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THE LEGACY OF THE BLUES, by Samuel Charters Calder and Boyars, 1975, hardback (£3.95) and paperback (£1.50)

ERIC HILL

My mother passed on when I was just about eight, I started to learn I was growin' up in a world of hate.

In conjunction with this book the Sonet record company have issued a series of LPs of recent recordings of bluesmen such as Bukka White, Champion Jack Dupree, Big Joe Williams and Lightnin' Hopkins. A total of twelve artists are represented and an LP is devoted to each. In addition there is a sampler record and two records called 'African Journey: a search for the roots of the blues'.

Samuel Charters' book is primarily a collection of biographical studies, and is best appreciated in conjunction with the recorded music. The author, like most writers in this field, is mainly aware of the sociological manifestations of black music, and as a consequence musical values hardly get mentioned. When they do, they're limited to remarks like: "And he was already a brilliant guitarist, with a kind of drumming frailed style; a surging rhythmic background to his dark voice".

Speaking as a musician, I would have welcomed some attempt at integrating Charters' poetical studies of the language and aura of the blues with some discussion of the melodies and rhythms actually sung and played. The author makes the point himself on page 113 that, for a young white, the words don't carry the emotional power that the music does, and although one chapter ('The Blues as Poem') consists of the words of several blues, they have little emotional effect when divorced from the aural experience.

The writing that most potently conveys the nature of blues music is to be found in the biographies of the artists themselves: the description of the life experiences that have gone into creating a blues singer. Quite often, when reading an account of a person's life, especially of someone who has survived with dignity against a background of poverty and racial discrimination, one can feel terribly voyeuristic, but that is never the case here.

The feeling of being in an ethnic minority is described from Charters' (white) point of view as an outsider in a black club on page 151: walk around parts of Bradford or Slough and you'll understand what he means. Every professional musician will recognise the insecurity of trying to get paid for something as intangible as music. This is conveyed most powerfully in a description of Champion Jack Dupree refusing to sing at a students' club until some quarantee of payment was made:

"Our talent is the only thing we got to get our money with, and it's no reason for us to give you our talent unless we get our money for it" (p.130).

The language (dialect) used in the blues is contrasted with the kind of early black poetry which imitated white culture: it wasn't until the first 'race recordings' of the 1920s that this dialect filtered through to the outside world. The differences between a written and an aural tradition, so relevant to the chapter called 'The Language, the Voice', are not discussed, but the chapter nevertheless proves most interesting. As does the book as a whole, if one accepts it as being directed at linguists and sociologists and not at musicians.