

Grunge and Blues, A Sociological Comparison: How Space and Place Influence the Development and Spread of Regional Musical Styles

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Introduction

In the early 1990's, a new type of rock music exploded onto the popular music scene in America. Labeled "grunge" by the media, this new sound was seemingly an overnight hit with America's youth. The rise of grunge may seem extraordinary and unique to many who experienced it. However, the birth and spread of grunge was not a new phenomenon. Other types of popular American music have come about in a similar fashion. One example is the rise of the Delta blues in the first decades of the 20th century. The genesis and spread of both Delta blues and grunge have several important details in common. First, the birth of both types of music can be understood using the sociological idea of historical contingency; moreover, Delta blues and grunge were influenced by similar contingencies. Second, both went from being strictly regional music to attaining national popularity through essentially identical marketing strategies. Large music corporations marketed Delta blues, to both blacks and whites, as a more authentic representation of the black experience, taking full advantage of the recording and home entertainment technology of the time. Seven decades later, grunge became a national phenomenon via this same strategy, marketing grunge as the "authentic" music of America's dissatisfied white youth, and exploiting the current music technology, especially MTV. Third, both Delta blues and grunge foster a sense of social solidarity in fans. This paper investigates the social processes that create and spread unique musical forms.

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Historical Contingency: The Delta Blues

Weber emphasizes the need for sociologists to consider both sociological and historical factors when examining social change (Roth 1976). “Historical contingency” means that change in a society is contingent on the coming together of certain historical factors. Space and place can combine to ignite social change. The development of unique regional music styles can be understood using the idea of historical contingency.

Blues music in general had been developing among African-Americans since the time of slavery. Drawing on the traditional music of Africa, American slaves used music to enrich all aspects of their lives. “Field hollers” helped slaves communicate while working. Spirituals were often sung while working or worshipping. Blues developed as a way for African-Americans to express their personal pain. African-Americans had endured an oppressive, isolated life during slavery; this oppression continued into the twentieth century, particularly in the segregated South.

For the majority of the black population of the south in the first few decades of the 1900’s, life was far from desirable. The invention of the cotton gin and mass invasions of the boll weevil (a cotton-plant-eating insect) meant there was less work for people to do. Most blacks were employed as sharecroppers, living and working on plantations owned by whites. Many of these owners took advantage of their black laborers, working them hard for little pay. The laborers toiled on cotton fields, painstakingly planting and harvesting the crop by hand in the baking sun (Palmer 1982).

Racism was rampant in the South. Jim Crow laws meant that blacks and whites were not allowed to attend the same schools, use the same railway stations, or use the same counters in government buildings (Kloosterman and Quispel 1990). Legal separation of the races was buttressed with unwritten behavioral rules that blacks were punished for violating. Violence was often a reality; lynchings were not uncommon. According to Kloosterman and Quispel (1990): “Breach of racial rules could have very serious consequences for a black. Between 1882 and 1946, 4,716 people were lynched in the USA. Of these lynchings, 90 percent took place in the southern states. Three-quarters of those lynched were blacks... in 25 percent of cases,

people were killed because they had not adhered to the racial etiquette.”

Life for black people in the South was hard, to say the least, and music served several purposes for them. First, it helped them get their work done as efficiently as possible. Sharecroppers had expanded the field hollers of their slave ancestors into full songs, and used song as a way to keep groups working at a steady, rhythmic pace. Second, music was a cheap form of entertainment. Many constructed homemade instruments; for example, a “diddly bo” was a metal wire nailed tautly to a porch post; this could be strummed and “fretted” like a guitar. Cheap guitars were available through mail-order catalogs, such as the Sears and Roebuck Company’s. Most importantly, music fostered a sense of social solidarity among the workers (Palmer 1982).

The sound of the blues was unique. The singing was “characterized by use of a heavy, gravelly voice” (Ferris 1974) similar to field hollers. The methods of creating sounds were innovative; “slides,” usually made from the tops of glass bottles or a knife, were used on guitars, resulting in a bending of the notes. Blues was “intensely personal, highly improvised, and quite irregular in form” (Garofalo 2002, 38). The blues could be performed solo, in duos, or in larger groups.

Though blues music had been developing since times of slavery, it became popular among white audiences early in the twentieth century, albeit usually in a diluted, “whitened” form. The “purest” form of blues was labeled Delta blues. So-called because it emerged among sharecroppers on the Mississippi Delta, Delta blues would become a national phenomenon (as will be discussed in greater detail later). Several historically contingent factors were important in the development of Delta blues.

Since the majority of blacks on the Delta lived and worked as sharecroppers on plantations, they remained isolated from the surrounding white population, even relative to the rest of the Jim Crow South. This isolation meant that Delta blues developed essentially undisturbed by whites; Delta blues were based almost entirely on black musical traditions. Delta blues was not “whitened” like other popular black musical styles of the day. (It was precisely this authenticity which would lead to the specific popularity of Delta blues.) And the economic conditions of the Delta were even worse than in the rest of the South: the economic woes of blacks meant that the blues were as

prevalent among Delta blacks as spirituals (Brown 1952). Blues lyrics were primarily concerned with the harsh aspects of the musicians' lives, such as heartbreak, hard labor, and depression. Brown (1952) sums it up thus: "The blues have a bitter honesty. This is the way the blues singers and their poets have found life to be. And their audiences agree."

According to Robert Palmer's book *Deep Blues*, the earliest Delta blues seems to have originated in the vicinity of the Dockery Plantation (Palmer 1982). The Dockery Plantation was a rarity; it was a sharecropping plantation whose owners did not mistreat or swindle money from its workers. Such humane practices provided a safe place for the black workers to be musically creative. Actually being paid for their work meant the workers could afford real instruments. Although the labor was difficult, the plantation owners were realistic in their labor demands; for example, the workers were given weekends off. On Saturday nights, music was a favorite pastime. Bluesmen such as Charley Patton, Henry Sloan, and Tommy Johnson (who would influence blues legend Robert Johnson) developed their talents on the Dockery Plantation. "Juke joints," small dance venues which served food and liquor, were favorite places for Delta blues musicians to perform. The combination of the poverty and isolation of the Delta blacks, together with safe havens of creativity such as the Dockery Plantation, were historically contingent factors in the birth of Delta blues.

Historical Contingency: Grunge

Nearly seven decades after the birth of the Delta blues, grunge became a new movement in rock music. Just as the Delta blues emerged from a specific and unique location, grunge was created in Seattle, Washington. Young white people in the late 1980's were facing the ramifications of Ronald Reagan's presidential reign. Reagan's policies left the future somewhat bleak for America's youth: the number of citizens below the poverty level increased almost every year between 1981 and 1992, and financial aid for college was substantially reduced. As Nirvana biographer Micheal Azerrad notes, "...they were the first American generation to have little hope of doing better than their parents... and they felt helpless in the face of it all... the

twentysomethings wanted a music of their own; something that expressed the feelings they felt..." (Azerrad 1993, 5). This is not to say that the lives of American youth after Reagan were as oppressive or difficult as that of blacks in the Jim Crow era South; that was certainly not the case. However, many young Americans in the late eighties and early nineties did indeed feel disenchanting, isolated, and somewhat hopeless. The popular music of the time did little to express this mindset.

The somber mood of America's youth was mirrored by the physical environment of Seattle. While Seattle can be considered a place of natural beauty, with its abundance of trees and water, the sun seldom shines brightly. Nearly every day is gray and rainy. As local record producer Jack Endino says, "... [W]hen the weather's crappy and you don't feel like going outside, you go into a basement and make a lot of noise to take out your frustration" (Howitt 2004). One can see Seattle as "...the symbolic end of the line in the journey of westward expansion which is so integral to the way Americans perceive themselves" (Howitt 2004). Economic success did not come easily to many young people in the early 1990's; living at the "end of the line" in or near Seattle surely reinforced this sense of powerlessness.

Physically isolated from the rest of the nation, Seattle is also one of the more racially isolated areas in the U.S. In 1990, only 152,572 blacks lived in Washington, while the white population numbered 4.1 million. This makes the area a popular home for extremist groups, such as religious cults. As Art Chantry, a graphic designer who worked in Seattle during the early grunge scene has observed, "...the northwest is weird. It's the flying saucer capital of the US, serial killer capital of the US, the Manson family used to vacation here" (Howitt 2004).

In Seattle's strange atmosphere, young white Americans created a new musical genre. In addition to reflecting the mood of disaffected youth, grunge was a reaction against the most popular rock music of the day. The so-called "hair metal" of bands such as Motley Crue, Poison, and Bon Jovi was mostly about flashy costumes and hairstyles, over-the-top special effects and musicianship at concerts, and songs which celebrated the superficial perks of being a rock star. Pop musicians such as Madonna and Paula Abdul cranked out songs which became hits, yet had little lyrical or musical substance. Alternative

rock bands such as R.E.M. and Jane's Addiction were moderately popular, and had more artistic merit, yet still did not fully express the range of emotional discontent that grunge soon would. Says Azerrad, "throughout the eighties, many musicians were protesting various political and social inequalities, but...many fans saw this protest for what it essentially was: posturing, bandwagon-jumping, self-righteous self-promotion... Kurt Cobain's reaction to bad times was as direct as can be, and a hell of a lot more honest. He screamed" (Azerrad 5).

The sound of grunge was different from any prevailing musical style of the day. Instead of the acrobatic guitar playing of hair-metal, or even the heavy sound of alternative rock bands like Jane's Addiction, the grunge sound was stripped-down. Guitars were tuned to play lower notes, and were played in the aggressive punk style (loud, hard, and fast) rather than in flashier styles. Feedback was used to augment the music's sound. The vocals were sung simply, often somewhat unintelligibly; the operatics of hair-metal were shunned. Kurt Cobain's style of singing was reminiscent of the vocal style of Delta blues; Nirvana even covered classic blues songs. The sound of grunge was a reaction against the "fluff" that the music industry forced onto the listening public.

Part of this reaction was the creation of a local musical culture, specific to Seattle. A study by George O. Carney observes, "Regions are clearly critical to innovation, and almost all styles...have their roots in a local scene (Carney 1995, 19). Seattle, in fact, had previously been the location of a unique regional music style; from 1958 to 1966, the "Northwest Sound," a "protopunk...loud, crude, simplistic, and accessible" music flourished in the isolated Seattle environment (Carney 1995, 18). The musicians involved in the Northwest Sound movement performed and recorded their music at non-corporate, independently-operated venues and studios. Twenty years later, this same environment would again give birth to a new musical style.

As was the case with the Delta blues, isolation was a key factor in the development of grunge. Seattle's local music scene was isolated from the mainstream, corporate aspect of the music industry; independent record labels were the norm. The most instrumental of these was Sub Pop, which first produced Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Screaming Trees, Smashing Pumpkins, and Mud

Honey. Unlike corporate record labels, “indie” labels were interested in signing acts with long-term potential, not musicians who would have a few hits and never be heard from again. The popularity of grunge bands spread via word of mouth, rather than by heavy promotion such as larger labels would have provided. Local radio stations, such as KCMU and KJET supported local bands. Additionally, an alternative press developed to further support the grunge bands; this included locally-operated publications such as *Backlash* and the *Seattle Rocket*. Independent venues such as Oz, the Offramp, and the Color Box, provided places for grunge bands to perform their music (Garofalo 2002, 368). In the culture of grunge, independence became a musical value in itself: “independent music required independent thinking, all the way from the artists who made the music, to the entrepreneurs who sold it, to the people who bought it” (Azerrad 1993, 4). As with Delta blues, grunge turned physical and cultural isolation into a creative advantage.

The Spreading of Regional Music

While both Delta blues and grunge began as music specific to a certain region of the country, both eventually attained national popularity. Corporate influence was the main factor in this. Presenting the music as a more “authentic” expression of experience, and taking advantage of the existing music and media technology, promoters were able to appeal to a nationwide audience.

The Delta blues was born when recording technology was becoming more advanced. People could play records of their favorite music at home. Recordings by black musicians were popular among blacks and whites alike. However, much of the music was manipulated to suit what executives thought were the tastes of white audiences. Some of the earliest recordings of black performers were “minstrel routines and orchestrated spirituals (which) generally reinforced the traditional image of the Negro” (Dixon and Godrich 9). In 1920, with the release of the first recordings by Mamie Smith, an African-American woman, executives realized that blues recordings could sell large numbers of records. They began marketing recordings of black artists to black audiences; these were called “race records.” White audiences bought blues albums as well. The years 1927 to 1930 are considered to be the

peak of blues recording. New blues records were released at a rate of nearly ten per week. Dixon and Godrich write that “the companies were able to maintain the flow of music only through exhaustive searches for new talent...companies made frequent excursions to major towns in the south” (41). Record executives such as Leonard Chess (of Chess Records) sought out Southern blues musicians and recorded their music. Encouraged by the record producers, the bluesmen would often move to larger cities in the North. Chicago became one such “hotspot” of blues music (Palmer 1982).

When playing for a whiter audience, blues musicians would often attempt to make themselves sound more respectable, thus losing some of the unique qualities of more “authentic” blues. Over time, blues developed into several different, distinct styles. The blues music performed in the North, in particular, began to sound more like jazz, and more polished than Delta blues. Many people, however, still enjoyed a more authentic, less standardized blues sound. Executives sought out Delta blues musicians such as Son House and Charley Patton, musicians who lived on the Delta and played music in the authentic Delta blues style. Later in the thirties, Delta bluesmen such as Robert Johnson would record albums. While these musicians could surely have played in the more standard, “whiter” blues styles, they realized there was a market for their Delta blues, and continued to play in that style. Blues audiences considered such artists to be more authentic examples of the oppressive African-American experience; such artists lived in the midst of the Jim Crow South, and played music which (unlike the blues popular in the North), seemed untouched by white or other modern musical influences. Home recording, and later, radio technology were instrumental in bringing Delta blues to audiences nationwide.

Grunge gained widespread popularity in the early 1990’s in a very similar fashion. Record executives noticed what was going on in Seattle, realized the appeal of grunge as a more “authentic” form of music, and began signing Seattle’s grunge bands. The first of the Seattle bands to sign to a major label was Soundgarden, who signed with A&M (Garofalo 2002, 369). Modern musical technology played a huge role in bringing the grunge sound to a nationwide audience. In particular, MTV was instrumental in spreading the popularity of grunge

bands. Once MTV put the video for “Smells Like Teen Spirit” in heavy rotation in 1991, Nirvana became overnight national stars. With the phenomenal success of Nirvana’s song, other grunge bands such as Smashing Pumpkins and Pearl Jam followed suit, and enjoyed nearly overnight success as well. American youth had grown bored with the “blow-dried, highly processed, faux rebellion” (Azerrad 4) of popular music. With the new bands expressing strong feelings about societal ills and a desire to “crucify the insincere” (Corgan 1995), white youth in America appreciated the authenticity of grunge.

Social Solidarity

One other important factor in the popularity of Delta blues and grunge is *why* people enjoyed the music. In both cases, the music fostered a sense of social solidarity among listeners. Fisher and Chon (1989) follow Durkheim’s idea of social solidarity through ritual, explaining that “human society is created and renewed by the intense arousal that occurs in gatherings and assemblies” (1). Collective group experiences are required to bring society into being; the capacity to have such experiences is what differentiates humans from other animals. Say Fisher and Chon, “the same sort of experience is needed to re-create social solidarity and bring about social change. This cannot be achieved except by means of reunions, assemblies, and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm their common sentiments” (1989, 2). It is easy to see how musical performances may have such results. “By a form of positive feedback, the words of the speaker come back to him, but enlarged and amplified...it is no longer a simple individual who speaks; it is a group incarnate and personified” (Durkheim 1961, in Fisher and Chon 1989).

Performances of the Delta blues certainly led to social solidarity among musicians and listeners. Ferris (1974, 122) describes this nicely: “Within Afro-American folk music one of the most important elements is the ‘musical spokesman’ who voices group feelings through his performances.” Such performances are “often cathartic,” working “to comfort the suffering and voice the feelings of their people.” The subject of Delta blues lyrics was usually personal pain. Blues musicians sang about the perils of their work lives, the difficulties of their romantic lives, and their depression. An illustrative example of blues

lyrics comes from “Drunken Hearted Man,” by blues legend Robert Johnson (1936):

I been dogged and I been driven
eve’ since I left my mother’s home
I been dogged and I been driven
eve’ since I left my mother’s home
And I can’t see no reason why
I can’t leave these no-good womens alone

My father died and left me
my poor mother done the best she could
My father died and left me
my poor mother done the best she could
Every man likes that game you call love
but it don’t mean no man no good
Now, I’m the drunken hearted man
and sin was the cause of it all
And the day that you get weak for no-good women
that’s the day that you bound to fall

In “High Water Everywhere” (1910), Charley Patton describes the perils caused by the unpredictable flooding of the Mississippi Delta:

Looky here, the water dug out, Lordy, levee broke, rolled most
everywhere
The water at Greenville and Leland, Lord, it done rose
everywhere.
I would go down to Rosedale, but they tell me there’s water
there.

Back water at Blytheville, backed up all around.
Back water at Blytheville, done struck Joiner town.
It was fifty families and children. Tough luck, they can drown.

Oh Lordy, women is groaning down.
Oh Lordy, women and children sinking down.

I couldn't see nobody home, and no one to be found.

Other blacks in the Delta could easily relate to such songs. Performing and listening to the blues helped all blues fans express their pain and empathize with one another.

Grunge music had a similar effect. The lyrics of grunge songs, like the blues, were also typically about personal pain. The national troubles mentioned earlier meant that feelings of hopelessness, anger, depression, and isolation were shared by many young Americans at the time. The lyrics of grunge reflected this state of mind. A good example of such lyrics is a sample from the Smashing Pumpkins' song "Bullet With Butterfly Wings" (1995), written by Billy Corgan:

the world is a vampire, set to drain
secret destroyers hold you up to the flames
and what do I get for my pain
betrayed desires, and a piece of the game
despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage
and I still believe that I cannot be saved

While such lyrics are about the singer's personal pain, audiences of young Americans were able to express their own pain by playing and listening to grunge, and to empathize with one another.

Conclusion

This paper has described the similarities in the development of two unique regional musical styles in America. The genesis and spread of both the Delta blues and grunge have several key factors in common. The birth of each type of music depended on certain historical contingencies, on specific features of time and place. Both types of music, while initially regional, eventually attained national popularity with the help of corporate record labels, which marketed the music as more authentic than other popular music styles, and by taking advantage of the existing technology of the time. Both helped musicians and fans achieve a sense of social solidarity, connecting emotionally with each other through performing and listening to music. Thus, sociological ideas can help us identify similarities in two musical

genres which, on the surface, seem very different.

It seems likely that such an analysis can be useful in exploring and explaining other types of music in any society. For example, Jipson (1994) takes a similar approach in discussing the regional musical styles of Athens, Georgia. Danaher and Blackwelder (1993) discuss similarities between blues and rap. Given the role that technological advancements played in the development of these two genres of music, it will be interesting to see how current technology, such as downloading music from the Internet, or the large number of cable music channels now available on television, will affect the evolution of current popular music, and the development of new styles.

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