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"I'll Be With Him on the Midnight Train to Georgia": The Traveling Woman in 1920s Blues and 1970s R&B

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Following Emancipation, African-American men found new freedom in travel. What had been largely fantasy during slavery was now reality, and for many, a necessity. Men migrated out of the South in droves in search of work, often leaving their female partners behind to care for children or run the household. Travel for African-American women in the first decades of the twentieth century was limited, often an "imagined reality" just out of reach.[1] Many women lived vicariously through the music of women blues singers who in their songs spun stories of female autonomy and freedom of movement. The singers themselves also presented an example of the traveling woman: "Being able to move both North and South, the women *[sic]* blues singer occupied a privileged space: she could speak the desires of rural women to migrate and voice the nostalgic desires of urban women for home, which was both a recognition and a warning that the city was not, in fact, the 'promised land.'"[2]

Like women's blues of the 1920s, female-centered African-American music of the 1970s, notably Gladys Knight and the Pips' 1973 crossover hit "Midnight Train to Georgia," thematically dealt with migration. While many women in the early decades of the century waited at home for their wandering men, women moved with their families to Northern cities in hopes of economic betterment during the Great Migration following World War I.[3] These decades of black migration reveal complex patterns of out-migration from the South, often in cyclical waves as portions of an extended family moved North or West and back again, though with an overall trend towards movement out of the South. It was not until the 1970s that the South experienced a net increase of African-Americans as migration patterns reversed. Black families began to move back to the South, typically joining extended family members still residing there. Many of those moving had not been born in the South but had had childhood experiences there, and as they were familiar with family stories, places, and friends, the South was the obvious choice for relocation.[4] Just as migration patterns reversed between the 1920s and the 1970s, gender identities and implications in "Midnight Train to Georgia" are opposite those in songs sung by blues women in the 1920s, though the traveling theme retains its metaphor of hope and transcendence.

Gladys Knight & the Pips
Courtesy of Motown Records

Travel was a particularly strong theme in blues music of the 1920s: travel via train or one's own two feet, travel to somewhere or away from somewhere. The theme of traveling connected simultaneously to past musical traditions popular during slavery and hope for a better future through the newfound freedom of movement after the Emancipation. During slavery, travel themes in spirituals linked the North with Heaven (as in "Follow the Drinking Gourd"), or for the majority of slaves who could not escape, pointed towards freedom in death (as

in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "The Gospel Train").[5]

The blues maintained the theme of travel, and for men this travel was firmly ingrained in reality. In the 1920s and 1930s, men often had to leave home and become itinerant in their search for work, while women were generally prevented from such travel through familial ties. Travel themes in women's blues provided an escapist fantasy for female listeners while also altering societal ideas about female independence, sexuality, and self-determination. In these songs, women's freedom was not limited to movement; it also stood for sexual autonomy. And indeed, travel and sexual freedom were commonly paired in both women's and men's blues songs, wherein the singer boasts of having lovers in many different cities.[6] As Angela Davis argues, women's blues in the 1920s generated ideological opposition in black consciousness to women's place in society through these themes of agency and travel, thus destabilizing dominant gender politics.[7] In claiming autonomy of movement, blues singers and their female protagonists claimed sexual agency as well.

The impetus for travel tended to fall into two main camps: 1) leaving or searching for a man with whom the protagonist has had a sexual relationship, or 2) returning home to the South after moving North with a man who has subsequently abandoned her. These reasons for travel in women's blues, while they could signify dejection, rejection, or failure on the part of the woman, in reality served to bolster the protagonist's confidence and project movement and agency, in turn "redefin[ing] black womanhood as active, assertive, independent, and sexual."[8]

The desire to return to the South is a long-standing trope in not just blues music, but many genres throughout the mid-twentieth century, including Country-Western and R&B. This theme of returning inevitably indicates other regions that one must leave, positioning the South in relation to the non-South, somewhat at odds with the rest of the country. Tara McPherson discusses this relationality in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*: "if one is to understand the many versions of the South that circulate throughout U.S. history and culture, one has always to see them as fundamentally connected to, and defined in relation to, the non-South."[9] The South and its histories (both the idealized, mythological one and the more realistic one) are inextricably intertwined with the histories of the rest of the country. In other words, the South takes its identity from its relations with the North, the West, or simply the non-South.

Many 1970s songwriters used this historical-geographical opposition as a point of departure for songs about traveling, home, and the tensions between city and rural life. Songs in this genre often depict Southern protagonists, black and white alike, who either specify the city or region they would like to leave or communicate a desire to leave a generic hyper-urban context, juxtaposing tough urban streets with the gentle rural mythology of Southern life.[10] "Everybody's Talkin' at Me," the theme from the hugely influential film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), is a case in point. The protagonist desperately wants to leave the horrors of New York City, "backing off of the Northeast wind" to return to the South, where life is better even during times of strife, where the "sun keeps shining/through the pouring rain."

A major factor in the success of such music is its grounding in Southern nostalgia, a notion mired in social myth, historical stereotyping, and cultural amnesia. Music that embraces this theme of sociocultural nostalgia for the South takes its place in a long line of similar literary tropes, the most prominent being Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer prize-winning epic *Gone with the Wind*. These tropes further cement the notion of an idealized, largely fictional Southern culture. McPherson describes what she calls our "cultural schizophrenia about the South"[11]: on the one hand, the region remains ensconced in marketed images of the Southern Belle and plantation life, full of lazy summer afternoons and mint juleps, compassionate Mammy figures and fried chicken, while on the other hand it is the site of the horrors and violence of slavery and Jim Crow.[12] The South, well aware of its traumatic history, remains "the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry"[13] aimed at capitalizing on America's endless fascination with the "old South." Here McPherson assumes a largely white perspective of Southern nostalgia; Southern nostalgia among African-American musics seems to stem primarily from cultural and familial ties.

"Midnight Train to Georgia" (cont.)

In women's traveling blues, the South often represents a place of promise and hope, a place replete with familial bonds that signifies "home." In "South Bound Blues," the protagonist follows her man to the North, is abandoned, and then takes the train home to Georgia with a definite sense of relief ("goin' back to Georgia folks, I sure ain't comin' back"). As Davis says, "The actual return by train to Georgia described in 'South Bound Blues' can be read as a spiritual identification with the black ethos of the South and the cumulative struggles black people have collectively waged over the centuries."[14] The North here represents an alien, hostile, hyper-urban locale, a place of poverty and isolation, while the South is the site of a communal cultural history bolstered by family ties and familiar places.

The return migration to the South that began in the 1970s included many African Americans "returning" to the South despite not having lived there previously. For them, the South represented a "homeplace" and the center of family history.[15] Many moved to join pre-existing households within their families, households that likely already felt like a second home. The ease of moving "back" to their homeplace was made possible through strong connections with those still living there, friends and extended family whose generosity supported new transplants economically, emotionally, and logistically.[16] The Southern homeplace thus represented a safe haven, a destination for a bright new future built on one's own (nostalgic) ancestral past.

Amid the reverse migration of the early 1970s, Gladys Knight and the Pips recorded "Midnight Train to Georgia," which quickly rose to the top of the charts to become a crossover success still beloved today. The history of "Midnight Train" is unusual: originally conceived as a Country-Western song, it was recorded first on acoustic guitar with white male vocals, then by Cissy Houston as an R&B song with strong Country-Western elements (such as a harmonica playing "Tara's Theme" from Gone With the Wind), and then recorded again by Gladys Knight in an entirely R&B version.

Written in 1972 by Jim Weatherly, a singer-songwriter from Mississippi, "Midnight Train to Georgia" was originally titled "Midnight Plane to Houston." Weatherly was inspired by a trip Farrah Fawcett, his friend Lee Majors's girlfriend at the time, took to visit her family in Texas. Thus, Fawcett and Majors were the protagonists in Weatherly's mind as he conceptualized the song.[17]

After recording the song on his eponymous first album *Weatherly* (1972), Weatherly sent it to Gladys Knight to record; clearly he saw potential in using a different soundscape for it, and R&B might have been an obvious choice for him considering the success of his song "Neither One of Us," recorded by Knight the same year.[18] Initially, the idea of recording his Country-Western pieces in the R&B genre had been surprising to Weatherly: "I never really imagined writing R&B songs. I really thought I was writing country songs. But they heard something in my songs—looking back it was probably the way they had a lot of space between lyrics. I didn't try to fill up everything with words or move everything close together. The songs would breathe, so you were almost waiting for what the next line was, as opposed to the line hitting before you were ready to hear it."[19] According to one interview with Weatherly, before Knight had a chance to cover the piece, producer Sonny Limbo called Weatherly and asked to cut the track with Cissy Houston singing.[20] In a bid to appeal to black audiences (and to radio stations catering to black audiences), Limbo and Weatherly decided to change the title to "Midnight Train to Georgia."[21] Commercially, this was probably an excellent move, considering Georgia's central position in the Southern nostalgia industry. Houston's version came out in 1972, and Knight recorded her version in 1973.[22]

The main characters of "Midnight Plane to Houston" are white, and initially, their genders are switched: the woman leaves LA for home, for "a simpler place and time." The final line of the chorus was "I'd rather live in her world than live without her in mine," rather than the other way around ("I'd rather live in *his* world than live without *him* in mine"). It is the female character who cannot make it in LA, and it is her male companion who follows her. In this version the female character succumbs to "traditional" gender stereotypes in line with mid-century suburban American ideals, as opposed to those depicted in the re-titled version that eventually rose

to the top of the charts. In the culture of these "traditional" ideals, it is not surprising that the woman cannot support herself in the "real world" of LA; her failure only confirms preset gender stereotypes about women who stray from the role of homemaker. When Houston recorded the song, producers wanted to create a "genuine"-sounding performance; therefore, all the pronouns had to be reversed to keep things "honest," a quality Weatherly desired.[23]

The resulting song repositions the man as a failure and effectively emasculates him while granting the woman agency of movement. The weakening of the male character through return travel to the South stands in direct contrast to women's blues repertory, where for women, "movement backward into the African-American historical past [became] movement forward, progressive exploration," and those who made that journey projected courage and independence.[24] In "Midnight Train to Georgia," the man does not seem to be so redeemed. LA is "too much" for him; he needs a "simpler place and time" because he "couldn't make it" in the big city, and he slinks away in the dead of night. The mention of a one-way ticket home in particular signals utter defeat because he gives up independence of movement by selling his car to pay for the fare.

Gladys Knight and The Pips in 1964. Courtesy Michael Ochs Archives.

What little agency the man wields in his return home is overshadowed by his economic situation, while the woman is under no such duress. She elects to follow her love across the country to "his world" of rural Georgia and away from her own.[25] Refusal to stay home and pine away for a man gone traveling is characteristic of songs by blues women such as "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, where instead, the protagonist often sets out to find her lover. "Midnight Train" takes this idea one step further—the woman goes with her man from the beginning—though in this case, the man is returning home and the woman is venturing into to new worlds.

In traveling between the urban and the rural, the song's main characters straddle not only geography, but culture, emotion, and time. The man, moving both forward in his lived time and back towards his Southern past, is thus linked to a "simpler place and time": the "backwards" rural South, which according to McPherson is seemingly suspended in time. The woman experiences a movement backwards in time in another, more general, way: from an over-developed, technologically dense, hyper-urbanity to the slower-paced, almost innocent life of the rural South, which to her may feel alien. Two kinds of nostalgia are in play here: the man's experience, in which he returns to the world of his childhood and the safety of family and friends; and the woman's, whose conceptions of the South are necessarily based on cultural stereotypes and popular ideas of Southern nostalgia.[26]

The mythology of travel virtually requires an internal transformation as the outcome, as any good travel story can attest.[27] Stories of travel in blues literature reveal the protagonist's personal growth and transcendence, while for women blues singers themselves the act of touring around the country fundamentally altered their lives, "challeng[ing] the normal social expectations surrounding female experience."[28] Rainey's "Lost Wandering Blues," for example, describes an emotional and spiritual journey comingled with a physical one, offering myriad possibilities for the outcome.[29] In "Midnight Train to Georgia" as well, the protagonist's travels function as a catalyst for internal transformation. Unlike in the blues, the transformation in "Midnight Train" is not text-based, but rooted in the harmonies: the gospel chord progression grafted onto the descending tetrachordal bass line.

The steady, stepwise descent of the bass correlates with the rhythm of travel, be it the swing of walking, tires rolling over the seams on a concrete highway, or the constant clickety-clack of a train. The cyclic bass line of "Midnight Train" repeats over and over again, moving in stately stepwise fashion down to the fifth degree, which, when harmonized, points the chord progression back to the tonic. Periodically, however, this bass line

interrupts its cycle with a decidedly gospel element: during the verses, every third cycle of the pattern includes a V/V harmony, a gospel "rise" inserted in an otherwise straightforward descending tetrachord.

The "rise" is a semiotic tradition in gospel music that positions the V/V chord as a kind of out of body experience; it is traditionally used to demonstrate how the body might rise up to heaven. The otherworldly destination mimics the rapture and illustrates the travel of the soul from this world to the next. Other gospel influences in Knight's recording, such as the continual call and response and the final improvisatory section, strengthen the V/V's gospel connotations. The presence of such a chord in this song suggests Georgia as a kind of heaven on Earth, adding to the idyllic yet bittersweet mythical quality of the Southern nostalgia that fills Georgia's coffers of cultural history. Its presence also reinforces the theme of train travel, calling to mind the story of the gospel train that carries the soul up to heaven.

Knight's protagonist is an active participant in her own transcendence, engaging in call and response with the Pips and singing improvisatory vocalizations with strength and confidence. During the song's coda, the V/V slips out of the picture completely as Knight improvises over the descending tetrachord with "for love, (I'm) gonna board the midnight train to Georgia" and "I've got to go, I've got to go." In this final section, Knight and the Pips play off of each other as they have done for the entire song, though with Knight's heightened improvisatory style the coda works itself into a celebratory frenzy as the music fades out. Interestingly, the removal of one gospel element (the V/V chord), allows for the insertion of another: vocal improvisations that move towards a general emotional release, a technique that performs ecstasy and rapture.

In the fifty years between the height of women's classic blues and the release of Knight's "Midnight Train to Georgia," African-American migration patterns and gender expectations with respect to travel and movement shifted. Looking at this shift through the lens of African-American female-centered music reveals changes that took place with respect to women's independence, freedom of movement, and self-determination. The traveling woman in the 1920s was a rarity and a fantasy; by the 1970s, a traveling woman was strong and independent. "Midnight Train" not only lends the figure of the traveling woman greater agency and a newfound sense of adventure, it provides a concrete example of a powerful, successful, independent female voice through Knight's performance. Yet the song also maintains its ties to previous iterations of the same theme: freedom of movement and of sexuality, women's autonomy, and, ultimately, transcendence.

Notes

[1] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 66.

[2] Hazel V. Carby, " 'It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical Amerika* 20:4 (1986):16.

[3] John Cromartie and Carol B. Stack, "Reinterpretation of Black Return and Nonreturn Migration to the South 1975-1980," *Geographical Review* 79:3 (July, 1989): 299-301.

[4] Ibid., 300.

[5] Multiple sources examine this trend. See Carby's article in *Radical Amerika* and Davis's chapter "Here Come My Train: Traveling Themes and Women's Blues" in particular.

[6] In Bessie Smith's "Mama's Got the Blues," the protagonist, newly abandoned by her husband, boasts of having nineteen lovers in four other states. For further discussion, see Davis, 75.

[7] Ibid., 67.

[8] Ibid., 75

"Midnight Train to Georgia" (cont.)

[9] Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

[10] I use the term 'hyper-urban' here to denote those "big, bad" (non-Southern) cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc…as opposed to the 'softer,' mythically less threatening urban areas of the South. Much of this idea of Southern cities being laid back, safe, and non-threatening comes from a specifically white consciousness, one that has been picked up by marketing companies, especially those working in the tourism industry.

[11] McPherson, 3. McPherson defines the South in the traditional way: south of the Mason-Dixon line. I would like to add my own parameters as well. For my purposes, the South continues along the southern bank of the Ohio River and extends as far west as eastern Texas.

[12] I place the fictional mammy figure somewhat anachronistically next to Jim Crow to demonstrate how she is used as a symbol for black happiness and contentment that is often superimposed on the political and social denigration of black Southerners.

[13] McPherson, 3.

[14] Davis, 81.

[15] Cromartie and Stack, 301. The authors term this type of "return" the "homeplace migration movement," 306.

[16] Ibid., 306.

[17] Historical and background information taken from a 2008 interview with Jim Weatherly entitled "Ten Questions with Jim Weatherly," published by the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. The interview can be found at http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/200805/jim-weatherly.aspx.

[18] Weatherly and Knight already had a good working relationship by the time he sent her "Midnight Plane to Houston." "Neither One of Us," the first recording on which they combined their talents, rose to number one on the charts in 1973. "Midnight Train" followed later that year, and in 1974 Knight recorded her third Weatherly composition, "Best Thing That Ever Happened To Me." See the Nashville Songwriters interview.

[19] Nashville Songwriters interview.

[20] Ibid. In this interview, Limbo is erroneously called "Sunny Limbs."

[21] Gary James' Interview with Jim Weatherly, undated, found at http://www.classicbands.com/JimWeatherlyInterview.html. The details are slightly different and a bit more vague in James' interview. Also, the idea of a singer named Houston singing "Midnight Plane to Houston" is rather comical in its own right.

[22] Nashville Songwriters interview. Knight was much more enthusiastic about the song after the name change. Weatherly mentions that since the Pips were from Georgia, it was "a natural" for them, and that Knight also "felt more at home with it."

[23] Weatherly uses the word "honest" four times to describe this song and his music in general in the interview by Gary James.

[24] Davis, 81.

[25] We assume the man is from rural Georgia, though in this case even Atlanta might be considered 'quaint' when placed alongside Los Angeles.

[26] Biographically, a third kind of nostalgia exists with respect to the Pips, who perform a yearning for Georgia-as-home while remembering the Georgia of their own childhoods.

[27] All meaningful travel narratives are about self-transformation or transcendence on some level, and even ancient travel stories such as *The Odyssey* still hold enormous cultural influence. A particularly apt example for the place and time under discussion, though largely dealing with white characters, is the retelling of Homer's story in the Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

[28] Davis, 72.

[29] For a nuanced discussion of this song, see Davis, 76-79.