Roger House, Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy.

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It is surprising that a full biography of Big Bill Broonzy has not appeared since Yannick Bruynoghe’s collection of interviews with the singer in *Big Bill Blues* (1955). Broonzy recorded just under a thousand sides in his career, making him one of the most widely recorded blues musicians of the twentieth century. He was also one of the most important sources of information for blues scholars such as Alan Lomax and Paul Oliver who would go on to write up the history of the music. However, in this book Roger House does not follow the traditional style of a biography by retracing Broonzy’s steps and telling a previously untold story. Using song lyrics and interviews with the singer, primarily from *Big Bill Blues*, House presents Broonzy’s music as the expression of an increasingly secular and modernizing African American population in the first half of the twentieth century, with the bluesman as the “archetype of the working-class black man” (1).

The singer’s life is explored in seven chapters, beginning with his early years in the late nineteenth century Mississippi, up to his death in 1958. As Broonzy’s interviews often included hazy and contradictory stories about his past, the book does not fall into the trap of debating biographical issues such as the singer’s year and place of birth, and thankfully so. Biographies can often become simple narratives of dates and events, forgetting why the story of a particular person is being told altogether. House’s principal aim is to present Broonzy as an example of an ordinary working-class man who experienced the profound changes in African American life in the first half of the
twentieth century. Thus the first four chapters use what is known of the singer’s life to narrate a more general history of African Americans since Reconstruction. The author looks at the impact of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the New Deal policies on ordinary African Americans. While this offers little that is new to African American history, Broonzy proves to be a worthy example: he was a sharecropper, was drafted into the segregated armed forces for the First World War, migrated northwards as did millions of African Americans, and worked in manual jobs throughout his life while performing to make ends meet.

In addition to having lived the life of the average African American laborer, Broonzy articulated his experiences in song, and House capitalizes on this by using his lyrics as oral history and the expression of the black working classes. Although this simplistic method of interpreting blues lyrics as a direct reflection of reality or the singer’s sentiments has been widely used in the past, in House’s book it is much more convincing as Broonzy clearly drew on his personal experiences and assumed different personas when writing songs. Broonzy’s blues therefore provide a window into the African American experience in what House terms the “Age of Blues,” the time of migration and change from an agrarian to an increasingly urban and secular mode of living. He argues that in this period “[t]he blues singer stepped into the forefront as the representative voice of the black working class” (97).

As traditional support systems provided by the church and the family could no longer cope with the increasingly secular and urban African American communities, music became one of the substitutes which “galvanized group solidarity” (15). Due to the fact he experienced the typical life of the urban African American, worked in manual day jobs while also performing in Chicago during the 1930s, Broonzy “articulated the sentiments of urban folk audiences” (77). While House is convincing in his presentation of Broonzy as a voice of his people, he misses the opportunity to explore how his voice relates to that of the many other black musicians which have been interpreted as spokespersons of their race, such as Marion Anderson, Leadbelly, or Billie Holiday. However, the author manages to demonstrate how Broonzy personified the “modern black aesthetic” (114) in the pursuit and development of a new urban blues sound which, despite being innovative in its sonic and instrumental arrangements, continued to draw on traditional folk sources for its lyric content.

It is at this point that House’s book is most convincing. By drawing attention to Broonzy’s important role in the development of an urban blues sound during the 1930s, and the relevance of this music to a modern and urban black audience, House challenges both the popular vision of Broonzy as the archetypal country blues singer and the stereotyped idea of the bluesman, images favored and idealized by white audiences in the post-war era. The author questions the folk purism of writers such as Elijah Wald who, he argues, have overlooked the role and significance of urban blues to black society (106). As a consequence, House aims to demonstrate that while Broonzy was subjected to folkie romanticism, such as in John Hammond’s 1938 concert at Carnegie Hall when he was pressured to play in overalls, he was able to balance the varying demands of white audiences and perform an important role for urban black audiences and in the development of the blues.

This adaptability was particularly important for Broonzy when he visited Europe on a number of occasions during the 1950s, as demonstrated in the book’s valuable and detailed listing of the singer’s recording sessions. Eager audiences of collectors and blues
enthusiasts expected Broonzy to play “the old field blues” (139), what they regarded as more ‘authentic.’ Unfortunately, House does not dedicate much space to Broonzy’s reception in Europe. This seems another missed opportunity, given that European audiences, particularly British, would go on to have an important role in development of the genre, and Broonzy would figure strongly in early British interpretations of blues music. It will be interesting to see how House’s treatment of Broonzy’s time in Europe differs from Bob Riesman’s in his forthcoming biography of the singer, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy*. Despite this omission, House manages to bring to light one of the most influential blues singers of the twentieth century, revalue his role as an urban blues singer and place him at the centre of a modernizing African American identity.

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