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Urban Blues (Phoenix Books)



Synopsis

Charles Keil examines the expressive role of blues bands and performers and stresses the intense interaction between performer and audience. Profiling bluesmen Bobby Bland and B. B. King, Keil argues that they are symbols for the black community, embodying important attitudes and roles—success, strong egos, and close ties to the community. While writing *Urban Blues* in the mid-1960s, Keil optimistically saw this cultural expression as contributing to the rising tide of raised political consciousness in Afro-America. His new Afterword examines black music in the context of capitalism and black culture in the context of worldwide trends toward diversification. "Enlightening. . . . [Keil] has given a provocative indication of the role of the blues singer as a focal point of ghetto community expression."—John S. Wilson, *New York Times Book Review* "A terribly valuable book and a powerful one. . . . Keil is an original thinker and . . . has offered us a major breakthrough."—Studs Terkel, *Chicago Tribune* "[Urban Blues] expresses authentic concern for people who are coming to realize that their past was . . . the source of meaningful cultural values."—Atlantic "An achievement of the first magnitude. . . . He opens our eyes and introduces a world of amazingly complex musical happening."—Robert Farris Thompson, *Ethnomusicology* "[Keil's] vigorous, aggressive scholarship, lucid style and sparkling analysis stimulate the challenge. Valuable insights come from treating urban blues as artistic communication."—James A. Bonar, *Boston Herald*

Book Information

Series: Phoenix Books

Paperback: 244 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; 0002- edition (March 15, 1992)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226429601

ISBN-13: 978-0226429601

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #969,448 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #7 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Rhythm & Blues #214 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Soul #389 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music >

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Customer Reviews

Charles Keil examines the expressive role of blues bands and performs and stresses the intense interaction between performer and audience.

Charles Keil is professor of American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

This book is a firsthand account of leading blues musicians during their prime in the 1960s. Along with Amiri Baraka's "Blues People," Charlie Keil's "Urban Blues" was a groundbreaking attempt to take black popular music seriously. "Urban Blues" was one of the first music studies based on fieldwork in an American city, and it remains fresh today because it offers a window into the music and lives of BB King, Bobbie "Blue" Bland, Ray Charles, and other musicians who are no longer with us. In my favorite passage, Keil is waiting to interview BB King while Martin Luther King Jr. is giving his "I Have a Dream Speech" on the television set on the tour bus. A timeless classic.

I found Urban Blues to be a thorough, in-depth, and insightful analysis of and commentary upon the Blues idiom: As a musical art form within a social context; as both influencing and being influenced by the social environment; and as a personal expression of each Blues artist. Dr. Keil has immersed himself in the subject by attending numerous musical events, and by talking to and interviewing both Blues artists and laypersons. In short, Dr. Keil has *been there - done that* in order to absorb, first-hand and with direct experience, the ambiance and fine points of the environments about which he writes. He is both an acute observer and an insightful and intelligent assessor of the Blues as a musical experience, and of the social ramifications of this art form. Dr. Keil puts forth many theories and conjectures from his research, but is primarily an observer. He does not impose his conclusions and hypotheses on the reader, but only presents them as possibilities. Having looked at the Blues idiom through Dr. Keil's eyes and the social context within which the Blues has emerged, I feel that I am much the wiser for the experience.

Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* was a first *the first* ethnomusicological account of an American popular music. As such, it announced to the academy that our popular music culture *and*, in particular, our black popular music culture *should be taken seriously and enjoyed unabashedly*. As such, *Urban Blues* stands as an historical touchstone and remains as relevant, accessible, and inviting today as it was in

1966, when it was first published.

After recently rereading this book, I'm impressed with how well Keil's book holds up today. Not only does he provide a good historical outline of ways that urban blues traditions have developed, but he also provides good descriptions of blues scenes from the 1950s and 60s. The interviews are irreplaceable resources and terrific reading. I especially appreciated Keil's description of blues concerts within overseas' tours, as Keil satirically nails the exoticism, primitivism, and other less-than-flattering ideologies that continue to emerge among blues fans even today. Keil's wit complements his good scholarship. His outline of various blues styles is an excellent resource for those who wish to compare styles and gain a sense of artistic distinctiveness. Although some of the analysis, and Keil's tone of writing, doesn't fully hold up with what we've learned about blues in the last 40 years, this book remains a good entry point for those who want an overview of what's come to be called "Chicago Blues." One major issue since Keil first wrote the book is the need to recognize that the "Chicago Style" really started in Memphis and various and sundry points South. Readers who want the bigger story need to check out what was going on outside of the windy city in more detail than what is provided in urban blues. There also are a number of good books on the history of record companies and numerous biographies and autobiographies of blues players that further complement, develop, and occasionally critique Keil's study.

Unfortunately, most people who actually know something about RnR and RnB are too old to look like they do to younger readers who think Buddy Guy is first generation. Most thirtysomethings (or fortysomethings) think rock is rock 'n roll and rock 'n roll is rhythm and blues and rhythm and blues is blues. Today, the actual people who created modern urban blues forms are unknown to young rock revisionists. But they weren't unknown to Charles Keil. He traces and authoritatively compares the various styles of blues, showing that the electric forms that led to rock were as important and significant as the blues music put out in the twenties and thirties. Duh, you say. Well when this book was written, there were no books on the subject of modern (1950s-1960s) blues around. Especially none written for a black or knowledgeable white audience. This is the book that started the black-oriented musical criticism necessary to understand the main tap root to rock 'n roll. Although the first of its kind, it still remains fresh with very little material that would need updating today. When I got my copy in the mid sixties, I stopped everything and read it cover to cover underlining all the important parts. As I say, Urban Blues was the first and still one of the few to get it right. Bedrock.

This is the second most important book that's been written on American popular music. Keil sees blues culture as medicine for the ills of Western Civilization. After introductory chapters on African-American music (in which he makes some remarks on Baraka's Blues People), and blues styles, Keil begins discussing the urban blues, blues played with electric instruments and played in clubs in cities. He has studies of B. B. King and Bobby Blue Bland, plus remarks on many other bluesman. How do they structure a performance? How do they interact with the audience? What are the values upheld in the blues world?

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