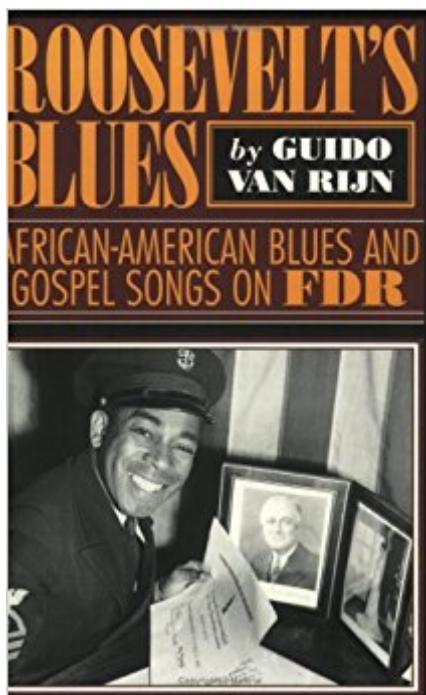


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Roosevelt's Blues: African-American Blues And Gospel Songs On FDR (American Made Music (Paperback))



Synopsis

In Roosevelt's Blues Guido van Rijn documents more than a hundred blues and gospel lyrics that contain direct political comment about FDR. Altogether, they convey the thought, spirit, and history of the African-American population during the Roosevelt era. Included in the book are recorded sermons by Rev. J.M. Gates and lyrics to songs recorded by such notable musicians as Huddie Leadbelly Ledbetter, Big Bill Broonzy, Champion Jack Dupree, Sonny Boy Williamson, Josh White, the Mississippi Sheiks, and many others. Using these sources, which have been neglected by historians, van Rijn documents Roosevelt's vast popularity among blacks.

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Customer Reviews

In blues lyrics of the thirties and forties a reflection of FDR's influence on black America

In Roosevelt's Blues Guido van Rijn documents more than a hundred blues and gospel lyrics that contain direct political comment about FDR. Altogether, they convey the thought, spirit, and history of the African-American population during the Roosevelt era. Included in the book are recorded sermons by Rev. J.M. Gates and lyrics to songs recorded by such notable musicians as Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, Big Bill Broonzy, "Champion" Jack Dupree, Sonny Boy Williamson, Josh White, the Mississippi Sheiks, and many others. Using these sources, which have been neglected by historians, van Rijn documents Roosevelt's vast popularity among blacks.

Very interesting book.

Prior to the long presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, black Americans largely voted Republican. Guido Van Rijn's analyzes blues and gospel lyrics that contained social and political comments to shed light on the question of why Roosevelt became so popular among blacks. *Roosevelt's Blues* is a uniquely fascinating blend of blues lyrics and political history that will appeal to a wide range of readers. The chapters need not be read in sequence; the reader can skip to topics of special interest, like *Got a Job on the WPA*, or *The Scottsboro Boys*, or *Uncle Sam is Calling*. The blues lyrics are entertaining in themselves, but more importantly they provide a deeper, more personal insight into the Great Depression that is often missing from standard accounts. The chapters address key events from 1929-1945 including the hard times of the Hoover days (1929-31), the first relief efforts through the Red Cross stores (1933), the CWA (1934), the bonus payment and the PWA (1936), the WPA projects (1937), the draft (1940), the approach of war (1941), Pearl Harbor (1942), wartime rationing (1943), and FDR's death (1945). The last chapter summarizes the conclusions of Van Rijn's analysis. Van Rijn enhanced his text with numerous lyrics, record labels, and historical photographs. An appendix includes extensive notes, a bibliography, a song index, and a discography. A suggestion to history teachers: To many students the 1920s and 1930s are only vaguely known as those decades bounded by two world wars. The chapters on the Depression years in most standard high school and first year college textbooks are perhaps notable for being somewhat uninteresting. Van Rijn's *Roosevelt's Blues* could enliven classroom discussions, as well as serve as a good example of political and social research. *Roosevelt's Blues* also demonstrates that reading history can prove fascinating and enjoyable.

"It is interesting to speculate on what southern history would have been if the Negro had not been a singing race," reflected Guy B. Johnson in 1934. He did not develop the speculation in his essay "Negro Folk Songs" in the 1934 collection *Culture in the South*. But he noted how a black composer "borrowed from the storehouse of folk blues, shaped up his 'blues hits' and turned them back to the folk with interest. It is all a bit confusing to the folk-song collector who tries to keep origins and paths of diffusion straight, but to the folk it makes no difference. The phonograph and radio blues are rapidly becoming at home in the folk tradition." In the "veritable flood of literature on Negro songs" which was published after World War I, there were several works that noted blues, though generally the emphasis was on ballads and spirituals. Conventional folk-song scholarship, combined with

uncertainty as to the authenticity of blues which had "become the basis for commercial exploitation," resulted in a growing disregard of the idiom at the very time when it was exceptionally revealing of black attitudes and experience. Opportunities for research on popular African-American values were present even in the depths of the depression era. Narratives from black interviewees were gathered in seventeen states, mainly in the South, for the Writers' Unit of the Library of Congress; from these, two thousand "slave narratives" were selected and published. Important as they were, sixty years later one can only regret that complementary narratives of life in the segregated South were not gathered at the same time. Yet some studies of rural black culture based on field research were written by, for example, Carter Woodson, Arthur Raper and Charles S. Johnson. The latter, in particular, cited extracts from the personal narratives of those from whom he gathered data. Quite the most extensive study of blacks between the world wars was undertaken by a thirty-person team led by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. Substantially funded by the Carnegie Foundation, it provided a solid socioeconomic base for black studies and assessed white and black "beliefs," "valuations" and expressed "opinions." Although an unrivaled work, *An American Dilemma* spared a mere eight of its more than fourteen hundred pages for "Negro achievements" in business, literature, sports, dance, theater, popular entertainment and the visual arts. In this disregard for African-American culture it reflected the work of black sociologists E. Franklin Frazier, J. G. St. Clair Drake, Horace Cayton and others who were members of the team. Yet blues was mentioned, even if "Negroes have contributed such popular music forms as ragtime, jazz, the blues, swing and boogie-woogie" was all they had to say on the subject. Song collecting was the province of the Archive of Folk Song of the Library of Congress, and the invaluable location recordings of John A. Lomax, Alan Lomax and other field workers such as Zora Neale Hurston and John W. Work give us insights into the work song, ballad and folk song traditions that survived in the South. A decade later John A. Lomax described the circumstances of his field recordings, in which, however, the blues played little part. A dozen blues were included in the Lomaxes' 1936 collection, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*, which related to the singer's past life. In spite of the fact that many thousands of blues records representing hundreds of individual titles were on general sale in the 1930s, whether in country stores and chain stores, from tailgates or by mail order, they were rarely accorded more than a passing word in the social literature of the period. There was no recognition that they could be significant indicators of the spirit and suffering of the African-American poor, or that blues singers expressed the feelings and attitudes of those who shared their color, class and culture. In order to ascertain the impact on the black community of the depression, the implementation of the New Deal and the involvement of the United States in World War II, Guido

van Rijn's book, *Roosevelt's Blues* analyzes, in depth for the first time, the content of the blues of that period. Some may argue that the blues is not reliable as an indicator, but as noted above, there are few, if any, others. As the author shows, some singers were particularly concerned with social issues, but a significant proportion of all blues and gospel titles were sociopolitical in content or implication. That many of these referred directly to President Roosevelt may seem surprising, but the nature of the presidency in American politics is such as to personify government. Analysts will continue to assess the depth of the crisis, the efficacy of the administration, and the measure of recovery. But postmortem analyses, though revealing and necessary, seldom reflect the perceptions of the times. Echoing Guy B. Johnson, we may find it interesting to speculate on what we would know of black southern feelings and opinions in the interwar years if African-Americans "had not been a [blues] singing race," and had not been recorded for the phonograph, or if Guido van Rijn had not undertaken so rigorously and sympathetically the formidable task of transcribing and analyzing the content of large numbers of those records and placing them so precisely in their historical, social and political contexts. Sometimes with impassiveness and resignation, frequently in anger or frustration, often with irony or scepticism, and always with simplicity and economy of expression, the blues transcribed and explained in this important book open windows on the inner lives and emotions of African-Americans in the depression, giving human dimensions to the raw statistical data of 1930s sociological surveys. Paul Oliver, Oxford Brookes University

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