRITERS, JUST BY BEING BLACK, HAVE BEEN ON THE BLACKLIST ALL OUR LIVES. CENSORSHIP FOR US BEGINS AT THE COLOR LINE."**
> LANGSTON HUGHES

The commercial art surrounding blues and jazz was very much of the era,

with overtones of Art Deco style – a genre which consciously acknowledged 'primitive' art in everything from graphic design to architecture.

LA REVUE NÈGRE

Although not a blues performer as such, one of the most successful African American entertainers associated with the era of the Harlem Renaissance was the singer and dancer Josephine Baker, who found fame on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s. Born in St Louis in 1906, after a start in vaudeville as a teenager, Baker moved to New York where she performed at the Plantation Club (a keen competitor of the Cotton Club) and in a 1921 Broadway revue, *Shuffle Along*, with the jazz/blues singer Adelaide Hall.

In 1925 Baker moved to Paris where she starred in *La Revue Nègre*, put together by the African-American songwriter Spencer Williams, in which she was a huge success with her erotic dancing and outlandishly scanty costumes. The celebrated Art Deco poster for the show, at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, was by her lover Paul Colin, who also designed most of the Deco-influenced stage sets. It was at the same time that the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs was held in the French capital, a hugely influential exhibition that actually promulgated the term 'Art Deco'.

Josephine Baker, now a superstar, moved on to the Folies Bergère, where she formed her 'Danse sauvage', further perpetuating a highly contrived 'primitive' image.

TOP LEFT: The grand entrance to the Cotton Club at 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue in the 1930s. Though in the heart of Harlem, the African-American clientele would often be exclusively white.

TOP RIGHT: A 1938 painting by the Harlem Renaissance artist Archibald J. Motley entitled 'Blues'. Born in New Orleans in 1891, and described as a (1924 exhibition of his work as a 'jazz age modernist', Motley is best known for his depictions of African-American life during the 1920s and 1930s. He declared his work to be 'a means of affirming racial respect and race pride'.

BOTTOM LEFT: The vivacious Josephine Baker in the famous 'banana skirt' that helped foster the 'image of the uninhibited' primitive' performer that Baker exploited to the full in her exuberant singing and dancing. It was a representation of African-American that persisted through to the 1940s, and even later, in the imagery surrounding such black-to-lighter-skinned popular stars

BOTTOM MIDDLE: The famous Art Deco poster by the French artist Paul Colin for *La Revue Nègre* starring Josephine Baker. Colin, who reportedly lost to Picasso and Matisse in contests and concours posters as well as designing stage sets, also illustrated Baker's memoirs published in 1927. Again, the racial stereotyping is much of the commercial art of the period, which was taken for granted at the time, would be considered unacceptable today.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A sheet music cover from the late 1930s. The jazz-age imagery of skyscrapers and New York nightlife perpetuated a romantic view of Harlem that was at wide with much of the urban reality where 1930s Blues.

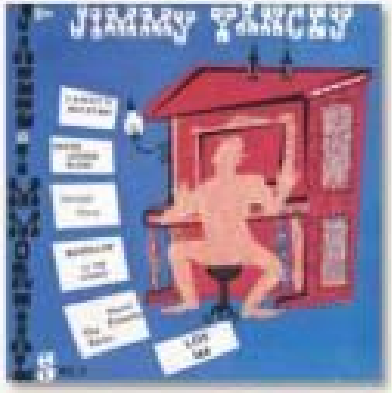
LEFT Despite the first 'race records' being instigated by African American producers like Perry Bradford and Harry Pace, the accompanying advertising material was replete with racial caricatures common at the time. Whether this was the product of black or white publicity departments is not clear in most cases. The term 'race' of course, was not pejorative – a 'race man' was a good, upstanding person in African-American communities. The illustration for 'Empty Bed Blues', like the song itself may be the era, was monotonous enough; the number, recorded by Elizabeth Johnson in June 1928, was a cover of Bessie Smith's version earlier that year.

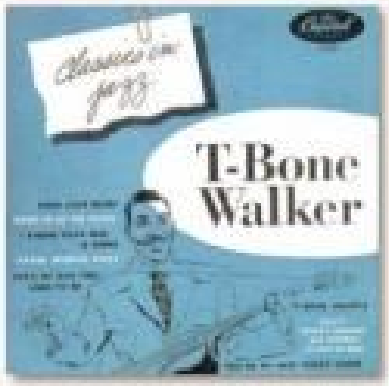
RIGHT TOP The first country blues vocal to be recorded 'in the field' by a record company was when an Okeh mobile unit arrived at Ed Andrews' booking in the street in Atlanta, Georgia in March 1924. Despite the build-up publicity, the single didn't do as well as expected, and that was the end of Andrews' short-lived recording career.

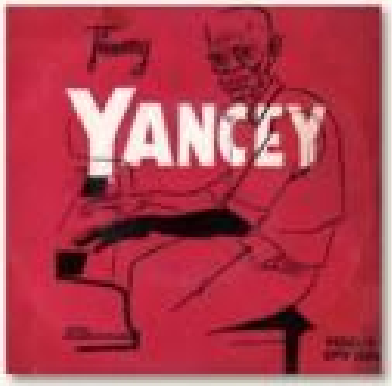
RIGHT BOTTOM After Okeh Records' introduction of a 'race records' catalogue in 1923, all the major companies followed suit in order to promote jazz and blues specifically for the African-American market. The giant Columbia was no exception, its 'race stars' pictured here including the great Blind Blake, blues star Clara Smith and the undisputed 'Empress of the Blues' Bessie Smith.

LEFT In the pre-vinyl days of the 10-inch 78rpm single, it was common practice for records to be sold in (usually brown) paper sleeves, an ideal place for publicity material announcing other releases by the label. This Brunswick sleeve was dedicated to the label's Race Records listing, including gospel material, jazz, washboard band music and blues.

RIGHT TOP A significant trend in newspaper advertising of race records was the move to humour and cartoon illustrations aimed at the African-American consumer; celebrities (and welcome) move away from the 'plantation' stereotyping of earlier 'black-originated material presented as part of the (white dominated) broader market. Blind Blake's 'Ramblin' and Ramblin' Boa Constrictor Blues' got the cross-look treatment via Paramount Records in an ad that appeared in the African-American Chicago Defender newspaper in August 1928.





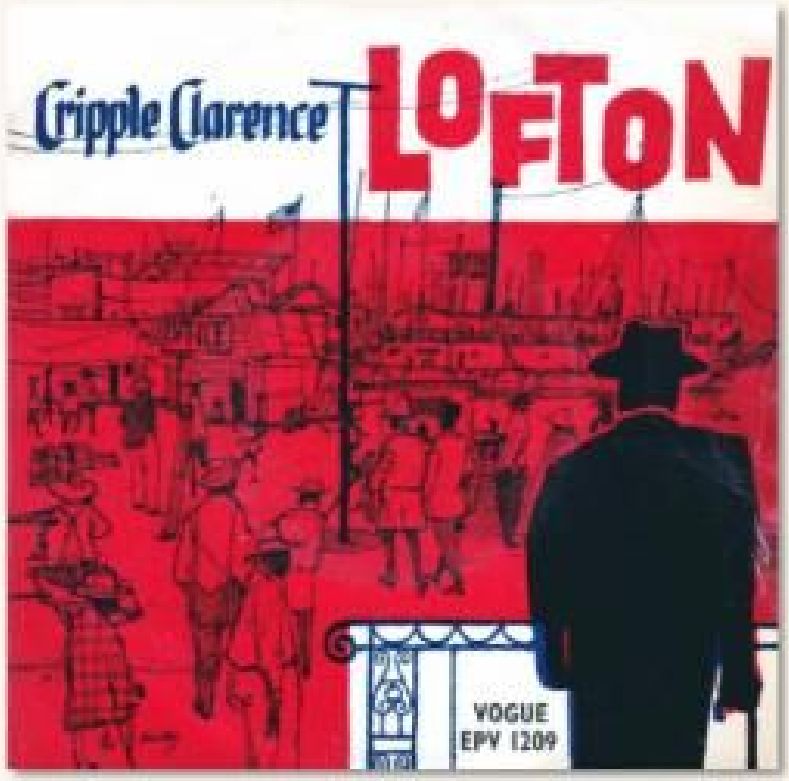


TOP LEFT: Typical of the record industry recognizing the blues revival was this RCA compilation released in 1960, *Kings of the Blues*. With its tightly fashionable silhouette-style of flat blocks of colour by designer Paul Bacon, the album was part of the company's ongoing 'Backgrounds of Jazz' series on its pioneering "X" label. At the time Bacon was also one of the essential designers for the Riverside and Blue Note labels, before moving into book jacket design for which he is perhaps best known.

BOTTOM LEFT: More and more of the big major companies began issuing blues collections on the recently developed vinyl long player discs, acknowledging the renewed mainstream appeal of the music, as with this 1954 collection of T-Bone Walker – material – with a splendid line drawing of the bluesman – in Capitol's 'Classics in Jazz' series.

TOP RIGHT: In the UK, specialist jazz labels were among the first to reflect the blues revival during the early and mid-1950s. The artwork for the 1955 Jimmy Yancey boogie-and-blues LP in Vogue Records' 'Jazz Immortals' series was by Mundy Kaminker, better known as the clarinet player in the hugely popular Chris Barber Jazz Band.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Vogue's spin-off EP featuring four tracks from the Yancey album had an illustration by another British musician-designer, guitarist Stu Eisley.



ABOVE: Today, although still known as a guitar player on the blues, skiffle and traditional jazz circuit, was better known as a prolific illustrator, both on record covers and his weekly contribution to *Melody Maker*. This imaginative cover, another for the Vogue label, featured music by the Chicago boogie musician Cripple Clarence Lofton.