

BLUES TRADITIONS OF GUITAR PERFORMANCE IN MODERN SCIENTIFIC IDEA

Qin ShengYang

Kharkiv State Academy of Culture, Kharkiv, Ukraine
qsy950810@icloud.com

Цінь Шенян

Харківська державна академія культури, Харків, Україна
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4461-3586>

Qin ShengYang. Blues Traditions of Guitar Performance in Modern Scientific Idea

The relevance of the article. Blues has always been and is still one of the most popular areas of non-academic art in the period from the end of the XIX century. However, after the Second World War, the blues tradition began to be actively assimilated against the background of other stylistic trends and subcultures. In this regard, the interest of modern scientists in blues specificity, which has become an important component of many modern musical phenomena, not only increased, but also expanded the perspectives of research. Starting from the second half of the XX century, blues traditions gained rapid development due to the technical revolution in the field of guitar performance. The invention of the electric guitar directed performers to the formation of a new way of thinking, a new performance technique, and new ways of self-expression. Such directions as rhythm and blues, blues rock, rock and roll absorbed a whole array of blues traditions, which in combination with other trends of musical culture formed the image of modern non-classical guitar performance. These processes have not yet received proper scientific development, although the number of scientific publications on the blues is very extensive.

The purpose of the study is to form a systematic view of the modern historiography of blues guitar performance research.

The methodology. The main method is the source and textological analysis of existing publications; method of systematic analysis, which allows to classify existing sources according to their nature, direction and subject of study; a comparative method involved in comparing the views of different scientists on the same issues.

The results. Contemporary (starting from around 1980) scientific publications on blues traditions of guitar performance were analyzed. It was determined that a number of aspects of modern performance are in the initial stage of development, a significant number of works are devoted to the early stage of the development of blues, mostly the material of scientific research is not musical material, but interviews, historical essays, etc.

The scientific novelty. The leading scientific works of the late XX and early XIX centuries are systematized and characterized regarding blues guitar performance, the “white spots” in its study are outlined, the main directions of scientific research are determined.

The practical significance. The materials of the article can be used for the further study of issues of the development of the blues tradition of guitar performance, as well as in music history courses and disciplines taught to students of the pop and jazz specialty.

Conclusions. Several leading aspects of art-historical studies of the blues tradition in guitar performance are highlighted:

- historical and genetic;
- sociocultural;
- practical and technological.

An important conclusion is the definition of blues as a musical universal, which provides a certain way of thinking and its artistic reflection in music, not fixed exclusively in the purely blues direction of guitar art.

Keywords: *music art, blues, guitar performance, blues tradition, historiography.*

Цінь Шенян. Блюзові традиції гітарного виконавства в науковій думці сучасності

Починаючи з другої половини XX ст., блюзові традиції гітарного виконавства набули стрімкого розвитку, зумовленого, зокрема, технічною революцією. У статті здійснено спробу сформувати системне уявлення про сучасну історіографію досліджень блюзового напрямку гітарного виконавства. За допомогою джерелознавчого та текстологічного методів здійснено аналіз існуючих публікацій. Найвні джерела класифіковані за їхнім спрямуванням та предметом вивчення. Компаративний метод залучений для порівняння поглядів різних науковців на однакові питання. Визначено: немало аспектів сучасного виконавства перебуває в початковій стадії розробленості; значна кількість праць присвячена ранньому етапу розвитку блюзу; матеріалом наукових розвідок здебільшого є не музичний матеріал, а інтерв'ю, історичні есе та ін. Систематизовано та охарактеризовано провідні наукові праці кінця XX — початку

XIX ст. щодо блюзового гітарного виконавства, окреслено «білі плями» в його вивченні, визначено основні напрями наукових розвідок.

Ключові слова: музичне мистецтво, блюз, гітарне виконавство, блюзові традиції, історіографія.

The relevance of the research topic. Blues as a phenomenon of musical culture is a unique example of stylistic immortality. This is manifested simultaneously in two aspects: on the one hand, similar to classical musical samples, blues works have considerable popularity in their almost original form, on the other hand — during its existence, blues has shown such wide possibilities for assimilation in various cultural paradigms that it is difficult now to find a musical style that would not have been influenced by the blues, and to which the blues would not be tangential in one way or another. Thus, musical practice constantly turns to blues compositions and performance tools, therefore it needs a corresponding scientific and methodical foundation.

Problem statement. Studies of the blues direction of guitar performance mostly have a scattered, local character both in the geographical and in the “aspect” sense, so the layer of scientific literature on this subject needs analysis and systematization. For Ukrainian musicology, the currently available access to the American and European scientific literature bases is important, which opens up opportunities to correlate the domestic research experience with the world one.

The purpose of the article — is to form a systematic view of the modern historiography of blues guitar performance research.

Presentation of the main research material. Blues and guitar performance are so closely related that it is difficult to differentiate what exactly has primacy and priority in the historical and cultural process: did blues from the very beginning of its existence influence guitar performance or, on the contrary, did guitar performance influence blues style? It just so happened that the specifics of the guitar as a musical instrument and blues stylistics from the very beginning achieved the most

harmonious symbiosis, which contributed to their further interpenetration. As P. Hordiienko aptly notes in his article, “The bluesy style of performance gave rise to new technical approaches of playing the guitar (band, slide, etc.), which became the basis of the guitar school of jazz, and later rock music. Having made its way from blues to jazz-rock, the guitar not only did not exhaust its possibilities, but, on the contrary, won leadership in many new directions of jazz” (Hordiienko, 2008, p. 186). There is only one thing to disagree with the author — this property of the blues guitar applies not only to jazz. Its echoes can be heard in most contemporary styles, from pop music to works of the academic tradition.

Blues performance, which at the turn of the XIX and XX centuries had a defined stream with bright specifics (Chicago blues, delta blues, etc.), gradually “dispersed” among numerous types and subspecies of musical art of the XX century, reaching a state of diffuse existence by its end. This is expressed, first of all, in the disappearance of purely blues artists. Those we consider the masters of the guitar blues themselves deny belonging exclusively to this tradition. Most of them work in different styles and genres, using both their technical thesaurus borrowed from blues practice and the corresponding elements of rhythm and harmony. In such conditions, the study of blues guitar performance is a very complex and specific task, which is naturally reflected in the colorful variety of scientific investigations of recent decades.

In his article, Paul Oliver (Oliver, 1983) notes that scientific studies of the blues began with folkloristic investigations of the beginning of the XX century, as well as biographical and autobiographical essays on outstanding performers. He dates the active phase of blues research to approximately the 1960s, when it was first proposed to consider it as an independent musical direction¹.

P. Oliver defines several areas of blues study: general-historical², regional³, textological⁴, as well as sociological and ethnomusicological.

He also mentions several works that examine the blues in the general context of American multi-ethnic culture. At the same time, a large number

1 Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*, (New York, 1959); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* (London, 1960).

2 Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (London, 1969); Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music* (London, 1976).

3 Bruce Bastin, *Crying for the Carolines* (London, 1970); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York, 1982); Bengt Olsson, *The Memphis Blues and Jug Bands* (London, 1970); John Broven, *Walking to New Orleans* (Bexhill-on-Sea, 1974); Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (London, 1973).

4 Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues* (London, 1968); Harry Oster, *Living Country Blues*, (Detroit, 1969); Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York, 1963); Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (London, 1975).

of blues magazines were published, which were supposed to satisfy the needs of interested fans of certain musicians. In Great Britain, the magazine "Blues Unlimited" had been being published for more than twenty years, the American edition of "Living Blues" — for more than fourteen years. Blues magazines were regularly published in many European countries, as well as Australia and even Japan. They mainly published interviews, reports, reviews of phonographic records, etc.

Analyzing the degree of blues research in 1983, Paul Oliver notes that "...blues research to date has had its limitations and a lack of any coordination of research enterprise has meant that there are considerable lacunae even in the areas which have been most thoroughly examined..." (Oliver, 1983, p. 378). He also emphasizes the superiority of amateur research over scientific one: "It is a field to which few professional skills have been brought, and the disregard of the subject for half a century by the musicological, or for that matter, ethnomusicological and folkloristic establishments, has meant that blues research has remained deficient in many respects. Were it not for the amateurs — using the term in the best and literal sense — there would have been little research at all..." (ibid., p. 380).

The first studies of the blues were mainly devoted to singing and singers. However, the publications were mostly devoted to the facts of the musicians' careers, rather than the nature of their songs, the relationship of the texts, the style of performance, the peculiarities of the musical structure, etc.

According to Oliver, until the 1980s only three works had been published in which the blues is considered from a musicological point of view: John Fahey's study of Charley Patton's works, "Early Downhome Blues" by Jeff Todd Titon and "Big Road Blues" by David Evans. These books contained, among other things, a comparison of the transcriptions made by the authors, showing differences in the perception of pitch, metronomic time marking, tonal plan, and differences in the ways of expressing microtonal variations, strokes, and bends.

By the way, the lack of a systematic approach to the study of the blues was emphasized even earlier by Charles Keil: "for the most part, however, musicologists go one way, anthropologists another,

and critics continue to tell us what they like and what they don't" (Keil, 1966, p. 59). He imagined the general directions of the study of musical style (and blues in particular) as syntactic, practical, semantic, kinetic and genetic. Although we do not agree with the sequence of presentation of these aspects by Keil, we note that they are completely logical and methodologically justified.

Today, these five aspects are only partially covered by musicology. The syntactic and semantic direction of the study of blues is realized, rather, in the field of literature through the analysis of traditional blues texts, their semantics, symbolism, mythology, etc.

The genetic direction is represented by historical works of various scales, among which it is worth noting the article "The Blues and the Veil" by Nick Bromell (Bromell, 2000). The author raises the racial issue, which sounds in and around blues art as a through-and-through theme. After the abolition of slavery, African Americans could not find a place for themselves in the American community. "On the one hand they were «free at last», and compared to their experience of three hundred years of slavery this new condition looked and felt like a new ontology, a new way of being in the world. On the other hand, for many former slaves, life actually worsened after 1865. Formally invited to join as citizens the nation that had enslaved them, many African Americans found themselves more cut off from white Americans than ever before" (ibid., p. 195). African Americans seemed to be behind a veil that demanded a cultural form. "That form was the blues. The historical condition of the veil found expressive form in the blues" (ibid., p. 197). In addition, in the above-mentioned article, Bromel defined the ability of blues to overcome international and geographical borders.

Both topics are developed in a collection of essays by a group of American authors (Bakriges et al., 2007). It explores the flow of African American music and musicians across the Atlantic to Europe from the time of slavery to the XX century, and their influence on European music.

Topics related to the racial origins of the blues are also addressed by Adam Gussow in his eloquently titled "Whose blues?" (Gussow, 2020). He tries to deal with the antagonistic positions of researchers regarding "black bluesism" (Gussow's term) and

the understanding of blues as an inter-ethnic and transnational phenomenon.

It can be considered that this turn of the historical study of the blues is significant for modern art studies, because racial issues in this context are complex and were previously discussed with much less acuteness.

The practical aspect of blues research is revealed through numerous memories and reflections of both blues musicians themselves and their heirs, as well as people who had a direct relationship with this field — producers, sound engineers, journalists, etc.

A large layer of significant works on blues music is literature in the genre of interview. Jas Obrecht's book "Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar" (Obrecht, 2015), unlike his previous monographs devoted to such outstanding guitarists as Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, BB King, introduces readers to nine representatives of the post-war generation: Sylvester Barnabee "Pat" Weaver, who became the first recorded blues guitarist; Papa Charlie Jackson, the first commercially successful blues artist; Blind Lemon Jefferson, the founder of country blues; Blind Blake, "the king of ragtime guitar"; Blind Willie McTell, who has worked in almost every genre of roots music; gospel-blues singer Blind Willie Johnson, an unsurpassed master of the slide guitar; Lonnie Johnson, the most influential guitarist of the 1920s, who made many blues recordings; Mississippi John Hurt, whose fingerstyle and folk repertoire influenced the further development of the blues in the 1960s; Tampa Red, the "guitar wizard", the most prolific performer of the era considered by Obrecht and a key figure in the development of the post-war blues style. An important fact is the presentation of these personalities in one book, which emphasizes the importance of guitar performance at this time. The materials include interviews with such prominent blues figures and blues-influenced guitarists as BB King, John Lee Hooker, Ry Cooder, Stefan Grossman, and others. They provide not only commentary on style, but also their personal reactions to these early guitar heroes and how they influenced blues, country, jazz, folk, and rock music throughout the XX century.

A large selection of interviews with blues artists was published by the University of Illinois in 2015

(Russell, 2015). Among the heroes are guitarists Juke Boy Bonner, Albert Collins, Freddie King, Louis Myers, Baby Boy Warren and others. A book by Steve Cushing (Cushing, 2018) was created in a similar style, but the interviews in it do not belong to performers, but to historians, producers and blues researchers, including Paul Oliver, already mentioned in this article, as well as Samuel Charters, David Evans and others. Of course, such materials reveal many interesting facts about the contemporary life of blues performers, owners of record companies.

In 2017, the University of Michigan published a book by Andrew Kellett, "The British Blues Network: Adoption, Emulation, and Creativity" (Kellett, 2017), devoted to the processes of assimilation of African American blues music by young British performers in the 1950s and 1960s. Kellett believes that that it was these processes that formed the most popular artists of the time — The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds, Eric Clapton and Led Zeppelin. The author argues for three related components of the creative process — experimentation, refiliation and addition. That is, during the experiments, the musicians assimilated the experience of their predecessors, supplementing it to a certain extent. Also, Kellett with some irony notes that they assimilated not only blues traditions, but also various psychotropic chemicals that had to "expand thinking".

In the same year, the same publishing house published a book by Jonathan Wipplinger, "The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany" (Wipplinger, 2017), dedicated to jazz and its influence on German society in the 1920s. In the sixth chapter of his work, the author analyzes the role of blues in the development of the diasporic musical culture of that time, reflects on the cultural level about the general processes of its development and the subsequent temporary "death" of German jazz after the emergence of Nazi political power.

Many important details are contained in works dedicated to the personalities of prominent blues musicians Charley Patton (Sacré, 2018) and Michael Bloomfield (Dann, 2021).

Among the materials of Ukrainian researchers devoted to the history of blues, the article by I. Koliada and Yu. Kononchuk, which examines

the issue of the emergence and interpenetration of blues and jazz art, attracts attention. In particular, the authors note: “Researchers of the history of the development of jazz consider the blues musical genre from two positions: 1) blues is a predecessor that grew jazz and influenced the peculiarities of its development as a younger musical genre (the period of formation of blues is the last quarter of the XIX century — the first decade of the XX century, and jazz — the 1910-1920s); 2) blues is considered as a primitive predecessor of the jazz style, the peculiarity of which is proximity to the original sounds and motifs of African musical culture. Only starting from 1950, there was a rethinking of the existing approach, when blues began to be recognized as an original musical genre, the origin and development of which is independent and independent from the development of jazz itself» (Koliada & Kononchuk, 2016).

The kinetic aspect of blues art declared (or demanded?) by Charles Keil has also found its realization in modern science. Andrew Cohen’s very interesting study “The Hands of Blues Guitarists” (1996) is devoted to issues of hand position and playing technique of blues performers. Through professional observations and systematization of various approaches, the author comes to the conclusion that hand posture features not only marked regional specificity, but also determine the intonation and expressive palette of music. He claims that “...there was regional clustering to the ways that African American folk and blues guitar players from the early part of this century held their picking hands and that these postures facilitated certain musical patterns while inhibiting others. The player’s picking hand posture therefore serves as an important determinant of the elusive quality called «style». If there is such a thing as regional style, we should see it expressed in visual images showing how different players held their hands...” (Cohen, 1996, p. 455). However, then the author reflects: “Whether small changes in playing posture result in changes in playing style or regional preferences for a particular rhythmic background ultimately result in regional postural differences is a chicken-and-egg sort of question” (ibid., p. 464).

Partly, the issue of blues performance has been considered by researchers of general processes in

guitar performance. For example, F. Bernat in his dissertation work (Bernat, 2019) devotes an entire section to new trends in this field, which in the XX and early XXI centuries. manifested, including through the influence of folk, popular, jazz and rock music. By the way, the scientist notes that the following characteristic features are present in jazz guitar music: performance technique borrowed from the blues (mode and intonation system, glissando, playing notes with an unfixed pitch), rhythmic organization (syncopated rhythm, uneven distribution of durations in bars)” (ibid., p. 84), as well as the principles of sound production inherent in the work of African American musicians of the beginning of the XX century (ibid., p. 85).

The work of F. Bernat also contains a concise analysis of the work of such guitarists as John McLaughlin, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Frank Zappa. Despite the fact that none of them actually worked in the field of purely blues performance, the scientist notes the significant influence on them of the musicians-predecessors of the blues direction, a certain continuity of technical and compositional techniques. The author refers to the musicians’ own declarations, which confirm, for example, that J. McLaughlin, along with the influence of Indian music, jazz and flamenco, recognized the deep influence on his work of blues practice in particular, and J. Page, listening to the recordings of blues masters since childhood, in his creativity actively uses blues intonations and playing principles (Bernat, 2019, p. 93).

Investigating the work of E. Clapton, F. Bernat determines that he “has a subtle sense of blues improvisation, and his guitar solos contain a combination of passages built from uneven rhythmic patterns...” (Bernat, 2019, p. 91), as well as, that “Clapton’s musical blues thinking remains unsurpassed to this day” (ibid., p. 92).

Awareness of the influence of blues performance on the entire palette of guitar art, starting from the middle of the XX century, is important for modern musicology, although the identification of specific features of the blues is sometimes difficult, as are attempts to classify the stylistic affiliation of the work of most non-classical guitarists of this period. For example, John Clayton Mayer, in addition to blues and blues-rock projects, had experience

playing in such styles as alternative rock, soul, indie rock, folk rock, soft rock, pop rock, country rock, and even acoustic music. On the other hand, many musicians worked in mixed styles based on blues (country, country-blues, blues-rock, rhythm and blues, electric blues, etc.), and also brought blues intonations, harmonies and principles of guitar playing into other styles. For example, the blues solos in many rock compositions by David Gilmour and Kurt Cobain are widely known. It is very difficult to evaluate this “diffusion” of blues elements in the guitar art of the XX century. It is not for nothing that many of today’s guitarists have a rather bad attitude to attempts to classify their art and attribute it to a specific direction.

Yanina Zhurba in her article (Zhurba, 2018) notes the powerful influence of the blues tradition on jazz art in terms of genre, style and form. Among other things, the researcher identifies bright manifestations of genre features of blues in the jazz style of bebop, stylistic and shaping features — in the style of boogie-woogie. It is quite natural that Ya. Zhurba emphasizes the influence of blues harmony on the development of jazz, also determining the intonation and stylistic heredity — the use of blues diatonics, constructions based on pentatonic interscale attraction, the use of the musical form of the 12-bar blues square.

Another direction of practical studies of guitar blues is related to the invention of the electric guitar. And, actually, it was the technical side of the performance that became the key to the constant rapprochement of the blues with other stylistic trends that used the possibilities of the amplified (and later, deformed) guitar timbre.

The blues giant BB King was one of the first to use an electric guitar. The new qualities of the instrument made it possible to make very smooth bends (stretching chords in a vertical direction, perpendicular to the strings), as well as to use a well-voiced vibrato that imitated the vocal technique of blues singing. These and other techniques of playing the electric guitar influenced almost every performer of the second half of the XX century. The evolution of the instrument itself inspired the evolution of performance, giving rise to new and new techniques (fingerstyle, tapping). Of course, this process was also reflected in relevant scientific research.

Ukrainian researcher P. Hordiienko in his article “Peculiarities of jazz guitar performance” notes that “currently, professional guitar thinking is at the stage of unification of the entire existing guitar language” and further confirms this opinion: “in the recordings of Ch. Byrd, you can find bossa nova, blues, swing themes, classical arrangements, country rock, and much more» (Hordiienko, 2008, p. 188). In this sense, the study of the technique of playing the electric guitar is equally significant for different stylistic directions of guitar performance, starting from the second third of the XX century.

The historiographic aspect of the formation of the skills of playing the electric guitar is considered in detail in the article by V. Blazhevych (Blazhevych, 2017). It defines the old techniques of playing the classical guitar, which have migrated to the arsenal of performers on the electric guitar (hammer on, pull off, rasgueado, tremolo), as well as the borrowing of some techniques from the practice of playing on other instruments. To the vibrato mentioned by the author, which originates in guitar technique from stringed and bowed instruments, and the special phrasing that came from wind instruments, we will add various percussion techniques borrowed from the relevant field of musical performance, as well as, for example, muting of strings in combination with the use of a mediator, which produces a sound similar to the timbre of the banjo, and two-handed tapping, which is as close as possible to playing a keyboard instrument.

V. Blazhevych also points to the huge influence of blues acoustic performance on the formation of the technique of playing the electric guitar, in particular emphasizing the actually “basic” prevalence of “band” and “slide” techniques. In addition, the author states the changes that the use of distortion of the sound of the electric guitar brings to the performance, but does not expand on this topic.

The article by O. Voichenko perfectly illustrates how it is almost impossible to separate jazz and blues performance in the XX century (Voichenko, 2012). Speaking about the genesis of the jazz guitar, the scientist refers to the work of such musicians as Charlie Christian, BB King, George Benson, etc., who at the same time are considered stars of the blues art. In the study of O. Voichenko, the history of the development of jazz guitar is traced, which

largely overlaps with the history of blues guitar performance.

Important aspects of the reflection of the stylistic features of British blues-rock in the principles of playing the electric guitar are considered in the article by the young researcher Maksym Zhembrovskiyi (Zhembrovskiyi, Chernyshova, 2023). The material of his research is the work of one of the most outstanding performers on this instrument, Eric Clapton. The author focuses on the methods of forming the musician's individual guitar timbre, his technical skills. Among other things, he determines that E. Clapton is characterized by the use of blues movements, playing the pentatonic scale in one position and, in general, the combination of blues drama with the drive of rock, which allowed him to form his unique performance style.

Conclusions. It is quite difficult to cover the entire range of modern scientific literature devoted to blues traditions in guitar performance. At the beginning of the XXI century, several American universities systematically published voluminous studies of blues music. However, it is obvious that there are many white spots in this topic. Some aspects are just beginning to be researched, some authors revise the known facts, verifying the information of previous researchers. At the same time, the general trend of

preference for interviews and essays over scientific analysis remains.

In general, it is possible to define several aspects of art-historical studies of the blues tradition in guitar performance:

- historical and genetic;
- sociocultural;
- practical and technological.

The function of the blues itself in art can be determined in the same way: it historically caused the emergence of many new styles, ensured transatlantic socio-cultural contacts, and contributed to the development of guitar practice and technologies. In fact, the blues has become a musical universal, which is the carrier of a certain way of thinking, the specificity of the reception of the world and its artistic reflection in art.

Prospects for further research. Despite the existence of purposeful studies of blues in modern art history, most of them, as can be seen from the text of the article, are directed to the past (mostly, the works refer to the 1920s — 1960s). Analysis of blues guitar practice of the second half of the XX century, the specifics of sound production, technical methods of working with an electric guitar, etc. are still awaiting systematic studies.

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Qin ShengYang

postgraduate student, Kharkiv State Academy of Culture,
Kharkiv, Ukraine

Цінь Шенян

аспірант, Харківська державна академія культури,
м. Харків, Україна
