

“I Don’t Worry ‘Bout a Thing (‘Cause I Know Nothing Is Gonna Be All Right)”: Locating Mose Allison within the Blues Tradition

by Andrew Scheiber

If you look for Mose Allison in the blues section of any record store or online music service, chances are good you won’t find him. More likely he’ll be where he’s been since 1957, when his first record, *Back Country Suite*, first hit the jazz bins. Despite the downhome reference of that first album’s title, Allison was by the time of that first release already firmly ensconced in the New York jazz scene, contributing his angular, beboppish piano parts to the ensembles of folks like Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, and Phil Woods. In subsequent years, however, Allison would distinguish himself as the author of perhaps the most literate canon of blues-inflected songs this side of Percy Mayfield; and while he remained firmly categorized as a jazz artist, British blues-rockers like the Yardbirds, the Who, and Led Zeppelin’s Robert Plant appropriated Allison standards like “Young Man’s Blues” and “I’m Not Talking” in a fashion parallel to, and indistinguishable from, their treatment of the canons of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and others.

Allison’s career provides a unique opportunity to examine the fluid and contested cultural locations of “jazz” and “blues”—terms that are

often taken for granted but whose definitional boundaries disintegrate under the most casual inspection. I think it’s safe to say that Allison is probably the only musician with a marker on the Mississippi Blues Walk whose first album was largely inspired by Bela Bartok; but that seemingly odd musical disjunction is more apropos than it might appear at first glance.

The details of Allison’s biography, and the provenance of his musical style, are well established via interviews with the man and other sources, but I’m hoping that a brief recap might put into context some of the remarks that follow. Born in Tippo, Mississippi in 1927, Allison absorbed music of all kinds via the jukebox at the family-owned gas station and through a piano-playing father and a dense network of relatives who brought their own musical interests into the house via records and piano rolls. His earliest influences stemmed from a time when the boundaries between jazz, blues, and mainstream popular music were not as defined as they are presently; Allison has named artists as diverse as Albert Ammons, Nat King Cole, Memphis Minnie, Duke Ellington, and Sonny Boy Williamson as primary reference points for his music. He grew up with an intimate working

relationship to the family farm outside of Tippecanoe; Allison wryly told interviewer Stanley Booth that he's probably one of the last of the bluesmen who has actually walked behind the plow mule and picked cotton into the proverbial eleven-foot sack (Booth 1998). But he's also probably one of the few bluesmen with a degree in English and a minor in philosophy of aesthetics from a major university (LSU, from which he graduated in 1953).

A 1955 recording date with singer Marilyn Moore in Galveston earned Allison a New York musical connection—Moore's then-husband Al Cohn; to use one of Allison's own favorite phrases, he "followed his ear" to New York, and before long was playing piano on club and recording dates with Cohn, Bob Brookmeyer, Zoot Sims, and others. In 1957 he showed some of his compositional jottings to pianist George Wallington, who helped Allison get his first recording contract as a leader with Prestige Records. Here's how Allison describes the music that comprised the core of his first record, *Back Country Suite*: "I had been collecting those little pieces over the years. Actually the thing that inspired that was Bela Bartok. At LSU I heard him for the first time, one of his things, the piano suite, 'Hungarian Sketches,' or somethin', just a piano playin' fairly simple tunes. But they were so evocative. That gave me the idea. I said, 'Well, hell, I can do that. With my background, the music I grew up with, I ought to be able to come up with somethin' like that'" (Booth 1998). But it should also be noted that one of these pieces, simply titled "Blues" on the original release, later became iconically known as "Young Man Blues" via its popularization by the Who and other British blues-rockers; and that the record featured a number from one of Allison's blues influences—Mercy Dee Walton's "One Room Country Shack"—in addition to his own compositions.

And here's where the story I want to tell really begins—with the discourse that construes this first Allison record as a "jazz" artifact rather than something else. That first record for Pres-

tige set the pattern for the five that would follow—trio performances, with the distinctive Allison vocal treatment, of blues staples, alternating with instrumental originals characterized by abstract, Monk-like melodic and harmonic turns and ferocious be-boppish improvisation. It's interesting to consider how Allison's path might have unwound differently had he only released the vocal performances on those first six Prestige albums—which included Percy Mayfield's "Lost Mind," Ray Charles's "Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand," Willie Dixon's "Seventh Son," as well as Allison's own certifiable classics "Parchman Farm" (with a debt to Bukka White) and "If You Live."

The management at Prestige must have sensed, however, that Allison's music required a different presentation than that of Monk or some of the other artists that Allison's instrumental stylings evoked. "Back Country Suite," "Local Color," "Creek Bank"—these titles evoked a landscape somewhat distant from the hip Bohemia, at once cool and crazy, that served as the cultural frame for marketing Monk, Mingus, and others to the jazz aficionado. In fact, the cover art for Allison's first two Prestige records is more consistent with the visuals used in the late Fifties and early Sixties to package so-called "folk blues" artists like John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, and Lightnin' Hopkins—though I think it's safe to say that no artist in that marketing category would have produced a song title like "Crepuscular Air." In place of the abstract expressionism or the "portraits of the artist" that typically graced the covers of jazz releases of the day, we see instead rural Southern landscapes and Walker Evans-like images of decaying local or vernacular architecture.

The liner notes to Allison's early releases are perhaps an even more telling indicator of how the relationship (and the divide) between blues and jazz was understood among music aficionados of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The back panel of Allison's first album for Atlantic Records, in 1962, contains the following com-

BACK COUNTRY SUITE
for Piano, Bass and Drums



mentary by prominent jazz critic Nat Hentoff: “Mose has fused the country blues and the modern piano tradition from Nat Cole to Thelonious Monk into a wry and unmistakably personal style” (Hentoff 1962). In Hentoff’s view this “personal style” is marked by a tension (albeit a “complementary” one) between “evocative passages of dissonance” in his instrumental works and “the simplicity of his singing numbers” (Hentoff 1962).

Later that same year, Allison’s second Atlantic album, *Swingin’ Machine*, inspired similar comments from its jacket scribe: “36-year-old Allison has been deeply influenced by such blues singers as Sonny Boy Williamson, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and Percy Mayfield”; “At the same time he was assimilating the country blues sound, Mose was also listening to Louis Armstrong, the boogie-woogie pianists, and Nat King Cole. . . . In recent years he has been interested in the work of Erroll Garner, John Lewis, and Thelonious Monk on piano, Parker’s saxophone, and the trumpet of Dizzy Gillespie” (Hoefler 1962).

At the risk of hanging an extravagant claim on such occasional remarks, it seems to me that the rhetoric of these liner notes goes straight to the central issue I want to elucidate. While I wonder about the coherence of the blues/jazz divide that places Percy Mayfield on one side of

the line and Nat King Cole on the other, there is a consistency to the way that Hentoff, Hoefler, and others portray Allison’s music as drawing on two distinct musical and cultural realms. In commentary on Allison’s music these two realms are typically signified by the terms “blues” (often the more specific term “country blues”) and “jazz,” but this distinction carries some hidden baggage that briefly gets exposed in these remarks in R. D. Harlan’s notes to *The Word from Mose*, released in 1964: “Mose has evolved into a popular artist who has transcended the limits of both jazz and folk music to bring us something different. . . . The chords Mose uses are advanced and in keeping with the modern jazz aspects of Mose’s talents. The subject matter upon which Mose bases his songs is rooted in everyday events which allow the listener to relate to their content, as in folk singing” (Harlan 1964).

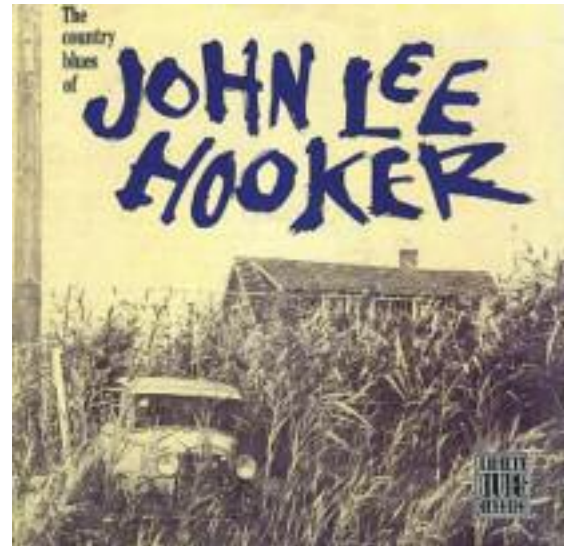
I’m interested here in how seamlessly the term “folk music” can be inserted where other commentators used phrases like “blues” or the more specific “country blues.” The ease of this substitution suggests that the use of “blues” in reference to Allison’s music is meant to signify the vernacular or folkloric elements of his music; contrastively, the accounts of his “jazz” credentials are meant to indicate his alignment with formal and performative “modernisms” of various kinds—not just the advanced rhythmic, tonal, and improvisatory aspects of post-war bebop, but modern Classical music as well. The text accompanying early 1970’s reissues of Allison’s late 1950’s recordings reinforces this theme; Ira Gitler assures us that on these early recordings “Mose shows himself to be a modernist but his roots are also in view at all times” (1972), and Len Lyons insists that despite Allison’s incorporation of ideas from composers like “Bartok, Charles Ives, Scriabin, and Schönberg” his music retains the “basic feeling” of “the ‘country bluesers’ with whom he still identifies” (1975).

Thus “folk music” (which, as we have seen, is encoded in the imputed “country blues” ele-

ments of Allison's oeuvre) and "jazz" are understood as radically different in their cultural locations and functions. In his 1963 book *Negro Folk Music USA*, Harold Courlander, one of the prominent anthropologists and folklorists of the day, represented the issue in terms that almost exactly describe the cleavage between folk roots and jazz fruits that producers, publicists, and reviewers had been trying to negotiate in their treatment of Allison's music, beginning with *Back Country Suite*. Courlander noted in 1963 that across jazz discourse "there is no intimation that jazz is a folk form. . . . It is clear that jazz developed out of folk music, primarily Negro, but in some basic ways it has become completely dissociated from folk music" and while on occasion jazz might "go back to its sources for refreshment and stimulation," "the persistent search for new motifs, themes, sounds, and rhythms; the constant seeking for innovation; and the emphasis on personalities and performers' styles certainly indicate that jazz is much more of a 'pop' or 'art' medium than a folk medium" (1963, 32, 32-33).

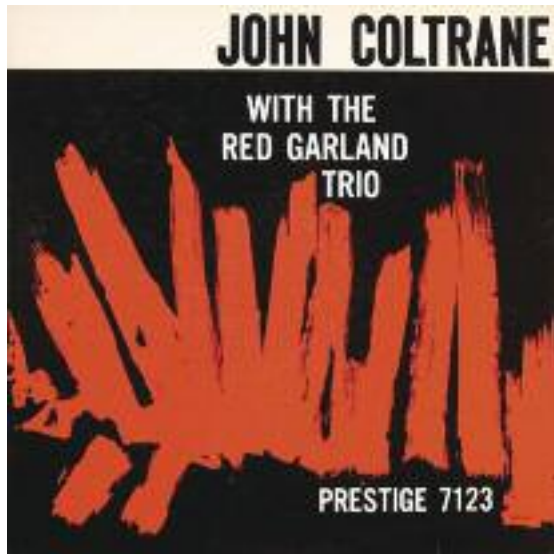
As I've discussed elsewhere, such discourse reflects and reinforces the divergent metaphorical trajectories that are associated with jazz on the one hand and blues on the other. Iconically particularized and personalized in the figure of Charlie "Bird" Parker, jazz is often signified by images of flight, of transcendence through ascent (what Ann Douglas has called "air-mindedness" [1995]) or avant-garde exploration, while blues is often signified in precisely the opposite way, through celebrations of immanence (in the body, in the material struggles of everyday life) that involve descent, return, "getting down" or going "way back."

To put another spin on this divergence: in the discourse I've been citing, blues is manifestly textual (that is, embodied content, especially in terms of lyrics, but also instrumentally, in what Albert Murray refers to as the "blues onomatopoeia" of train-whistle guitar and other evocations of downhome sounds [1976, 118, 166])—which is why in these accounts Allison's



"blues" side is associated not just with his youth and his origins, but with memory more generally. (Speaking of Allison's first album as a leader, Gitler says that "The country blues of his [Allison's] youth have never left him and the experiences connected with that period of his life are vividly etched in his memory. It is a group of musical sketches based on these recollections of childhood experiences that comprises the *Back Country Suite*" [1972].) By contrast jazz is configured as primarily meta-textual, focused on questions of, and innovations upon, expressive form; in contrast to the unconscious absorption that is the usual way of internalizing the blues *habitus*, proficiency in jazz modernism appears to be acquired through conscious effort, including the formal (if usually self-directed) study of music theory and music literature. Where blues is an expression of who one is and where one comes from, jazz emphasizes the idea of the mercurial, self-fashioning, ever-innovating artistic self, ever reaching to transcend the very immanence that the blues embraces, celebrates, and sometimes laments.

What's fascinating to me about all this is how unremarkable it all seems on the one hand, and how odd it seems that the normative complexity of being a human or being an artist requires such special commentary—and, not coincidentally, how artificially stark the con-



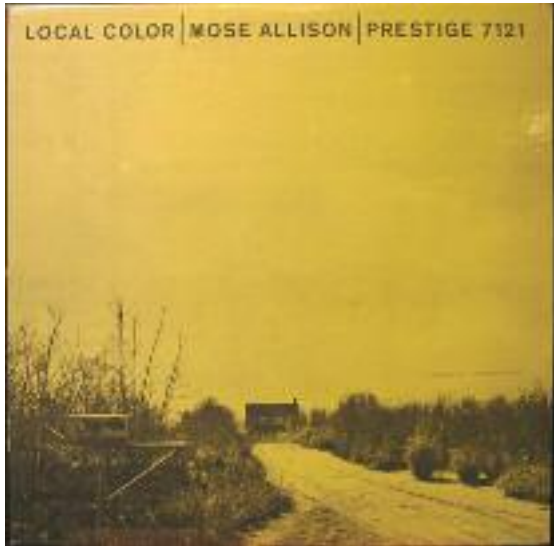
trasts are between blues and jazz expressivity. Of course we all come from a home culture that instantiates in us a basic worldview and set of cultural forms; and of course many of us aspire, explore, and achieve in ways that are both extensions of and departures from the “vernacular” practices and understandings that characterize our upbringing. Yet in accounts of Mose Allison as an artist this polarity between blues origins and jazz apotheosis is treated as a kind of riddle, a set of stylistic facts in need of explanation or resolution—and Allison himself is presented as a uniquely successful instance of the integration of these disparate shades on the cultural spectrum. But being an artist—blues artist or jazz artist or anything in between or around—should not under normal, healthy cultural circumstances present an either-or choice between evoking a collective milieu (a community, a culture, a “folk”) or pursuing a distinctively individuated artistic personality. So how do Allison’s “blues side” and his “jazz side” get rhetorically separated in the way we have seen in the commentary I’ve cited?

The answer—or at least the hypothesis I am about to venture—has to do not so much with Mose Allison’s intentions, aspirations, or achievement as an individual artist (topics on which he can speak—and has spoken—much more authoritatively than I can), but more with

the ideological contexts that have influenced (and continue to influence) the circulation and reception of his music in the wider culture.

Almost to a person, the commentators I’ve cited have heard the supposed “country blues” elements in Allison’s music as something to be treated apologetically in explaining him as an evolving modern jazz artist. (By contrast, British mods and rockers pretty much ignored Allison’s jazz modernism and focused on his blues-form vocal compositions, placing him in the same musical firmament as Sonny Boy Williamson and Muddy Waters.) Ignoring for the moment the question of Allison’s reception on the far side of the pond, I’d like to consider the cultural location of Allison’s music in the period I’ve been discussing—from the appearance of *Back Country Suite* in 1957 up through the mid-1960’s, when his commercial profile as an artist became consolidated.

As we’ve seen, Allison was placed on, and remained on, a precarious boundary—between blues and jazz, between vernacular and professional/learned music traditions. But I’ve raised the question as to why or how this territory becomes configured as a boundary rather than as a continuum. In this context I think it’s interesting to note that Allison’s early career as a recording artist—from 1957 up through the mid-1960’s—almost exactly corresponds to another musical phenomenon, the explosion of interest in vernacular American music in both Bohemian and wider American culture, in the form of the so-called “Folk Revival” of that period. This phenomenon did not emerge out of nowhere; the groundwork for it had been laid in the Popular Front cultural politics of the 1930s, had been tended by passionate scholars of blues, Appalachian, and other regionally and culturally specific communities, and had been sustained and nurtured by race-specific and region-specific broadcast, recording, and live performance networks. In that respect what became popularly recognized as “folk music,” beginning with the Kingston Trio’s hit “Tom Dooley” in 1958, had lived a life more or less



parallel to, but mostly separate from, that of the jazz tradition.

It's also true, as others have noted, that the residual popular front and proletarian sentiments that many casual adherents associated with this music became attached psychologically and strategically to progressive political initiatives, especially the Civil Rights movement, in a way that the largely non-lyric jazz tradition did not. What the folk vogue and the jazz scene had in common were the parallel ways in which they appealed to a specific and powerful taste-making (and taste-chasing) demographic, those who, while in a position to enjoy many of the privileges of postwar affluence, nevertheless chafed under the *ennui* of Eisenhower normalcy and the hovering threat of nuclear annihilation: in other words, those primed both in terms of attitudes and available resources to become consumer-participants in some alternative vision of American culture, a desire which air-minded jazz and roots-minded vernacular music were poised to satisfy, but in different ways. Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good* is for me perhaps the most resonant account of this phenomenon, but in terms of my particular focus here I'd like to note his description of the period in which Allison's career first blossomed (1957 into the early 1960's) as a time "when an alienated, jazz-driven literary

bohemia turned to the simple songs of an old, rural America" (1996, 18).

In Cantwell's version of this history, folk music essentially supplants jazz as the cultural flagship for those seeking passage out of the comfortable yet terrifying normalcy of bourgeois existence; this account essentially narrativizes a discursive divide between vernacular tradition and jazz avant-gardism that marked the scribbles of the musical cognoscenti even before the Kingston Trio went to number one with "Tom Dooley." The folk revival's contribution was to make this divide more manifest, reifying this perceived opposition between folk or rural musical sensibilities and jazz as a genre or a taste-making divide. I would assert that in the years between 1957 and the British Invasion (in which figures across the blues/jazz spectrum, from Allison to Muddy Waters, were re-presented to American audience as proto-rock-'n'-rollers) the newfound fascination with what was then called "folk music" divided the jazz/blues continuum essentially into two marketing and taste-making segments. The principal distinction was between those artists who could be assimilated to the "folk" or "roots" zone of cultural production and marketing and those who could not. Without necessarily diminishing jazz's role as a channel of distinctively Black aesthetics or for the desire of some white Americans for escape from the *ennui* of postwar Babbitry, the "folk revival" created a new mainstream market segment that for a few crucial years ran parallel to, and in competition with, that previously enjoyed by jazz.

Allison, interestingly, fell on the jazz side of this divide—partly, I think, because the stylistic modernism and adventurism of his instrumental compositions and his piano playing (and the strong networks and credentials he had established in the jazz community) made his classification as a folk artist difficult, even had he been willing to lend himself to such a stratagem. Curiously, though, his songs crossed over into what eventually coalesced as a kind of folk/blues/Appalachian nexus of "vernacular" music, being

taken up by artists like Dave Van Ronk and Bonnie Raitt; even the iconic pop-folkies The Kingston Trio eventually recorded a version of “Parchman Farm.” I would theorize that had Allison’s instrument been guitar rather than piano, he might well have fallen on the “folk” side of the musical divide, as did a lot of jazz-inflected guitar players (Lonnie Johnson, Brownie McGhee) who had more in common with Mose’s musical sensibility than they did with Lightnin’ Hopkins and John Lee Hooker, with whom they were usually racked in mainstream record stores.

As if this hypothesis isn’t extravagant enough, in concluding I’d like to propose a broader, deeper one: that the perceived opposition between the folk and jazz elements of Allison’s art symptomatizes something even more fundamental in the American psyche. More than simply representing a musicological conundrum, the rhetoric attempting to locate Allison stylistically and commercially as an artist symptomatizes the tension between two ideologies of authenticity in Cold War America that the mainstream marketing of blues and jazz, respectively, strove to excite and to satisfy. These ideologies of authenticity, while running through postwar American culture, can be traced back much further, at least to the American Romanticism of folks like Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller on the one hand and to early 19th-Century minstrelsy on the other. One is an ideology of individuation (which in its modernist projection evolves into Sartrean existentialism); and running parallel and counter to this is a second ideological impulse, that of identification with some idealized image or conception of “the folk”—which is to say, “the people” as construed in a pre-consumerist (if not pre-industrial) and pre-statist sense—an “anti-modern” impulse that is nevertheless (and paradoxically) one of the symptomatic features of the modern condition and Modernist aesthetics. As Robert Cantwell puts it, this impulse, especially as expressed through the production and reception of “folk music,” con-

stitutes in the modern and postmodern eras “a recovery of self” that is “at the same time . . . a revolution against the very forces that constitute the self” (1996, 40).

In fact these are two different expressions of the same cultural phenomenon—the search on the part of some denizens of mainstream culture for an alterity, whether it takes the form of an individual exploration of harmonic or geographic territory or of lending oneself in solidarity to a world-historical struggle for justice and mutual understanding. In the case of jazz, it is the existential freedom of flight and movement that the Beats read into and out of its high-flying experimentation and restlessness; and in the case of blues and folk music, this alterity was sought in another form of “authenticity”—in a cultural Otherness of some sort, whether it be marginalized minority communities or some idealized version of “the folk” from which the modern (and now postmodern) subject finds himself or herself estranged, and with whom that subject seeks to identify. Thus air-mindedness and the thirst to dig for roots represent apposite responses to the same condition—and, as can be inferred, differing ways in which these desires for alterity can be shaped, channeled, and satisfied through the rendering of music or other cultural assets into a particular kind of commodity.

I wonder what Mose himself, with his minor in the philosophy of aesthetics from LSU, would wonder about such remarks—probably something pithy, like “Your mind is on vacation / But your mouth is working overtime.” But I do think it’s interesting that both his official website, *MoseAllison.com*, and his recently dedicated marker on the Mississippi Blues Trail begin by introducing him without adjective, as a “pianist, vocalist, and songwriter” (Mississippi Blues Commission 2012), noting only in further paragraphs his blues influences and his career as a jazz performer. As his website announces that he has recently (at age 86) retired from performing, I think it’s safe to say that he is ending as he began, with the blues and jazz elements of

his reputation held in uneasy but unapologetic suspension. Still answering our paradoxical desires as Americans and consumers, he is a true original who defies categories; and we all want to be in his camp. ▲▼▲

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