



Doctor, write me a prescription for the blues

A story of health promotion through the power of music

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Doctor, write me a prescription for the blues

Music is the most powerful mind-altering substance generally available. The Blues has been the single most influential musical form across the world since the last century. It has shaped jazz, given birth to rock and roll and without it, there would have been no Elvis Presley, no Beatles, no Rolling Stones and post sixties popular music would look very different. The basic vocabulary of rock is the blues.¹ The Blues reinvents itself in the new generation of RnB artists. It extends its influence through 'world music' – that globalisation of the musical forms of all continents. The Blues has infiltrated that most pervasive of popular media, advertising, providing an outlet for blues giants like Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Snooks Eaglin and John Lee Hooker. John Lee is the oldest performer with a UK number one: 'Boom Boom'. The Blues then, is the single most powerful form of the most powerful form of mind-altering substance there is. Surely then, it should be available from health services?

The Blues has always had its doctors- Dr Ross, Dr Feelgood, Dr John, Dr Clayton, to name but a few. These have claimed a title reflecting the Blues musician's calling, evoking the tradition of mystical belief in the musician as healer.



Figure 1 Piano Red, the original Dr Feelgood.



Figure 2 UK RnB band Dr. Feelgood

The Blues in common parlance is both a state of mind and the musical idiom- 'a bout of depression; melancholic music of black American folk origin, often in the twelve bar sequence'.²

'Music has charms to soothe the savage breast'³ Blues doctors show people a good time, making ordinary lives richer and healthier. Most forms of music can claim to be therapeutic, inducing well-being. Only the Blues has, as its defining feature, catharsis: 'a release of repressed emotion by association with the cause and elimination by abreaction: purgation; confessional; admitting fault or wrong doing'.² A cathartic drug is a purgative. The basic attitude of the blues is that joyful music can come out of real pain¹ and if you can articulate your pain, you are not overpowered by it.

Pharmaco-audiology

The basic pharmaco-audiology of the Blues is the 'twelve bar' chord progression, It is peculiarly effective in altering mental states, fast sequences enforcing foot and body movements, slow grooves exorcising painful experience. Musically, the form is open to boundless improvisation. The instruments of the Blues are simple and accessible. Voice, guitar ('axe' or 'box') harmonica ('harp') and piano are the essentials. Barefoot Blues doctors have improvised on tea-chest basses, washboards, kazoos, cow bells, fiddles and trumpets. High tech- surgeons operated much later with saxophones, horns and Hammond organ. Electricity was harnessed to a create new and more powerful beast, but still embedded in the roots and values of the music.

The Blues Medicine history

The history of the Blues is one of unrelenting pain and suffering of black Americans, from slavery to the present, of white injustice, exploitation and butchery set against a spirit of Black resilience and hope. The music is a synthesis of the complex, rhythmic insistence of African music, 'hollers' of slave plantations and prison work farms, good time music of 'jump ups', house parties, and street corner bands, Negro spiritual and gospel music, and the songs and stories of the southern white-trash hillbillies, themselves the exploited Scottish

and Irish settlers who fled the British Isles to settle eventually in the Appalachian mountains. ⁴

The Blues doctors were born in medicine shows which toured the southern states of America from the early 19th century. (Fig 3) Slaves with musical talent earned the privilege of travelling with the patent medicine show bands and their cavalcades. The power of the music was used to draw in the crowds, infect them with magic and persuade them to buy the latest concoctions in the little brown jar. If the music was potent, perhaps so too was the medicine. The Blues draws on a huge tradition of hoodoo (voodoo) herbal remedy and ritual from Africa and the Caribbean, intricately tying together, love, fertility, power, social standing and well-being. ⁴ The Black Cat Bone and the John the Conqueror Root (fig 4) were part of the pharmacopaea. This application of the musical adjuvant to the herbal remedy made the medicines more saleable, but it was not surprising. At around the same time as the medicine shows, exasperation with the general ineffectiveness of orthodox medicine was almost universal as indexed by the editor of the Times in 1856: *'The doctor is no better than the meanest herbalist, the product of the longest conversation with a doctor is simply to reinforce the uselessness of medicine'*.

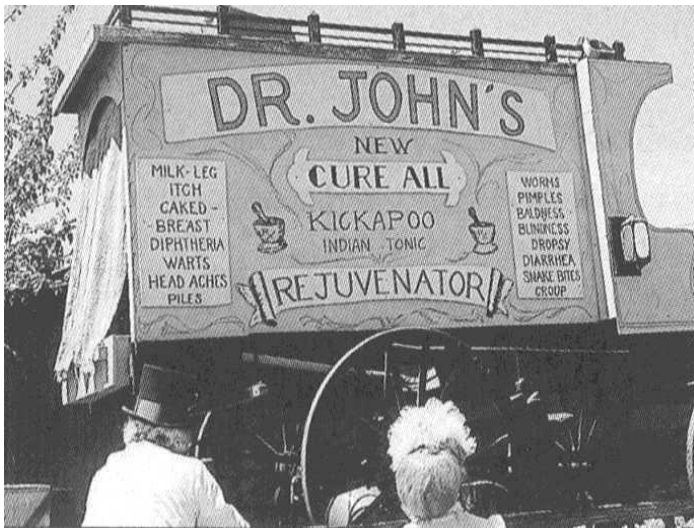


Figure 3 Dr John's Medicine show



Figure 4 John the Conqueror 'Mojo'

The formal Blues probably emerged in the early 1900s. The first recorded Blues was Mamie Smith's 'Crazy blues' in 1920. Blues shares a common ancestry with jazz for we find Dr Jive, Jelly Roll Morton, plying twelve bar jazz numbers, along with WC Handy and King Oliver, while the 'Classic Blues' women performers were making the blues a household commodity ⁵

Blues psychotherapy

Advertisements for the Classic Blues Race recordings of the 1920s marketed Blues catharsis:

'You may think you've got trouble- but wait till you hear Margaret Johnson sing 'Heavy burden blues'. Then you'll feel better because no-one could be so sad as Margaret. Margaret Johnson is all weighed down with the "Heavy burden blues"'

Margaret Johnson, 'Heavy burden blues'. Okeh race label, Figure 5

“Oh the blues aint nothin but a good woman feeling bad” – a slow aching heart disease- like consumption, it kills you by degrees. Ida Cox at last, tells what the Blues are! Every verse is a picture. Hear it and discover how many kinds of Blues you’ve got.’

Ida Cox, ‘Blues ain’t nothin’ else but.’ Paramount race label, Figure 6 ⁶

Figure 5 Margaret Johnson

Figure 6 Ida Cox

However bad things are, the Blues is the key to unlock and release the pain. The Blues is a psychotherapy. Leadbelly, the Blues Medicine Nobel laureate, describes this, introducing 'Good morning blues':

'Now, this is the blues, there was a white man had the blues said it was nothing to worry about. Now you lay down at night you roll from one side of the bed to the other, all night long you cant sleep what's the matter? the blues has gotcha. You get up and sit on the side of the bed in the morning, you got your sister, brother, mother, father around you, you don't want no talk out of em, whatsa matter? blues got yer, you go an put your feet under the table, look down at your plate you got everything you wanna eat, but you get up and you shake your head and yuh say I cant eat and you cant sleep what's a matter? The blues has got you, it wanna talk to you, here's what you gotta tell it....

'Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?

I'm dying alright, good morning how are you?

I lay down last night turning from side to side,

I was not sick, but I was just dissatisfied

Blues walking round my bed

I would eat my breakfast but the blues was all round my head.'

Catharsis alone places the Blues at the psychoanalytical end of psychotherapies- the performer working through his or her experiences to reach some personal understanding. To some, self-realisation and confessional is enough. Lightnin' Hopkins: *' I have had my fun, if I don't get well no more, I'm lying in this hospital, lord I'm going down slow'*. The delta blues of Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Mississippi Fred Macdowell demonstrate the cathartic qualities of the blues par excellence.

'You made me weep and you made me moan, you forced me to leave my happy home, but someday baby, you aint going to worry my mind any more.' Fred Macdowell

'When the train left the station there were two lights on behind, the blue light was my baby and the red light was my mind. All my love's in vain.' Robert Johnson

To be more effective the talking therapies must be cognitive and behavioural. ⁷

Cognitive-behavioural Blues therapy works best when the performer can turn the self-analysis into positive behavioural change, relapse prevention, and recognition and avoidance of risk situations. There is a search for reconciliation and repaired relationships. Guitar Slim describes this: *'Things I used to do, I don't do them no more.....'* Mississippi John Hurt: *'I've got the blues and I can't be satisfied, gonna take the next freight train and ride'*. Brownie McGhee: *'I'm so tired of running around, think I will marry and settle down, this old night life, this old sporting life is killing me'*.

Even in death, the Blues doctor seeks practical support to reassure him that his suffering has been worthwhile and his life had purpose. Blind Lemon Jefferson pleads with the listener: *'There's one kind favour I'll ask of you..... please see that my grave is kept clean'*. St James Infirmary Blues echoes this sentiment: *'I want six crap shooters for pall bearers to carry my box along I want twelve girls from the whore house to sing me my leaving song.'*

Illness blues

There are many cathartic Blues about illness and death. Memphis Minnie in a song of her own personal battle with meningitis sings:

'My companion took me to the doctor, Doctor please tell me my wife's complaint

Doctor look down on me shook his head I'd like to tell you son, but I cant.

He take me down to the City Hospital the clock was striking ten,

I hear my companion say I don't believe I'll see your smiling face again.

Then the nurses all began to stand around me the doctors had done give me out

Every time I would have a potion I would have a foaming at the mouth.

Mmmmm the meningitis killing me..... '

Victoria Spivey likewise is trapped in a hopeless, helpless experience of ineffective healthcare in "Dirty TB blues". Dr Ross, 'Goin' down slow', Champion Jack Dupree, 'Bad health blues' and others sang about the appalling toll of tuberculosis. Bukka White's 'High fever blues' describes his sister's death from hepatitis.⁶

Blues and social justice

The Blues is an expression of anger against shame and humiliation. Protest overrides catharsis in songs such as Billie Holliday's 'Strange Fruit', BB King's 'Why I sing the blues' and Big Bill Broonzy's anthem, 'Black, Brown and White':

*'I was in a place last night, they was having fun,
They were drinkin' whisky straight, but they would not give me none.
Two men workin' in a field one day, this is what it meant,
They paid the white a dollar an hour paid the black man fifty cents.
I helped build this country and I fought for it too,
If you're black you gotta work for a living, is that the same for you?
Said if you're white you're all right, if you's brown stick around,
But if you's black, oh brother, get back, get back, get back.'*

The Blues and public health

The Blues doctors criticized well-intentioned public health programmes, misplaced in the context of overwhelming economic inequality. Champion Jack Dupree's Warehouseman Blues said give us jobs and money not grapefruit juice to protect us from scurvy. Pellagra killed 7000 poor blacks (and whites) in the southern states in the early 1900s. Sonny Terry and Brownie Mcghee's song, 'Cornbread, peas and black molasses' hails from a prison holler alluding to Goldberger's experiments on prisoners, designed to determine the dietary deficiency causing pellagra. Goldberger proposed yeast extract supplements to

combat the disease and arranged distribution via the Red Cross. Poor blacks felt stigmatized by handouts and found themselves, press ganged into slave labour when they queued for help at the Red Cross stations.⁶ Leadbelly sang about that in 'Red Cross Store Blues'. Goldberger's courageous research was eventually rewarded when mass supplementation of cornbread flour with yeast extract eradicated pellagra.⁸

Blues Medicine

As the Blues doctors became more confident, medicine became metaphor, the Blues an illness, Blues music, the treatment. Charles Brown sings 'the Blues is a virus', Professor Longhair has the rockin' pneumonia. Piano Red tells us why he is 'Dr Feelgood'. The UK Doctor Feelgood take us down to the surgery for a shot of R'n'B. Clara Smith gives us the full treatment through a Porter Grainger song:

'All day long I worry, all night long I am blue,

I feel so awefully lonesome I just dont know what to do

I am asking you doctor to see if you can find something in your satchel to pacify my mind

So doctor, doctor write me a prescription for the blues, them worried blues

'I went to the Egyptian, and the hoodoo doctors too,

They shook their heads and told me there's nothing that I could do,

So doctor, doctor write me a prescription for the blues, them worried blues

'Well just like a little baby all day long I cry,

*Doctor, if you cant cure me I will just as soon to die,
So why not give me something poison, doctor won't you please?
And I'll sign a piece of paper that I died of a heart disease.
Doctor, doctor write me a prescription for the blues'*

Ray Charles pleads for appropriate care for his mental health:

*'My doctor says I need rest, all I need is her tenderness
He put me on a critical list but all I need is her sweet kiss
He gave me a medicated potion, but that don't improve my emotion,

I don't need no doctor, I know what's ailing me,
All I need is my lady, because I'm down in misery.'*

Conclusions

So what should the international health services learn from the Blues experience?

First, appropriateness of services. Ray Charles appeals for more sensitive recognition and diagnosis of mental ill health and for treatments which fit the problems. In the 1970s a medical journal advertisement proclaimed 'you cant change her environment, but you can change her mood with Serenid' extolling doctors to prescribe a mind altering benzodiazepine rather than try to change the environment that altered her mind in the first place. (fig 7)

Massive prescribing of psychotropics ⁹ still suggests tacit acceptance of Medicine's legalized drug-pedaling as social control. Citizens advice bureaux services in general practice are beginning to show more appropriate responses to social and emotional problems, prescribing debt counselling, welfare rights or employment advice instead of anti-depressants. ¹⁰ The medical school adage was not to drug reactive ('understandable') depression. How often is the patient still receiving the medicated potion that don't improve emotion? ^{11,12}



Figure 31 The ultimate technological fix?

Secondly, the social narrative and protest Blues tell us that health services do not have all the answers. We must advocate better social and economic policies to achieve better health and reduce inequalities. ¹³

Thirdly, the Medicine Showmen teach us that it was their powers of suggestion, persuasion and entertainment that made people buy the medicine and feel they were getting better. In health services today we have traded our art for reliance on science. We have not developed our arts into effective communication, we

have not managed placebo, or exercised human empathy. We have not used skilled media operators in music and the arts to help us relate on the level of our patients. Our dependence on technology is failing us.

Fourthly, the Blues could be included in the raft of complementary medicines jockeying for inclusion in respectable treatments formularies. If I devise a randomised trial giving the intervention group a selection of Blues standards their quality of life and mental health states as measured by Euroqol, SF12 or 36 would be greatly enhanced over controls. But such a trial would be unethical, because nobody could be denied the benefits of such therapy.

Artists and music therapists are now accruing their own camp-following of systematic reviewers- producing the inevitable-‘answers are unclear and more research is needed’.^{14,15,16,17} To see the art as the therapy will inevitably obfuscate the value of the art. Seeing the art as a medium through which health services improvement is achieved will serve us better.

As the alternative therapies strive for inclusion, acceptance, legitimation, they might lose their attraction. The Blues therapy is just too good and too important and must be protected from the deadening influence of health service control and medicalisation. Complementary therapy is what the Blues is. You may therefore need to keep paying for your dosage.

Finally, we need to value greater the pursuits and triumphs of our creative people and recognize the health enhancing qualities of non-health service human endeavour. The Blues has been a voice for Black America over more than a century. It has given succour, amusement, elation. It has provided themes which people relate to in sorrow and in joy. It has provided comfort, welfare, happiness. It has afforded dignity and identity to disenfranchised and downtrodden people. It has infected people across the globe.

Medicine has only the power to save life, prevent ill-health, relieve disability-sometimes- and ineffectively, worldwide. It can only restore, or maintain, it cannot uplift, strengthen, fortify. Only the pursuit of culture, the expression of common understanding through the arts, music, communication can enable us to achieve some higher quality of life. The Blues shows us how a single artistic form can help individuals and peoples to achieve higher state of well-being. So doctor, write me a prescription for the Blues.

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