

MYTHS AND FALSEHOODS

D. Thomas Moon Interviews Kip Lornell

Ethnomusicologists like Kip Lornell, who specialise in blues and other related musical genres, sometimes play an important role in providing analytic depth to potted blues histories, some of which recycle old myths, misguided ideas, and flat-out falsehoods. Considering the volume of books and articles written by fans and collectors from no particular academic discipline, it is not surprising that some blues 'myths' are still with us in some form today.

I asked Kip to address some popular myths about blues origins and evolution while also inquiring about the fascinating long-awaited collaboration between researchers Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick: 'The Blues Come to Texas: Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick's Unfinished Book'.

The publication presents primary source material gathered by the pair from 1959 until the mid 1970s. Kip Lornell and respected writer and photographer Alan Govenar worked together to contextualise and document the existing manuscript for publication by Texas A&M University Press.

Let's begin by talking about Oliver and McCormick's book. What should readers know about it?

I first met Alan Govenar around 1990 when I was working on the Lead Belly biography with Charles Wolfe, 'The Life and Legend of Leadbelly', and came through Dallas as part of my part of the research. We talked about lots of things and Alan pointed me towards a few Lead Belly tidbits that he had gleaned, which I greatly appreciated. We hit it off and stayed in touch over the years and continued to help out each other on small projects since then.

Just after New Year in 2012, Alan approached me about helping him with his work on the Mack McCormick and Paul Oliver Texas blues manuscript. Alan had been working with Paul for a few years, but as Paul's health had declined, it became clear that completing the book was impossible. Alan had tried to involve Mack McCormick but Mack declined because of his own failing health. I had first heard about the manuscript back in 1975.

Intrigued by Alan's proposal, I agreed to meet with him in Dallas during my spring 2012 break from teaching at George Washington University to check it out in person.

After sitting down for a day and examining and digesting the nearly 900 pages in front of us, it quickly became evident to us that the manuscript couldn't be 'finished' *per se*. However, it was abundantly clear that it needed to be published because the manuscript was chock full of previously unseen primary material, much of Mack's interviews from the late 1950s into the 1960s. You can imagine how pleased and surprised we were to read transcripts of interviews with Blind Lemon Jefferson's sister and never before known information about Geechie Wiley, among much other fascinating information!

Because the back-material supporting this very long manuscript consisted of more than 3,000 pages of correspondence, research and field notes, earlier drafts, etc, housed at Documentary Arts (a non-profit

established by Alan in 1985), I needed to be with Alan in person to collaborate on the book. Over the next four years I made six trips to Dallas to work with Alan to get the manuscript into publishable condition. Most of the work consisted of figuring out Paul's truncated footnotes, which often consisted of initials with page numbers and sometimes referred to books in print only in the U.K. or long out-of-print. It became clear that Paul wrote the manuscript because of the 'British-isms' and English spelling. We did some very, very light editing when we spotted obvious spelling errors or typographical errors.

Otherwise 'The Blues Come to Texas: Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick's Unfinished Book' is the manuscript that Paul placed aside around 1974 when the McCormick and Oliver partnership finally became totally unworkable.

Alan and I also contributed two essays: one by Alan about how the book came to be and a co-authored effort to contextualise these two men and this book in blues scholarship. All told, working on the book proved to be one of my most challenging and complex professional endeavours, a statement which I am confident that Alan would agree with. It's in the Texas A & M Press catalogue as a March 2019 publication and I daresay that it's going to be viewed as a major book and, in many ways, the capstone work for these two scholars.

It's interesting to note that neither Oliver nor McCormick were folklorists, *per se*.

Non-academic scholars are really significant, and an important thing. So much really significant research in many kinds of American vernacular music, but blues in particular, was done by people who don't have any formal scholarly or academic training in these fields – whether it's anthropology, folklore or ethnomusicology. That's not necessarily a bad thing. People like Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick uncovered important primary research that would've otherwise been overlooked by academics. We owe them a great deal.

They were out there looking for stuff – looking for musicians, looking for records, looking for information that probably would have been lost. It wasn't really part of the academic discussion. It wasn't until the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that academics became acceptable, particularly in ethnomusicology.

When I was thinking about going back to graduate school to get a PhD in 1978, looking around at ethnomusicology programmes that focus on the U.S., there was only one. And still there's only one, and that's the University of Memphis, which I attended from 1979 until 1983.

All the schools now have an 'Americanist' on their ethnomusicology faculty for their graduate programmes, but if you were going into ethnomusicology in the 1970s, you were expected to go outside of the country and do field work in much the same way an anthropologist did.

Let's move on to some myths. Early researchers frequently placed the beginning of the blues at the era of slavery – secret, coded, underground music. How do you respond to the 'slave origin theory'?

It's interesting that sometime between about 1895 and 1905 – somewhere in the turn of the century – you have the blues form, somewhat codified. We also have jazz as a separate idiom – improvised ragtime music – and what we think of as the beginning of modern gospel music. I believe, too, the suggestion that there was coded language. We still have coded language in 2018, don't we? It was even more important in some ways – more significant and underground during the 1850s and the 1860s, for example. It was a response to the imposition of Jim Crow laws.

However I really think the response to having relative legal and other kinds of freedoms suddenly taken away in the 1890s played a key role here. Freedoms were slowly eroding after the Army left the South to enforce those new laws, and it became part of our legal system – 'separate but equal.' Separate was never equal. It seems to me that it's no coincidence that those three forms became more standardised, part of the vernacular and more widespread by the first decade of the twentieth century.

I remember interviewing an older musician in Tidewater, Virginia in 1976 or so, and he started playing music in the mid to late teens, right after World War One. He said: "You know, I never heard any blues being played around here," after we talked about what the term meant. That speaks perhaps to the isolated nature of the small community in which he lived, his own personal circumstances, and I think it also suggests that what we think of as blues wasn't as widespread as we might think until a bit later – the concept of having blues as a separate form. Blues as an emotional response, perhaps, but not really the way we're talking about it now, not until the early part of the twentieth century.



Courtesy John Tefteller.