

COMPARISON OF THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF “WORRIED LIFE BLUES”

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In 1941 Chicago blues singer/pianist Maceo Merriweather recorded his first big hit “Worried Life Blues” for the RCA Bluebird label, and it has since grown to become a widely covered “blues standard” recorded by at least thirty-eight other artists between 1941 and 2007. It might be difficult to imagine that a simple eight-bar blues song of but three chords could yield such variation as to successfully accommodate viably unique interpretations by so many other artists.¹ Three versions of this song recorded between 1957 and 1963 by performers whose musical careers all intersected with the Chicago blues scene; Bill Broonzy, Chuck Berry, and Otis Spann, will be examined to discover how indeed each artist’s individual sensibilities and musicianship result in three uniquely stylized realizations of this one song on which they are mutually based.

Bill Broonzy, after returning to his solo folk-blues roots following a reasonably but less successful career on the Chicago blues scene, recorded his solo version of “Worried Life Blues” in 1957. Broonzy borrows both tempo and the boogie-woogie shuffle feel from Merriweather’s original recording albeit now performed solo voice and guitar (as opposed to voice, piano, and accompanying slide guitar). Broonzy’s roots Delta country-blues acoustic guitar style (sans slide) is relaxed, and freely moves between holding down the boogie-woogie bass-line, and intermittent fills and turnarounds, with the rhythm at time only subtly implied. In the tradition of many of the great solo Delta blues performers of the 20s and 30s, Broonzy displays no need to necessarily keep strict tempo and occasionally even the meter is similarly treated with slightly casual regard. Concordant with his guitar accompaniment, Broonzy’s deep vocal delivery is genuine, intimate, and clear, reminiscent of a hard-working background and the spirituals and church music of his Arkansas youth of the early 1900s.

¹ Merriweather’s “Worried Life Blues” itself was likely based on the even earlier “Someday Baby Blues” recorded by Sleepy John Estes in 1935

In sharp contrast to Broonzy's 1957 acoustic solo rendition, Chuck Berry's 1960 *Chess* recording of "Worried Life Blues" features a full band including vocals, two electric guitars (one strictly rhythm and one playing fills and riffs), piano, bass, and drums. Once again the tempo and boogie-woogie elements are carried over from the original 1941 recording, but Merriweather's open shuffle feel is translated into a stricter 12/8 rhythm clearly stated throughout on the drum-kit. The boogie-woogie bass-line is carried by one rhythm guitar, and while there are no featured instrumental solos, the piano and second guitar are freely riffing and "jamming" behind the vocal verses during the entire length of the recording. Berry brings to this recording, not only his blues roots, but the newer R&B and Rock & Roll sensibilities for which he had already become famous. The music is, by contrast to both Merriweather and Broonzy, loud and almost raucous, analogous to the tendency electrified Chicago city blues had taken on. Berry's vocal style is clear, well-articulated, and energetic. Perhaps in part due to his St. Louis middle-class background (not of the more "authentic" rural Mississippi Delta ilk and era) one does not hear quite the direct and palpable link to country Delta blues as was more pronounced in Broonzy's performance.

Perhaps most true to Merriweather's original recording of the three is that of Otis Spann's solo piano/vocal rendition, recorded in 1963 in Copenhagen. Here one can hear a very "live" sounding recording to the extent that even Spann's persistent and steady foot-stomping is clearly audible. Spann was a consummate professional and by no means a stranger to the recording environment. Throughout this recording Spann's manner is relaxed and steady, reflective perhaps of his extensive Chicago studio experience coupled with his nearly ten years tenure as Muddy Waters' full-time pianist. His performance is so seemingly effortless and relaxed in fact, that one can almost imagine a huge smile across the face of a man with the confidence of having

played this, and songs like it, hundreds of times before. In contrast to Berry's rendition, Spann's performance might be likened to what Spencer refers to as "urban blues"; an evolution of "city blues" that was "less folkloric...and more subdued than its precursor, in part because its pulse was more regular, its rhythms more refined."² Spann's blues performance is quite refined, much more so than either of the two other cited examples. Here one can sense the culmination and fine-tuning of sixty years of a blues legacy from the plantations and barrelhouses of the Delta, to the sophisticated blues of uptown Chicago. Spann's vocal delivery is as relaxed and confident as his playing, so relaxed that at times he barely articulates a few of the lyrics enough to understand them. Introducing the second piano break of the song, Spann slyly warns in spoken voice "watch out son..." as he continues to expertly play another chorus.

Even though each of the three above covers of Merriweather's song retain many of the characteristics of the original recording, including; song structure, lyrics, boogie-woogie feel, and even tempo (although Spann's version is a bit slower), each rendition indeed takes on the unmistakable individual qualities of the artist performing it. Perhaps artistic expression such as this could be no other way. It is likely that even if Broonzy, Berry, or Spann deliberately tried to exactly emulate Merriweather's original performance, the effort would have been only partially successful, and why would they have wanted to? Each performance is a reflection of that artist's relationship to the individual song, and indeed an insight into his relation to music and the world. Although imitation may be considered the most sincere form of flattery, in art, it is at best a student-level effort one engages in before true art commences. As soon as an artist picks up his

² Jon M. Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1992), Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779280> (accessed August 4, 2010), 27.

instrument, pen, or paint brush, by his very nature he engages in an act of unique individuality.

This indeed is the nature of art and human expression.

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