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**PBS SINGS *THE BLUES*: A HIGH-PROFILE DOCUMENTARY SERIES,  
COMMERCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES, AND MODERN PUBLIC BROADCASTING**

A Dissertation in

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by

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### Abstract

With its federal funding never guaranteed, U.S. public broadcasting has struggled from its formal inception in 1967 to achieve its mission and ideals. Originally conceived as operating independent from commercial interests and thereby serving greater audiences with more diverse programming, public broadcasting increasingly has partnered with companies in order to survive. Martin Scorsese's 2003 documentary series *The Blues* represents an extreme in those partnerships. This dissertation explores *The Blues* as a discursive and political-economic form in the context of the changing nature of public broadcasting. Specifically, it examines discourses and political economic practices associated with the series. The discursive categories analyzed are the auteur, genre/program scheduling, commercial sponsorship, and the blockbuster. Directors working in Hollywood and commercial television each created an episode for the series, and their positioning as auteurs raises questions about connections between public broadcasting and for-profit media. PBS's counterprogramming strategies demonstrate how this series works within and against the scheduling standards of the service and show how its generic structure and construction facilitates its distribution to and exhibition in other venues. Volkswagen's exclusive national sponsorship pushes the boundaries between not-for-profit and commercial interests, and becomes a model for future corporate sponsorships. The blockbuster model illustrates how PBS becomes a conduit for big media's workings, while the service manages to fulfill its expectations. Overall, the series shows an extent of public broadcasting's vulnerability, and without a source of permanent, independent funding, it becomes even more vulnerable to both governmental and commercial interests.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

List of Tables.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter One. Introduction, Series Overview, and Dissertation Overview.....	1
Chapter Two. A Brief Political Overview of U.S. Public Broadcasting: Historical Developments and Current Structure.....	22
Chapter Three. Auteurs and their Personal Visions of <i>The Blues</i> .....	50
Chapter Four. Broadcasting <i>The Blues</i> : Mixing Genre, Scheduling, and PBS Identity.....	86
Chapter Five. Volkswagen, Sponsorship and <i>The Blues</i> .....	129
Chapter Six. PBS, <i>The Blues</i> , and the Documentary Blockbuster Series.....	155
Chapter Seven. Conclusions.....	198
Bibliography.....	208

**List of Tables**

Table One: Series CDs, Their Types, and Their Labels.....	197
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## **CHAPTER ONE: Introduction, Series Overview, and Dissertation Overview**

On a Sunday evening in late September 2003, you turn on your local PBS station and see a delivery man waiting by an elevator and singing, "That spoon, that spoon." Subsequent shots show other people humming or singing the same words. The style of the shots, the editing, and the tone seem odd for this station. At first, you stop and double check: Is this PBS? Then, a red Volkswagen Passat cruises around a city block, and the exchange from the two men inside suggest they seek a parking spot on the crowded street. The song the other people were singing or humming, Willie Dixon's "Spoonful," blasts from the car's stereo. Just before you change the channel because you are convinced you have the wrong one, the announcer says, "Volkswagen proudly sponsors the PBS film series that explores the power of the blues." The Volkswagen logo and its "Drivers wanted" slogan then get superimposed on a blank screen. Without the announcer mentioning PBS, this spot might otherwise be an advertisement on commercial television.

Public television came to the United States long after the dominance of private, commercial interests. In 1967 The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television outlined an opportunity to create an alternative to the commercial system that would fill the gaps left by commercial interests. In its report, the Commission explained this need: "We recognize that commercial television is obliged for the most part to search for the uniformities within the general public, and to apply its skills to satisfy the uniformities it has found. Somehow we must seek out the diversities as well, and meet them, too, with the full body of skills necessary for their satisfaction" (Conant et. al. 13-14).

In the commission's eyes, seeking these diversities required independence from the commercial constraints imposed by profit-driven broadcasting. These constraints reached for uniformity over diversity, for entertainment over knowledge, for lulling audiences over challenging them. The goal of

commercial broadcasting was to create a suitable environment for advertising, not necessarily for a democratic society. The commission believed that public broadcasting's financial independence from advertising and other commercial activities would allow socio-cultural diversities to emerge and thrive. The members suggested a tax on television sets to fund these initiatives, though they also considered "removing restrictions which prevent educational television from accepting advertising" and converting "educational television to some kind of pay television," among others (Conant et. al 71). Overall, the commission stressed a fund independent from government and commercial constraints.

Many of the commission's suggestions became integrated into the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, but with a notable exception: the independent form of funding. Established by the act, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was forced to appeal to the federal government for funding on a regular basis. This decision had profound ramifications for the development and nature of public broadcasting. The second Carnegie Commission on public broadcasting studied the system about ten years into its operation and found "the effects of underfinancing have often been at the root of public broadcasting's other difficulties," not to mention stunting the service's attempts to reach its full potential (94). As a result public broadcasting sought revenues from other areas and even "adopted private television revenue models, such as sponsorship of programs, near-advertisements, and 'strategic partnerships' with private companies" (Noam and Waltermann 8-9). The Volkswagen spot, which resembles the more explicit commercial messages in the automotive manufacturer's "Drivers wanted" campaign, represents just a small component of a relationship between public broadcasting and a 2003 Martin Scorsese-led project titled *The Blues*. This dissertation will explore that relationship.

From its inception, public broadcasting has drawn criticism for its productions and practices. Several of these criticisms cite the service's increasing commercialism as part of the reason for its decline and even downfall. In the 1994 book *Public Television for Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere*, William Hoynes argues that the market has hindered public television's attempts to meet



its operational goals (157). He explains how "insulation from market forces (and the ideology of market television) will be central to formulating strategies for constructing a more democratic public television" (Hoynes 157). In 2003 Hoynes reflects on his earlier book and its findings, and he observes how quickly public broadcasting has shifted to the market model since his book's publication ("PBS Brand" 42). Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting Executive Director Jerold M. Starr explains how rising costs and declining funding have forced PBS toward more commercial practices. He outlines some of these practices and their results:

Five-second underwriting acknowledgements have expanded into 30-second commercials, including pitches on children's programs for junk food and theme parks. There are more co-production deals with commercial partners looking for lucrative back-ends. Such programs typically are designed for export and, consequently, are less local or even national in character (Starr "Alternative View").

In *The Decline and Fall of Public Broadcasting*, David Barsamian complains how PBS offers products such as DVDs, CDs, and books to attract viewers, members, and donations, but the bigger danger in PBS's current practices lies in the reach for larger checkbooks. Barsamian claims "that producers and executives sell programming to generate support from corporations, a major source of income that is euphemistically called 'underwriting'" (31). These sponsorships sometimes extend to the branding and selling of products related to programming, such as home videos and toys from children's shows, which make PBS indistinguishable from commercial networks (Jarvik 31) or at least compromise its mission (Starr 51-55).

Much research about the service criticizes it for other failures and shortcomings, as a quick survey reveals. One common critique from the right highlights the perceived liberal bias of the service's programming (Jarvik 161-181; Barsamian 15). Some find fault with the structure of the service, which prioritizes both the need for stations serving local audiences and maintaining a consistent, national

identity in programming and mission (Balas 2). The idea behind the "public" nature of the service raises questions about programming and mission; while the "public" title facilitates requests for funding, it also raises questions about "whether it ought not to be able to demonstrate a considerably wider audience reach on a more frequent basis" (Rowland 162; also Ouellette). For many, the programming proves just plain boring. Barsamian recounts a partial, somewhat sarcastic listing of the offerings: "a steady stream of cooking shows, Lawrence Welk re-runs, British comedies, studies of insects mating, nightly business reports, 'Antiques Road Show,' and African animals -- without Africans" (11). Some independent producers feel that PBS fails to serve them and their interests in funding their productions and in making their programs available to the public through broadcasting (Bullert 21). Still others point to public broadcasting's constant struggles for money, with federal budgets turning on the whims of Congress (Engelman 159) and pledge drives alienating viewers.

Overall, these critiques sometimes lead to questions such as, "Is PBS Still Necessary?" (McGrath "Is PBS"). Even various book titles proclaim the downfall and failures of public broadcasting. The subtitle of James Ledbetter's *Made Possible By...* gets right to the point with *The Death of Public Broadcasting in The United States*. Writing from the perspective of an independent media representative, David Barsamian allows little optimism with *The Decline and Fall of Public Broadcasting*. Laurie Ouellette describes how public broadcasting falls short for the public in *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the American People*. James Day's history proves one of the more optimistic titles with his use of present tense (rather than past tense -- signifying "already dead") with *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Broadcasting*.

Despite its initial non-commercial intentions, public broadcasting has adopted many of the practices and much of the mindset of commercial broadcasting. Since the service qualifies as a not-for-profit institution, it must follow those regulations, so it also must adapt those commercial activities within those rules. Many of the commercial activities the service engages in center around PBS

programming. While children's shows such as *Sesame Street* and *Arthur* feature corporate partnerships, special programming such as short-run documentary or fiction series also offers a particular draw for corporations.

One example that pushes these boundaries between public service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting is *The Blues*. Arguably, in fact, the series is indicative of the contradictory forces that collide as public broadcasting attempts to balance its unique mission with its funding realities. The following section offers some basic context of *The Blues*. Understanding more about *The Blues* -- including why it is representative of the tensions of public broadcasting -- requires some comparison with an earlier, more "PBS-like," and better-known PBS music documentary series, Ken Burns' *Jazz* (2001).

### **Series Contexts: *Jazz* and *The Blues***

Two of the most high-profile U.S. public television programs about music are Martin Scorsese's *The Blues* (2003) and Ken Burns' *Jazz* (2001). For better or for worse, Burns' *Jazz* set a precedent for Scorsese's *The Blues*, and the comparisons are almost inevitable. Both series share multiple features. Both series focus on a music genre's history. Both documentary series include multiple episodes with extensive archival materials and various expert interviews. Both series debuted their respective seasons. Both series feature extensive Web sites and numerous multimedia materials such as DVDs and VHS tapes, a book, and CDs. Sony and Universal distribute the CDs for both series. Both big-name directors drew major automotive manufacturers as sponsors.

However, *The Blues* was also in many important ways not *Jazz*, just as the blues as a musical form is not jazz. This simple fact provides much of the interest in -- and much of the critique of -- Scorsese's executive-produced series. As the earlier aired, critically acclaimed triumph, *Jazz* cast a prominent shadow in popular discourse about *The Blues*. Several popular media reviewers, in fact,

compared *The Blues* and *Jazz* in order to explain the complexities and shortcomings of the former in favor of the latter. This critical discourse -- in comparing the two documentary series -- foreshadows many of the discursive and contextual dilemmas of *The Blues* upon which this dissertation focuses.

Many reviewers concluded that *The Blues* lacked while *Jazz* delivered. Mike McDaniel of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote, "Those looking for what Ken Burns did in his multipart PBS series *Jazz* will not find it here" (9). *Christian Science Monitor* writer Gloria Goodale noted how unlike *Jazz*, *The Blues* is neither "chronological" nor "comprehensive" (18). A *Chicago Tribune* review read, "[A]nybody who turns to this seven-night documentary series expecting a chronological, diligently annotated, Ken Burns-style history is in for a surprise" ("PBS Sings" 27). Richard Cromelin of the *Los Angeles Times* offered the most scathing critique as he upheld the *Jazz* standard: "Many viewers -- especially a PBS audience primed on Burns' clear, linear expositions -- will likely be expecting 'The Blues' to fill that void. Those folks will be singing the blues" (E32). Cromelin even wished Burns did have a hand in the series: "Right now, the sound of 'Ken Burns' Blues' has a pretty nice ring" (E32).

But others compared the latter series favorably to the Burns' precedent. Joel Selvin of the *San Francisco Chronicle* argued that the musical forms explained the two series' narrative differences: "The blues defy the straightforward narrative approach of Burns' 'Jazz' series, because the music developed distinct regional flavors and styles, feeding off different sets of traditions" (1). *Boston Globe* writer Steve Morse quoted Corey Harris, a guide / host in one episode, who claims Burns' *Jazz*, with its "more academic tone, utilizing talking-head interviews" was "'too ivory tower'" (N1). In this same story, series episode director Charles Burnett was quoted as saying, "'Ken Burns set the mold. There is always a comparison between our series and his [...]. He did a terrific job, but ours is different. It's not one particular vision but seven particular visions" (Morse N1). Even though the series overlooks St. Louis blues, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writer Calvin Wilson still prefers *The Blues* to *Jazz* because the latter fails "to dream about its [jazz's] future. That's something Ken Burns and Wynton Marsalis might want

to think about" (C3).

Other differences are telling, as will be explored. While *Jazz* offers a long chronology of its music history, *The Blues* offers a pastiche or a mosaic. While *Jazz* employs a uniform style across episodes, *The Blues* features seven different ones. While Ken Burns is PBS' documentary superstar maintaining a long association with WETA-TV, Martin Scorsese and the six other directors have virtually no experience with U.S. public broadcasting. While *Jazz* features funding from multiple charitable resources, *The Blues* draws its production funding primarily from two independent production companies. Further, while Ken Burns possesses a strong reputation for his cultural history documentaries, Martin Scorsese's reputation is based on Hollywood fictional films (including *The Departed*, for which he won the Best Director Academy Award, post-*The Blues*).

Overall, these similarities (less so) and differences (more so) suggest something beyond the textual characteristics of these two series, something also about public television. *Jazz* fulfilled the basic expectations of a major PBS project: a big-name director at the helm, a premium spot on the PBS schedule, a major corporate sponsorship, a documentary format, and an informational companion Web site. In many ways *The Blues* fulfills all these aspects as well. But closer inspection into the series' background and the discourses around it reveals something different not just about contrasting documentary and narrative styles, but also something different about the particular historical moment of its original airing context -- public broadcasting -- and how a series like *The Blues* fit into that particular context.

As will be discussed, in some ways *The Blues* symbolizes the failure/decline of the system in the mind of many of the critics who fear the increasing commercialization of PBS, in particular with the "Hollywoodization" of the series, its commercial nature and its agreements with big media and big business. Scorsese and Clint Eastwood (a director for one of the installments) in particular represent the interests of "New Hollywood," given their notoriety for entertainment fiction films, not documentary

ones. The sponsorship of this series attains new extremes in brand exposure; the Volkswagen logo appeared not only on the series, but also on multiple events related to blues outreach and education. The deals with Sony and Universal to distribute the DVDs and CDs, not to mention with HarperCollins to print and distribute the companion book, represent ongoing partnerships between the service and these companies. For some scholars, these associations with popular directors, these agreements with media companies, and these extensive partnerships with sponsors all point to the not-for-profit system's decline, downfall, or failure.

While these argued shortcomings prove important when discussing this series, I also would like to suggest that *The Blues* series represents a peculiar, yet potentially pivotal, moment in public broadcasting history. The peculiarity comes through its tensions of being broadcast and marketed within the public broadcasting system and of being conceived and distributed outside this system as well. While some scholars would perceive these tensions as another failure, I would like to suggest this series offers some ideas for future directions for the service. Since the series' 2003 broadcast, some changes in PBS practices suggest the viability of some of these practices. With these new directions, however, come some limitations and cautions, which I will analyze as well.

### **Series Overview**

A variety of components comprise *The Blues* as a cultural text. Central to it are seven television episodes by seven directors: Scorsese, Wim Wenders, Charles Burnett, Marc Levin, Richard Pearce, Mike Figgis, and Clint Eastwood. Martin Scorsese also served as an executive producer of this series. These episodes originally aired on many U.S. public broadcasting stations for seven consecutive nights from late September/early October, 2003. Following Scorsese's organizational structure for the series, each director addresses a different topic through a different style in his episode. Scorsese explores the Mississippi and West African roots of the music in *Feel Like Going Home*, while Wim Wenders pays

tribute to his three favorite bluesmen: Blind Willie Johnson, Skip James, and J.B. Lenoir in *The Soul of a Man*. Marc Levin attempts to bridge the gap between the Chicago blues of Chess Records and hip hop in *Godfathers and Sons*. Richard Pearce and his camera board the tour buses of Bobby Rush and B.B. King in *The Road to Memphis*. Mike Figgis explores the influences of the blues on two generations of British musicians in *Red White and Blues*, while Charles Burnett places the blues between the sacred and the profane in *Warming by the Devil's Fire*. Finally, Clint Eastwood sits down with other blues and jazz pianists to interview them about the history and their influences and careers in *Piano Blues*.

A variety of multimedia materials accompanied the television episodes, all connected through "The Blues" iconography/branding. Separate from the series episodes is a concert documentary titled *Lightning in a Bottle* (2004). Directed by Antoine Fuqua, this single documentary features a concert performance at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Performers include a combination of blues greats such as David "Honeyboy" Edwards, Robert Cray, Dr. John, and B.B. King and contemporary artists such as Chuck D., Alison Krauss, Bonnie Raitt, and Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith. In addition to the performance, the documentary features interviews and behind-the-scenes preparations. The concert kicked off the Year of the Blues celebration in February 2003, a celebration led by the Blues Foundation and the Experience Music Project, both partners in *The Blues* series.

A radio series aptly titled *The Blues: The Radio Series* also accompanied the series. The thirteen-episode, thirteen-hour series provides the chronological alternative to the more mosaic-like approach of the television series. Hosted by Keb' Mo' (Kevin Moore), the Public Radio International (PRI)-distributed series begins with the blues' origins, looks at the blues queens of the 1920s, the blues of the Great Depression, the blues of the 1970s, and even the future of the blues. The episodes mix interviews, Keb' Mo's comments, song clips, and even full songs. The final episode mentions the television series. The Experience Music Project (the Seattle-based popular music museum), along with

Ben Manilla Productions, produced the project in partnership with WGBH radio. The radio episodes are also available on-line.

DVD and VHS box sets contain extended episodes, along with extra materials such as archival performance access and directors interviews. A variety of CDs accompanies the series as well, including a single "best of," a five-CD deluxe box set, a soundtrack to each episode, and a dozen representative artist collections. The collections include such artists as Eric Clapton, Son House, Bessie Smith, and B.B. King. A total of 25 CDs carry the series logo. Amistad also published a companion book, which brings together more interviews and histories about blues music and its artists.

An extensive Web site at [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) also accompanies *The Blues* series. The site is divided into five major sections: "About the Film Series," "The Songs & The Artists," "Blues Road Trip," "Blues Classroom," and "Partners & Resources." The site accomplishes three purposes: information, promotion, and education. It provides background information about each episode and its director, a discography, and performer biographies. The promotional aspects include mentions of all the ancillary products, links to the PBS online store, and logos for all the affiliating producers and Volkswagen. The educational aspects dominate the site content. The "Blues Road Trip" section features an interactive map of locations known for the blues, such as Chicago and Louisiana. With each city appear articles about the history, the style, and notable songs and musicians. The "Blues Classroom" features an online version of a teacher's guide and CD distributed to about 25,000 high schools around the country. The materials include background essays, lesson plans, viewing guide, song clips, bibliography and additional information, glossary, and credits. The Experience Music Project provided much of the expertise for the site's development.

In addition to the blue "Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues" logo, the Volkswagen name and logo also appear many times throughout the above-listed texts. The American division of the German automotive manufacturer serves as the exclusive national sponsor for the series. Its name, logo, and



sometimes the slogan "Drivers wanted" appears as a visual on the Web site. It receives oral mention throughout the radio series. The series broadcast even featured an extended spot for VW, and another commercial for the series with the VW logo appeared on broadcast and basic cable television.

For the purposes of the following analyses, I will focus on the series broadcast, the multimedia products, the Volkswagen sponsorship, and in part the series Web site. This is not to say that the radio series and *Lightning in a Bottle* bear no importance to the overall blues project, but these other aspects provide the more visible components to aligning *The Blues* with a prototypical PBS documentary series and its associated practices. While the Web site for *Jazz* offers links to various other programs about the genre, no radio companion series accompanies it. Similarly, no concert performance bringing together traditional jazz artists alongside contemporary ones is associated with *Jazz* either. But such elements could possibly be the future of public broadcasting, a future with mixed potential for the service.

### **Series Development and Production History**

As will be argued, the above texts are not only the most visible aspects of the series, they are also complex. However, a short history reveals some of the complexities that went into another aspect of the series as a mediated artifact, its production. The below summary of this production highlights the series' inspiration and development. It demonstrates the variety of the various parties involved with the project. Overall, it helps set the foundation for understanding the following chapters about auteurs, programming, sponsorships, and blockbusters.

The series vision begins with (or at least is discursively constructed as beginning with) Martin Scorsese, who built his reputation on stylized fiction films filled with violence, organized crime, and anti-heroes. Many of his films feature Italian characters and follow religious themes. However, Scorsese also has a long connection to music, both in his fictional films and in his documentary work. Part of his signature as a feature director includes his use of rock music in his films. In *Goodfellas*

(1990) for example, Scorsese uses songs released during or before the film's setting (Reay 49-55). In *The Departed* (2006) he uses music by Irish punk band the Dropkick Murphys to evoke an ethnic feel to his cinematic Boston. Further, he often in his films uses music by the Rolling Stones, who drew their name and inspiration from Chess musician Muddy Waters. Examples include "Jumpin' Jack Flash" in *Mean Streets* (1973); "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," "Heart of Stone," "Long Long While," "Sweet Virginia," and "Can't You Hear Me Knockin'" in *Casino* (1990); and "Let it Loose," "Monkey Man," and "Memo from Turner" in *The Departed*. The Stones' "Gimme Shelter" appears in *The Departed*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*.

Though now more visible after his release of *Shine a Light* (2008), Scorsese also developed a name for himself through documentary, including but not exclusively documentaries about music. He directed several documentaries throughout his career, including *Italianamerican* (1974) and *My Voyage to Italy* (1999). He established himself as a film historian in a four-hour British Film Institute documentary titled *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995). Early in his career he worked as an associate producer on *Medicine Ball Caravan* (1971). In addition to cinema and Italian identity, Scorsese also has worked on or directed several documentaries about music and musicians. He started as a second director and editor in the epic concert film *Woodstock* (1970). Before *The Blues* series and *Shine a Light*, Scorsese paid homage to The Band's final performance at San Francisco's Winterland in *The Last Waltz* (1978). In addition to performance footage and guests such as Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, and Eric Clapton, interviews with the group reveal its influences, careers, failures, and successes. Scorsese, a friend of band member Robbie Robertson, even asked questions on camera. In many ways *The Last Waltz* becomes a fan's concert documentary as Scorsese himself was a fan of the group. The idea of "personal involvement" by the director, as we will see, became a brand characteristic for *The Blues*.

A lesser-known piece involving Scorsese provides the inspiration for what eventually becomes

*The Blues* series. In 1994 British guitarist Eric Clapton recorded an album called *From the Cradle*, which features classic blues covers. Clapton toured to promote the album, and he performed such blues standards as Bessie Smith's "Ain't Nobody's Business" and Elmore James' "It Hurts Me, Too." Bruce Gowers filmed the live footage of Clapton's performances at the Fillmore in San Francisco, and Martin Scorsese conducted and filmed the interviews with Clapton (Russell 59). Archival performances of the blues legends playing get intercut with the Clapton interviews and performances in *Eric Clapton: Nothing But the Blues: An 'In the Spotlight' Special*. The piece aired on public broadcasting on June 19, 1995, and limited VHS tapes of the performance were made available only to promoters. Just bootlegs and YouTube copies exist for non-promoters; nothing commercially distributed or approved was made available to general audiences.

In his director's interview for *Feel Like Going Home*, Scorsese describes the earlier production's influence on *The Blues*:

We were all struck by the elemental power and poetry of these juxtapositions -- it seemed like such a simple yet eloquent way of expressing the music's timelessness. It also gave us a way of approaching the history of the blues in cinematic terms ("Director Interview: Martin Scorsese")

From this inspiration Scorsese and Margaret Bodde of Cappa Productions (Scorsese's production company) began work on a single film about the genre. However, series producer Alex Gibney suggested they divide that one film into multiple parts. According to Gibney, "We made a conscious decision early on that this was not going to be an encyclopedic approach to the blues. Our films are going to be personal and impressionistic. We thought that this would be the best agent provocateur to turn people on to the music" (Gettleman F8). As a result Scorsese recruited directors to create one episode in the director's own vision. Scorsese self-described his choices as "I sought out directors with a love for the music and experience, in both features and documentaries, who would make films that

communicate their passion for and their personal connection to the music" (Gettleman F8). A press release dated June 13, 2000, formally announces the project and names some of its major partners, including Margaret Bodde and Scorsese of his Cappa Productions, Gibney and his OFFLINE Entertainment Group, and Jody Patton of Clear Blue Sky Productions. No mention of PBS, CPB, or other public broadcasting entities appears in the press release.

About one month later, in July 2000, PBS announced during a summer TV critics press tour its partnership with Scorsese "to exec produce a multipart documentary series on the evolution of that music form" (Garron "Scorsese"). The release projected an air date of fall 2001, and it also mentions, "PBS will air Ken Burns' series on jazz next season" (Garron "Scorsese"). According to Current's Pipeline dated November 13, 2000, the line-up of directors included "a premiere group of feature film directors" such as Michael Apted, Charles Burnett, Spike Lee, Marc Levin, and Wim Wenders ("Pipeline 2001"). At that time the series was slated for six, 60-minute episodes. By Current's 2002 Pipeline, dated October 6 and 21, 2001, the project had expanded to include "outreach activities targeted at high school and college audiences" and a "companion book, CD box set, DVD, [and] Web site" ("Pipeline 2002"). Mike Figgis had replaced Michael Apted, and a sixth director still needed to be named.

By this point the major funders were in place: Clear Blue Sky Productions (soon to be Vulcan Productions) and Road Movies, both independent production companies. The original \$6 million budget later expanded to \$8 million and a final production and advertising budget of \$14 million, and each company fronted half the money for production costs. Road Movies was founded by Wim Wenders in 1976, and it previously had distributed Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), which once aired on PBS. Vulcan was founded by Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen, whose philanthropic efforts span from neuroscience and technology to cultural preservation and the arts. According to the company's Web site, Vulcan Productions "is an independent production company founded to originate,

develop and finance creatively driven, inventive motion picture and documentary projects" ("Vulcan Productions"). It already had funded Michael Apter's *Inspirations* (1997) and *Me and Isaac Newton* (1999).

About half the budget went into production costs. Each director received approximately \$1 million to work with, and each one was encouraged to shoot on digital video instead of film. Scorsese also wanted each director to shoot on location as much as possible. By early 2002 Spike Lee had pulled from the project due to a scheduling conflict -- he was working with HBO at the time. Lee had been slated to direct the series' first episode, and Scorsese stepped in to replace him. The six directors for the series by this point included Scorsese, Wenders, Figgis, Burnett, Levin, and Richard Pearce. Scorsese had met Pearce while working on *Woodstock*.

Clear Blue Sky Productions and Road Movies announced April 15, 2002, that Hollywood actor and director Clint Eastwood would become the seventh and final participant for the series. The focus for his episode from the start seemed to be the piano and its contribution to blues music. The press release quoted Scorsese as saying, "His [Eastwood's] knowledge and appreciation for blues and jazz are legendary. As a musician, he brings a unique insight. I'm sure his film will be extraordinary" ("Clint Eastwood to Helm Doc").

While the series' association with public broadcasting was established early in the production process, its affiliation with a specific station did not become public until July 2002. At that time WGBH-Boston, one of the primary producing stations within the system, announced it would present the program. The announcement also noted an additional source of funding: "the CPB-PBS Challenge Fund, which supports high-profile primetime series" ("WGBH Boston / CBSP to Present"). With this press release the series placement on the fall 2003 broadcast schedule was finalized.

The following months of 2002 and early 2003 saw several related events. On September 5, 2002, the Senate passed the proclamation for the Year of the Blues. The proclamation called for

initiatives and festivities to recognize, celebrate, and preserve blues music and its legendary musicians. Also confirmed by December 2002 was Sony Music and Universal Music Enterprises partnering to release the companion CDs to the series. According to *Billboard Magazine*, which first suggested the partnership in November 2001, the two companies "will share their blues catalogs and all associated costs" (Conniff "Sony, Universal"). The editorial control for the song selections, though, remained with the directors, who would choose the songs for the soundtracks to their own episodes, assuming permission from the copyright holders. The *Lightning in a Bottle* concert occurred and was filmed on February 7, 2003, to help kick off the Year of the Blues festivities.

By 2003 hype was building around the series and its broadcast on PBS stations. The broadcast that is the subject for this analysis occurred with the mainstream programming September 28 through October 4, 2003. Although PBS member stations have more leeway with broadcasting national programming than does commercial network affiliates, 8 p.m. was the strongly suggested airing time for each episode (and many stations, such as WPSX, now WPSU, followed that suggestion). Each episode typically began with a short local underwriting message (in the case of WPSX, it was a spot for Horizon Wood Products), the extended spot for Volkswagen described at the beginning of this chapter, and the "Viewers Like You" announcement. Martin Scorsese then appears for about a minute, and he says a few words about each episode and its director. The episodes ran their lengths short of the two-hour time blocks, and WPSX and other stations filled the remaining time with other, blues-related programming, such as interviews or older music documentaries and specials.

The materials associated with the series were released close to the series' broadcast dates. Amistad released the book on September 16, 2003. In a move different from the dominant media practices at that time, the DVD set, with all seven episodes collected, was released for purchase on October 14, 2003, a week after the official broadcast ended. Individual episodes became available in May 2004, with *The Road to Memphis*, *Godfathers and Sons*, and *Red, White, and Blues* on May 4 and

*Feel Like Going Home*, *The Soul of a Man*, *Warming by the Devil's Fire*, and *Piano Blues* on May 11. The CD sets were released in stores on September 9, 2003. Also, according to an article in *Crain's New York Business*, "Sony is working on distribution deals to sell the CDs at places such as Volkswagen dealerships" (Souccar 3). Volkswagen drivers even could call 1-800-DRIVE-VW for a free copy of either the book or the single "best of" CD.

The \$7 million in promotion for the series and for the overall Blues Project proved quite an extensive effort with the combined efforts of WGBH, Vulcan Productions, the Experience Music Project, and public relations firm Dan Klores Communications and Edelman. The results of their efforts proved extensive. According to an article in *PR Week*, "[t]he project received almost 1 billion positive media impressions and have over 1,200 hits in outlets including TV Guide, People, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, and the Today show. The web campaign reached more than 113 million users, and the events helped reach another 2 million" ("Arts, Entertainment"). These impressive results helped the campaign win *PR Week's* Arts, Entertainment, & Media Campaign of the Year 2004.

In addition to the PBS broadcast, the films received non-PBS exposure both domestically and internationally. Even before the broadcast, the films were shown at music festivals throughout the country, including the Chicago Blues Festival, Bumbershoot Music Festival, and New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. The films also got showings at several film festivals, including Full Frame, Toronto, and Sundance. The Sundance screening included a special showing of all seven episodes. Internationally, the films were shown in German movie theaters, on BBC, on Italian television, and even at a film festival on a college campus in Australia. The British, Italian, and Australian distributions all featured their own accompanying Web sites that borrowed content from the PBS site.

Overall, *The Blues* appears to extend beyond the expectations and boundaries of a "normal" PBS documentary series. It features multiple directors, none of whom possess much affiliation with public broadcasting. Its production funding comes from independent companies, and its advertising

budget effectively doubles the overall budget. It becomes part of larger initiatives to call attention to blues music. Yet it still falls within the boundaries of the service through its broadcast on PBS, through its sponsorship partnerships, and through its multimedia options.

With the above background in mind, this series raises some key questions about the increasing commercialization of the service and how such trends become manifest in its most high-profile offerings. Several of the directors connected with the series work in Hollywood, several others work for major network and cable television, and one brings international connections. These connections to "big name" directors might attract other big names to working with the service, which in turn might bring more exposure for public broadcasting. These connections also bring with them corporate interests, such as through production companies, distribution companies, and potentially other big media companies. For a service established to provide an alternative to commercial interests, how does public broadcasting accommodate multiple directors from the commercial media industry? Do these connections benefit public broadcasting, or do they benefit these directors and their other connections? Do these connections strengthen the service in its missions, or do they make the service even more vulnerable to corporate interests? How are these connections presented in the series, the series' publicity, and the series' merchandising? In what ways does the series, and its surrounding discourses, culturally construct not just the series itself, but also the series' role in public television and even public television itself?

This dissertation will explore *The Blues* as a discursive and political-economic form in the context of the changing nature of public broadcasting. Specifically, it will examine various discourses and political economic practices associated with the series, and how these discourses/practices construct cultural categories often associated with, and arguably revealing about, modern media texts and industries. The discourses involve the series itself, but also the promotional and ancillary discourses that are associated with original broadcast texts. The discursive categories examined by this



project are those of the auteur, genre/program scheduling, commercial sponsorship, and the blockbuster. Such discursive constructs and economic practices, the dissertation will argue, are key to the series and help us to understand the contradictory tensions involved in modern public broadcasting, given its mission and funding realities.

## **Chapter Overview**

In order to contextualize *The Blues* as a series of discursive and economic practices in public broadcasting, Chapter Two explores many of the main debates and issues involved with public broadcasting in the United States, including its historical development and current structure. The developments trace the ideas of educational broadcasting and public broadcasting back to radio, through its preliminary stages during early television, and to its formalizations with the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act. The current structure explains the key groups and their operations within the service and situates this in larger debates about the role and contribution of public broadcasting. This background creates the foundation for considering the auteur, genre/scheduling, sponsorship, and blockbuster practices of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three engages the filmic concept of auteurs by analyzing the discourses of authorship surrounding the series. The series places a strong emphasis on how each episode constructs the personal vision of each director, a supposed blues enthusiast. The different documentaries offer one avenue for these discourses to develop, but DVD extras, Web site information, and other materials allow other avenues for them to develop.

Like many high-profile PBS documentary series, *The Blues* serves as a season opener, but a season opener functions differently on PBS than it does elsewhere. Chapter Four looks at the programming practices of public broadcasting with the series. Drawing on ideas of genre and coherence, it considers the series broadcast on one member station, WPSX in central Pennsylvania, to

analyze how those contexts mold the series as PBS. It also shows where this series differs from more traditional long-form documentary series facilitates its distribution to other venues. Given that this series originated outside of public broadcasting, how does it integrate the series into its own broadcasting practices and maintain its own identity, even though the series brings much publicity along with it? Does that publicity benefit the service, or does it require compromise? If so, does that compromise affect the identity of the service?

Traditional sponsorships provide the most visible commercial practice adopted by PBS, and they draw the most criticism. Historically, these sponsorships began with just a few words, but now they include spots like the one described at the opening of this chapter. Further, these sponsorships extend well beyond the spots into multimedia options and into commercial sectors as well. Chapter Five discusses the importance of sponsorship, particularly given the ongoing climate of defunding threats to public broadcasting. The success and extent of Volkswagen's sponsorship of the series raises several questions. Is the line for commercial sponsorship going too far? At what point does public broadcasting's mission end and corporate initiatives begin? Despite its mission, is public broadcasting becoming another commercial outlet? Overall, by analyzing the various sponsorship discourses including the underwriting spots themselves, the chapter looks at how Volkswagen's sponsorship of *The Blues* sets a precedent for major corporate sponsorships to follow, and it considers the role of these sponsorships within the mission of public broadcasting.

This series represents a type of blockbuster series for public broadcasting. With this in mind, Chapter Six develops a framework for analyzing blockbusters. Blockbusters in Hollywood attempt to maximize profits through diversities in ownership within one company. These blockbusters represent not only specific kinds of texts, but also particular marketing strategies, all with the attempt to engage audiences into seeing the movie and buying its related products. How is a blockbuster on public broadcasting similar to a Hollywood one? How is it different? If a blockbuster in Hollywood attempts

to maximize profits, what purpose does a blockbuster on public broadcasting serve? Are its intentions commercially motivated? Do the partnerships with other commercial companies create conflicts with the service's directives? Do the other companies benefit from these relationships at the expense of the service? In particular, the chapter interrogates ideas of characteristics of blockbuster texts, merchandising such as the series CDs, and promotional Web sites and how these elements challenge not only documentary series and big media, but also documentary series on PBS. *The Blues* pushes the boundaries of the blockbuster, particularly for public broadcasting, as this chapter will explore.

Chapter Seven, the conclusion, reviews the series' place within auteur theory, genre and programming, sponsorship, and blockbusters. It considers briefly how this series represents another "failure" or "decline" for the service. It ends with suggestions for future research, as this project only begins to address the complexities of this series and of the economic, cultural and political implications of documentaries on public broadcasting.

## **CHAPTER TWO: A Brief Political Overview of U.S. Public Broadcasting: Historical Developments and Current Structure**

Public broadcasting holds a rather difficult place in the U.S. media market. Unlike countries such as England and Sweden, public broadcasting in the United States began formally long after commercial broadcasting established its dominance. Efforts of various figures and organizations since the 1920s into the 1960s ensured that the concept of public broadcasting remained alive, though barely, within the strongly commercial system. Educational Television provided an early model for the establishment of public broadcasting, implemented with the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act. However, instead of protecting the fledging service in order to demonstrate its value to the market and the U.S. public, the act denied a stable foundation for it. The service has been trying to retain footing on a crumbling foundation ever since, and its maintaining of a degree of financial balance informs much of its current practices. The result is a complex, complicated history and operation systems of public broadcasting. The goal of this chapter is to unravel some of these complexities through a brief political history of public broadcasting's developments and through an explanation of the service's involved parties and its structure, with particular focus on aspects of programming and funding. This background will help inform some of the thinking as to why public broadcasting adopted the models from commercial broadcasting and how it adapted those models according to its own identity and goals. These practices then help in understanding *The Blues* as a PBS series and as a conduit through which commercial companies operate as well.

## **Developments / History**

The ideas behind, the debates around, and even the prototypical implications of public broadcasting began long before its formalization with the 1967 act. They originated in the early days of radio, before the growth and dominance of the NBC and CBS radio networks. One place to see these origins is in some of the offered programming in the 1920s and 1930s. Early educational broadcasting was seen as "using radio as a teacher" (Sterling and Kittross 122). In 1929 Cincinnati's WLW began airing the Ohio School of the Air, while in 1931 Madison's WHA began airing Wisconsin School of the Air, with the latter offering programming to be used in classrooms (Sterling and Kittross 122). Even before its state's version of School of the Air, WHA broadcast educational and informational programming directed to its rural listeners. Reflecting an extension and outreach orientation, these programs and others like them leaned toward modern change. For example, WHA's programming "provided scientific farming methods and the acquisition of new technology over traditional techniques and equipment" (Vaillant 65). Even into the 1940s, "[m]uch of the programming was limited to instructional and training purposes" (Engelman 86).

While early programming shows some of the origins, other questions center on station operators, vested parties, and "public" perceptions. Radio station license holders (all AM in these early years of course) included not only commercial operators, but also a high school, church-associated groups and universities, the latter including the above-mentioned WHA, licensed to the University of Wisconsin (Sterling and Kittross 175). Other groups that got involved in educational broadcasting included civic, labor, academic, and religious organizations, among others. However, an attitude of elitism may have characterized many of these radio operations,

thus problematizing how "public" they were in spirit. According to McChesney, both the operators and the vested groups perceived the public as "passive, ignorant, and mostly nonexistent" (McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 4). Instead of the public speaking on its own behalf against the corporatization of broadcasting, other groups donned this mantle of responsibility and did it for them. This period also raised questions about what organizations were best able to serve the public interest. The commercial networks attempted to convince regulators they offered the best resources and means to do so, while other not-for-profit groups strongly disagreed.

The idea of a "public" and its perceived interests provided key motivations behind The Radio Act of 1927. This act set the precedent for subsequent legislation for frequency licenses, frequency assignments, and programming limitations, among others. One assumption behind the act was that the general public had ownership of the air waves and the radio spectrum. Another assumption was that due to overlapping signals and license applications exceeding the number of signals in a given geographic location, the spectrum availability was limited. As such, Congress suggested that certain standards be applied toward assigning and renewing licenses, particularly in "the public interest, convenience, and / or necessity" (Sterling and Kittross 142). Congress failed to specify what these standards should be, however.

Not until the 1930s did the idea of allocating the radio spectrum for educational use begin to circulate more widely. The 1934 Communications Act originally carried an amendment for 25 percent of spectrum space to be reserved for not-for-profit organizations, but the proposal was rejected. More hearings about spectrum allocations occurred during the mid 1930s, and in 1938 the FCC "set aside 25 channels [...] for in-school broadcasting" (Sterling and Kittross 176-177;

also Engelman 33-37). Though a marginal gesture at best, it still proved a step toward the official development of public broadcasting.

The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the rapid development and dissemination of television. While commercial radio made a somewhat smooth transition to the new medium, educational radio struggled to make the move. Frieda Hennock, the first woman appointed to chair the FCC, helped make certain that educational stations and thus educational programming were guaranteed a place on the new medium (see Brinson). As a result of Hennock's and others' efforts, the FCC reserved 242 television stations for educational purposes in 1952, and it refused to put a time limit on when those stations' licenses needed to be allocated. The reservation ensured the growth and development of educational television beyond the 1950s (Sterling and Kittross 328, Day 29).

The growth of educational television, or ETV, was slow at first. After the allocation, the first station -- KUHT / Houston -- began broadcasting in 1953, with the University of Houston as its license holder; it still exists today. However, not all stations were stable: a second, KTHE / Los Angeles, started and folded within a year (Day 34-37). Despite this, it was during this time that many of the stations and entities that were later to be important foundations of the public broadcasting system were created. By 1954 WQED / Pittsburgh began broadcasting (years later it went on to produce *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and *National Geographic* specials). WGBH, still today one of the most prolific producers of public broadcasting programming, started on radio in 1951 and moved to television in 1955 ("WGBH About"). WTTW in Chicago began broadcasting in 1955 with a program titled "Report to the Teachers" ("WTTW -- Our History"). WNET in New York went on the air in 1962, with Edward R. Murrow hosting the debut

("Thirteen's 40th Anniversary"). Another important player in producing and distributing educational television programming was the National Educational Television Center, which served as a locus for exchanging programming produced by educational television stations and for creating its own programming as well (Brooks "National Educational Television Center"). The Center merged with WNET in 1970 (Brooks "National Educational Television Center").

ETV faced several challenges during the 1950s and early 1960s. First, ETV needed money to start and to operate. The Ford Foundation provided much of the seed money throughout the 1950s to help establish some foundations for ETV (Day 31). Second, the sheer novelty of television still drew audiences to commercial programming (Day 34). The period saw immense variety and innovation, with multiple formats including "music, variety, drama and comedy, quiz and other audience-participation shows, newscasts, and special events" (Sterling and Kittross 303). In addition to running classical Hollywood films, stations broadcast anthology dramas (Sterling and Kittross 402). Third, the political climate, particularly with its anti-Communist and anti-liberal leanings, made ETV an easy target for criticism and skepticism (Day 34-35). A final problem was technological. Frequency allocations in the UHF range, appearing in the upper end of the TV spectrum that most ETV stations were broadcast, created problems in reaching audiences as many sets at the time did not have the technology to translate the signals (Day 35). Legislation requiring manufacturers to make televisions that translate both VHF and UHF signals helped that problem. Even so, UHF stations were often inferior in signal quality to VHF stations, the latter being generally allocated to commercial licensees.

Questions about purpose and audience also emerged during this early growth period of educational television. About 50 ETV stations were on the air by 1960, and scholars had already



begun raising these questions. Foreshadowing criticisms of public broadcasting that continue to this day, at a Western Speech Association conference, Oregon State College professor Harold M. Livingston called for some evaluation and clarification of ETV and its purpose. He said, "If our new ETV stations hide behind the philosophy of general cultural programming, without defining and meeting specific community needs, these stations will eventually go the way of the educational radio station on the AM band" (Livingston 149). He follows his statement with three key questions for station owners and operators to consider in order to survive and thrive in the commercial markets:

What are the specific needs that an education station can meet in the community?

Having defined these needs by sound research methods, which needs can be met and met well with the limits of budget and staff? How can station effectiveness be defined and defended in terms of specific programming to limited audiences?

(Livingston 150)

The prescient questions followed ETV throughout the 1960s. By 1967, more than 140 ETV stations were in operation (Breitenfeld 35). These stations fell into four key types of operators: school stations, state stations, university stations, and community stations. All four types faced financial challenges alongside questions about the nature of their programming and their audiences (Breitenfeld 49).

While ETV stations struggled, commercial broadcasting dominated in the 1950s. Programming such as serial dramas, variety / comedy shows, and even news programs adapted quickly to the emerging new medium, and advertisers quickly found ways to maximize profits from the programming. Many of these shows used a sponsorship model of promotion, wherein

an advertiser paid for company and product mentions throughout the program. The American Tobacco Company's Lucky Strike cigarettes accompanied several of the features on the music-variety show *Your Hit Parade*, including the "Lucky Strike Extra" song performance, the Lucky Strike Orchestra, the opening credits plug, and the regular performer endorsement (Burns 139-144). Program content required adjustments to accommodate sponsor's wishes. Andersen notes, "If story lines could not be changed according to the wishes of the sponsors, they did not remain on the air. Sponsors succeeded in discontinuing the programs now considered to represent the 'golden age' of television," such as the Broadway-influenced teleplays written by such talents as Paddy Chayefsky (14). However, the sponsorship system gave way to the more economically lucrative spot advertising system, the latter involving multiple advertisers per program. Stole analyzes how networks realized early that the sponsorship system of promotion actually hindered growth and profits through her focus on *The Kate Smith Hour*. With this realization, networks began producing their own shows and then selling air time to the advertisers (Stole 552). Even then-NBC President Pat Weaver "promised that contrary to advertiser producer programming, which had attracted its share of critics for its moronic nature, network controlled production would ensure free expression, minority programming, and higher quality" (Stole 552).

The advertiser-driven nature of commercial broadcasting created some assumptions about the relationship between programming and audiences. Networks sold time on their broadcasts for advertisements, but their real product was not time, but audiences. The programming needed to draw enough audiences to justify prices charged to advertisers. Television shows also needed to appeal to the broadest cross-section of population possible, which ruled out certain types of humor, story lines, and formats. The programming needed to be "friendly" to advertisers'

messages in order for audiences to be receptive to the commercial messages. There was thus an incentive to avoid heavy-hitting issues such as the Vietnam War or other politically themed content in order to prevent angering their audiences into switching the channel or, worse, turning off the set altogether.

This narrow range of possible commercial network programming and the dominance of advertising became two of the motivations behind formalizing the ETV system. ETV advocates sought a greater variety of programming that moved beyond entertainment and commercialism and actually informed and even empowered viewers. This empowerment, it was hoped, would help people improve their situations in society and ensure their better participation in democratic processes. Such goals were coupled with the ideas of "public service" discussed in the early days of radio, and how spectrum licensees had an obligation to the public, who actually owned the airwaves. In all, lofty but laudable ideals were at the foundation of the hopes for ETV's future.

In 1966, the Carnegie Commission brought together fifteen people to study and write a report about the current and future operations of educational television. The people included representatives from the arts, higher education, government, and media and other industries. The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television compiled a book-length report that became *Public Television: A Program for Action* (1967). This monograph included analyses, reports, and a proposal on what they called "public television," which they defined as "all that is of human interest and importance which is not at the moment appropriate or available for support by advertising, and which is not arranged for formal instruction" (Conant et. al. 1). The commission took care to distinguish public television from "commercial television [which] seeks to capture the large audience; it relies mainly upon the desire to relax and be entertained" (Conant et al 1).

The Commission made twelve recommendations toward the development and management of a comprehensive public television system that would become an institution of American culture. They conceived this institution as independent from the commercial system because they felt the called-for programming offerings would not work under that system. The suggestions included more money for funding existing stations and increasing the amount of stations, for creating live interconnections of stations at reasonable rates, for improving and expanding facilities, for supporting ways to attract and retain talent, and for supporting technical experimentation. The commission's most emphatic suggestion called for the creation of the Corporation of Public Television, which would become the hub for the new system. The corporation would become "a federally chartered, nonprofit, nongovernmental corporation" (Conant et. al. 5 and 36). The corporation would disburse funds and make programming available, manage two national production centers, support the development of programming and production improvements, support the production of local programs for wider distribution, and support the production of programs primarily for local use. In terms of paying for its suggestions, the commission called for adding a 2-5 percent tax on television sets. The proceeds from that tax then would go into a trust to help future efforts. The suggestion was intended to create a source of stable funding for the proposed system.

These recommendations became the foundation for the 1967 Public Television Broadcasting Act. Written under Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, the act passed quickly and was well supported (Ledbetter 22-23). Johnson's support of the act flowed with policies of his "Great Society," and the explicitly educational purpose of the Act helped to blunt criticism from commercial broadcasters and their lobby association, The National Association of Broadcasters.

However, according to Ledbetter, Johnson also had a pragmatic side that affected the implementation of the Act. He writes, "Johnson, a consummate political realist, never intended the system to be completely independent from his own personal and political goals" (24).

Ledbetter cites several ways in which Johnson revealed his intentions to control. One member of the Carnegie Commission, for example, was J.C. Kellam who worked for Johnson managing his Texas radio station; Kellam's participation on the Commission thus offered the president inside information and connections (Ledbetter 25). In addition, Johnson's act changed the composition and appointments for the Corporation for Public Television board of directors, making all appointments an executive decision and not a split decision between the president and the other board members; however, party membership of the CPB board must be no more than eight from the president's party (Ledbetter 25-26).

A final, and ultimately crucial, way that Johnson attempted to guarantee control over this proposed system was evident in the fact that the commission's suggestion for funding never made it into the wording of the act (Ledbetter 26). Instead, the funding for the new corporation and its mission became dependent on Congressional approval. Long-term funding became part of the discussion due to "shifting political winds," but "the provision for multiyear funding was deleted as a result of the budgetary constraints resulting from the Vietnam War" (Engelman 159). Instead of an independent corporation working under primarily its own auspices with federal funding for financial support, the corporation became tethered even tighter to government control, with its board and its budget dependent on government appointment and approval. These changes saddled the fledgling organization from the start and left it vulnerable to "political winds" and whims (Engelman 159, Lashley 45).

Johnson signed the act in December 1967, thus establishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, or CPB. Not technically a government agency, CPB is a private not-for-profit corporation that directs funds from Congress to other public broadcasting entities. One of the corporation's first missions involved creating a workable system for the distribution of programming. This system, the Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, was founded in 1969 and started operation in 1970. PBS was the result of a complex series of compromises (Engelman 165-166), but it created a conduit between the national educational broadcasters within the service and CPB.

While much of the Commission's recommendations focused on improving infrastructure, organizing distribution, and looking long-term, it also included some key suggestions for programming both nationally and locally. The commission's overall guide was to recommend "greater diversity," though it also had some specific suggestions:

Major theatrical and musical productions, documentaries on subjects of national concern or which require a national approach, programs dealing on a national scale with public affairs or with news commentary, are immediately appropriate. Light programs, children's programs, and programs of criticism and review [...] are equally appropriate (Conant et. al. 44).

The Commission further affirmed the importance of locally produced and focused programming for local audiences and locally produced programming of interest to other audiences, but it specified more the amount of money required for such programming than about the actual content of these programs. The wording of the Public Broadcasting Act was more specific and calls for programs "of high quality, diversity, creativity, excellence, and innovation, which are

obtained from diverse sources, will be made available to public telecommunications entities, with strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature" ("CPB: Public Broadcasting Act of 1967"). It later specifically mentions programming for minorities and for children ("CPB: Public Broadcasting Act of 1967"). Programming that serves minorities and other diverse audiences become part of the accountability for public broadcasting in that it must regularly report about how such programming benefits these groups. Specifically, the required assessment report "shall address the needs of racial and ethnic minorities, new immigrant populations, people for whom English is a second language, and adults who lack basic reading skills" ("CPB: Public Broadcasting Act of 1967"). While the Commission left space for lighter fare, the wording of the Act attempts to tighten the boundaries of the programming possibilities to serving particularly underrepresented groups. The commission emphasizes culture, while the Act emphasizes education. Either way, both documents leave much leeway and offer little direction about *how* to go about programming the new public broadcasting.

In its early years of 1970-1972, PBS distributed some rather innovative and challenging programming to its member stations. Engelman calls this era "perhaps the most creative in public television history" in that productions included "political analysis (*Washington Week in Review*), public affairs (*The Great American Dream Machine*), drama (*The Forsyte Saga*), education (*Sesame Street*), and science (*Nova*)" (166). The creative and experimental programming also occurred on the local levels. Some stations pushed limits politically with their programming. *The Banks and the Poor* stirred such a controversy in 1970 that it forced the creation of new previewing guidelines for PBS (Engelman 167-168; Gibson 173).

Not all stations embraced this period of as a means to explore new innovations, however. Minnesota's KTCA did the opposite. According to Ouellette, KTCA "eschewed the avant-garde for straightforward education delivered by local instructors and professors" (206). A selection of programs included "Tree Care: Caring for Your Christmas Tree," "For Every Man Who Wants Power Tools: Buying Guide," "Efficient Reading," and "Fishing" (Ouellette 210). Overall, the program on KTCA emphasized practical skills over cultural uplift.

These differences in programming provide a small insight into just how differently PBS stations develop and plan their own programming. Each station has its own vision about how to serve its audiences, and programming produced in New York or Los Angeles might not appeal to programmers in Nebraska or Texas. Although there are national programming incentives for stations -- they can produce programming that can be distributed to other stations through PBS, in a way that really does not exist for local commercial stations -- most public television stations create programming for the local audience. This tension emerged early in the service's operations, and while it might be perceived as a testament to the system's diversity, it also became just one of the tools for subsequent political maneuverings.

President Richard M. Nixon did not trust television. Part of that distrust might have come from his supposed television "loss" in the 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy, even though on radio he supposedly "won." According to Ledbetter, "For Nixon, television was not only an intrinsically political medium -- its every emission had potential campaign implications" (58). These political implications (and paranoia, perhaps) extended to the fledgling public broadcasting as well. The administration suspected public broadcasting to be anti-administration and left-leaning, and in particular it disliked the criticism of Nixon Vietnam War policies (Starr,



*Air Wars*, 28). The administration's strategy was to put an emphasis on the importance of "localism," while at the same time "try to use the CPB to control programming" (Ledbetter 61). Critics such as Arthur L. Singer Jr., associate of the Arthur P. Sloan foundation, and Clay T. Whitehead, director of the new Office of Telecommunication Policy, asserted that CPB and PBS retained too much central control, a fact that ran counter to their mission as stated in the Public Broadcasting Act (Gibson 171-174). This central control removed power from the local stations, when they thought the opposite should happen. Whitehead continued to spread this criticism in various venues. In 1972 Nixon vetoed a two-year budget authorization that was nearly unanimously supported by Congress; this veto was widely seen as sending a message to public broadcasting about its dependence upon presidential approval of its programming (Ledbetter 78; Starr 29). CPB, PBS, and others interested parties, however, saw the roots of the debates in the issues of "program control, program content, appropriate audience, and money. They were concerned with specific policies and with a proper balance between the corporation and the local stations" (Gibson 175). They managed to work out their differences, with control shifting toward the stations and CPB and PBS serving as conduits for funding and programming.

The political history behind these early developments of public broadcasting in the United States reveals a complicated set of interests and expectations. The general consensus was that public broadcasting seemed a good idea because it offered an alternative to the commercial fare broadcast on the networks and because it offered potential opportunities for cultural uplift for the audiences ignored by commercial broadcasters. But decisions made during the creation of public television influenced the system throughout its existence, and no decision was more important than its funding structure. The Carnegie Commission clearly delineated between the

Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the federal government, but the Johnson administration changed the Public Broadcasting Act to ensure the government's control of the organization. Tethering its funding to Congress, having to go through a two-year budget approval cycle, and not creating an independent source of funding, solidified the government's control and the system's dependence upon the political zeitgeist and alternatives sources of funding.

Since the Nixon years, every Republican president has threatened to withhold or eliminate funding for public broadcasting. Other politicians have joined in the call. For example, Newt Gringrich got on the bandwagon with his calls for zero-funding the service (Ouellette 2). President George W. Bush and the Republican Party created problems for public broadcasting. A priority for the 2004 budget included advance funding, which calls for federal monies two years in advance, and funding for digital conversion in rural areas (McConnell 30). According to McConnell, "President Bush has called for eliminating most advance federal funds as a way to gain more flexibility over the entire [Federal] budget," but for public broadcasting the advance funding ensures a certain degree of "editorial independence" for stations (30). Near the end of his term, Bush threatened to cut the service's budget in half. An Office of Management and Budget spokesperson Sean Kevelighan explained, "'The administration's proposal is consistent with the evolving role of public broadcasting in a marketplace that has benefited from the tremendous growth and diversity of programming'" (Gold "No Tote Bag" E2). The spokesperson's comments situate public broadcasting's perceived increasingly commercial nature -- or at least the perceived "diversity" of market-driven television -- as a reason for the budget cuts.

The service faced other issues under the Bush administration. Its director at the time, Pat Mitchell erred on the side of caution with the broadcasting of several programs. For example, she

pulled an episode of the children's program *Postcards from Buster* that featured a lesbian family (Goodman E1). She also stood behind censoring certain words in a series titled *Cop Shop*, featuring Richard Dreyfuss (Goodman E1). In both cases, fear of funding losses and excessive fines informed her decisions. Unfortunately, these decisions also cut into PBS's credibility. The latter example also reveals another trend in modern public broadcasting. The name Richard Dreyfuss might appear incongruous with public broadcasting, but increasingly more Hollywood and other big media representation has become associated with the service. In 2006 network television producer Warren Bell received a one-year appointment from President Bush to the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (Gold "A Feud" E1). Bell drew strong criticism because while he had 17 years' experience in network television, he possessed no experience in public television. This disparity did not stop the appointment, however. Tony Fratto, a White House spokesman, is quoted as saying, "He has innovative ideas on making public television more competitive with mainstream media and expressed a very strong commitment to improving CPB" (Gold "A Feud" E1). In the Carnegie Commission's conceptions for the service, the independent funding should have preserved public broadcasting from market and political whims, yet the Bush White House saw another station competing with the network and cable channels. Arguably, Bell's appointment represents a move toward privatization of the service.

Further, the service must concern itself with intangible issues of reputation and political vulnerability, particularly when it comes to securing a budget. Multiple critics during the Bush administration claimed the service slanted to the left, and these leanings usually drew Republican criticism (McConnell 30). A *Los Angeles Times* editorial begins, "The Republican critics of public broadcasting have a point: It is outrageous that a medium supported by taxpayers should

have a clear partisan slant" ("The GOP" M4). In an interesting twist, the editorial continues, "So please, get the Republicans out of it" ("The GOP" M4). The editorial drew some responses from viewers, including one particularly insightful question: "Please explain how an organization that is supposed to be nonpartisan can have a Republican chairman and president?" ("Partisanship and Public Broadcasting" B12). In 2005, Republican Cheryl F. Halpern pledged to uphold the "objectivity and balance" called for in the service's act, yet she brought her own interests to the position, in particular criticizing NPR for its Mideast coverage as anti-Israel (Labaton A20). Her predecessor, Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, left under strong criticism that he commissioned studies to measure the balance on Bill Moyers' *Now* and that he demanded CPB threaten to pull back funds for programs that balance standard ("Better Broadcasting" A14). Again, while the Commission attempted to insulate the service from political whims, the Public Broadcasting Act ensured the opposite with presidential appointments to the CPB board.

This of course means that controversial programming adds financial and market pressure to a system that was conceived as more protected from such pressure than the commercial broadcasters. In her book *Public Television: Panacea, Pork Barrel, or Public Trust*, Marliyn Lashley notes, "More than any other factor, the strategic behavior of public television is determined by survival goals" (45). This survival is not only an economic battle, but also a political one. If the Corporation for Public Broadcasting makes a decision or funds a project that rubs some political figure, some government body such as the FCC, Congress or the President; some religious and other social figures; foundations and underwriters; and even the elusive public the wrong way, it raises questions among those discussing the future funding for the corporation. Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*, a poetic, experimental documentary that addresses

homosexual African American men that was a 1991 installment of the *P.O.V.* series, raised such a stir in 1989 that people denounced it even without having seen it and a majority of PBS stations refused to carry it. The stations that did carry it faced multiple risks such as losing donations and receiving FCC fines (Bullert 91-122). Soon after, *P.O.V.* canceled a scheduled airing of another controversial documentary about AIDS activism, concerned over the heat felt by the early Riggs' documentary (Ledbetter 188). Overall, the service must balance programming with both federal and outside sources of funding and with FCC rules and other legislation to ensure its survival; sometimes, as the above situation illustrates, this balance is not ideally achieved. This situation explains many of the relationships fostered between PBS and other, for-profit organizations.

Thus, PBS must walk multiple fine lines in order to retain its Federal funding, but even then various parties still hold up the scissors, ready to cut the purse strings. In addition to the budgets, public broadcasting draws funding from a variety of sources, including corporate underwriting (sponsorship), ancillary products, and pledge drives.

Discussed in more length in Chapter Five, corporate underwriting involves a pairing of a major corporation with a PBS show. In exchange for money and a time commitment, the company gets its name on the service's broadcasts and other products associated with the show. While these sponsorships might seem at odds with the not-for-profit nature of the service, reliance on sponsorships has grown continually since the 1970s. According to Hoynes, "Between 1982 and 1991, seventeen major corporations provided at least \$5 million each to support public television programming" (100). Corporate benefits for the sponsorships include tax deductions, public relations (Ledbetter 142), and an almost clutter-free environment (Ledbetter 17). Since the 1970s, the spots have evolved from a short phrase to psuedo-commercials in hopes of attracting

more corporate sponsors.

Depending on the arrangement, ancillary products can become another means for generating some funding for public broadcasting. Unlike major media industries with their branches in film, television, music, and other industries, PBS must form partnerships with these companies in order to make some of its show- and series-related materials available to the public. Major projects such as *Jazz* and *The Blues* include multiple media components from books to CDs and from VHS tapes to DVDs. In some cases the big-media partnerships help make them available, and in other cases the service makes them available through its own distribution methods. Information on how much PBS makes through these sales is difficult to track down, however.

Another aspect of PBS funding comes from its regular pledge drives. During pledge drives, individual stations solicit funds from their viewers. Since local stations rely on these pledge drives for a significant portion of their function, "station managers provide programming that reflects the preferences and demographic profile of a narrowly defined group of checkwriters -- subscribers to public television" (Lashley 96). During these drives, stations roll out the best in features programming, such as Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance*, to entice viewers and channel surfers to open their wallets.

Looking at the fiscal year 2002-2003 budget -- the year in which *The Blues* aired -- public broadcasting revenue also came from local and state governments, colleges and universities, foundations, businesses, and subscribers ("Public Broadcasting Revenue Fiscal Year 2003"). Also in that budget, "total nonfederal revenue" was 80.5 percent of the total budget, with 77.9 percent for public television ("Public Broadcasting Revenue Fiscal Year 2003"). In 2002-2003,

subscribers alone provided 26.1 percent of the overall budget and 22.8 percent of the public television budget.

While the federal funding remains a key part of the public service broadcasting budget, the other sources of revenue raise questions about the service's "public" orientation. The member donations certainly fit the "public" image, although here the danger is an emphasis placed on the "publics" who would be most likely (and able) to contribute donations. But the business income, at 13.2 percent for 2002-2003 ("Public Broadcasting Revenue Fiscal Year 2003"), also brings in a significant portion of the budget. Since the federal government funds only a portion of the service's budget, it must rely on these other sources of income. As a result, the service moves even further from the protected vision of the Carnegie Commission, as it now must answer to a variety of funding sources and not just the Federal government. As the service has adopted commercial media practices, the federal government -- particularly during the Bush administration -- perceives PBS as *part* of the media market, as a *competitor* in that market, and not just a *participant* in it.

### **The Structure of Public Broadcasting**

The complicated political history of public broadcasting helped shape the still-complicated structure of it today. At the core of the system lies the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the central component suggested by the Carnegie Commission. As of September 2008, the corporation had three stated goals: "Promote an educated and informed civil society through significant, high-quality content and services," "Increase awareness of and appreciation for the essential contribution that public media makes to civil society," and "Recognizing the

transformational change taking place between media and audience, foster innovation in public media by supporting projects that advance creative or resourceful ideas for improving content, service, diversity, and audience reach, including projects that employ collaboration as a tool for innovation. Help increase the resources available to public media" ("CPB: Goals and Objectives"). The CPB's overall objective involves disseminating money for the creation of programming and the funding of its distribution, among others. The Public Broadcasting Act prohibits the CPB from producing programming itself. Instead, it serves as the umbrella corporation for both television and radio public broadcasting.

The Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, is the most visible component of the television side of public broadcasting. The service consists of the 356 member stations.

Funded through CPB and other sources, PBS funds various independent productions and it creates a national selection of programming. Member stations choose whether or not to carry these programs on their local schedules. Like CPB, PBS does not create its own programming but instead fosters others' efforts to create it.

PBS' 356 member stations fall under 168 licensees, the latter comprised of community organizations (87), colleges/universities (56), state authorities (20) and local educational/municipal authorities (5) ("About PBS: Corporate Facts"). These stations generally fall into three categories: producing stations, program differentiated providers, and non-producing stations. Producing stations provide the most visibility within the system and often wield the most power. Some of these stations include WGBH-Boston, WNET-New York, WETA-Washington, D.C., KCET-Los Angeles, and WTTW Chicago. A program differentiated provider has a signal that overlaps with another PBS station's on-air signal, such as WNCY in New York,



which overlaps WNET, or WYCC in Chicago, which overlaps WTTW. Prime series get broadcast on the primary station in each market (WNET, WTTW), while the PDP (WNCY, WYCC) carries different programming during the first broadcast and then might air the series at a later date. Non-producing stations rely on PBS to help fill their broadcast schedules.

WGBH Boston serves as one of the most prolific -- and most visible -- producing stations within the service. WGBH offers a wide variety of materials for television, radio, Internet, and telecourses ("Produced by WGBH"). The station produces about 35 different shows, and it also produces some of the more popular PBS shows, including *Antiques Roadshow*, *Arthur*, *Evening at the Pops*, *Frontline*, and *NOVA*. It even has moved into the world of big-screen exhibition, creating such pictures as *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure* and *Mysteries of Egypt* for IMAX screens.

An interesting (and telling, given the modern finances of public television) offshoot of WGBH production activities is the Sponsorship for Public Television Group. This group pairs large corporations with PBS projects for their mutual benefit. The group's home page, [sgptv.org](http://sgptv.org), specifically addresses those looking for sponsorship opportunities: "No matter what your goals are, we can help. In addition to gaining an affiliation with the PBS brand and connecting with a loyal, influential audience, you'll enjoy a variety of on- and off-air benefits" ("SGPTV-- Home"). Sponsorships now include not only PBS broadcasts, but also Web sites and home distribution materials such as DVDs and CDs. Volkswagen's sponsorship of *The Blues* serves as one of the case studies of previous partnerships, and the site bills that pairing as one of the most successful ones in PBS history. Other partnerships include Libby's Juicy Juice with *Arthur*, Chick-fil-A with *Between the Lions*, and Liberty Mutual with *Antiques Roadshow*.

Most stations within the PBS system do not produce on the same level with WGBH. For example, WPSU-TV (formerly WPSX) represents one of the 56 higher education-operated stations throughout the country. In addition to broadcasting some of the national programming such as *The Blues* series, WPSU produces and broadcasts local programming as well. Some of its programs include *Our Town*, in which local community residents document their towns; and *Lawn and Garden Q & A*. It also produces and broadcasts system programs that provide access to the PSU community, including sports, music, and scholars. It also seeks local sponsorship for national and local programming.

Independent producers play an important part in the public broadcasting service. Since PBS and CPB cannot produce their own programming, independent producers offer a chance to help fill the remaining hours of the programming schedule. A producer herself, Bullert describes how these producers compete for funding, for time, and against politics in order to get their works broadcast on PBS. She identifies four types of independent producers: "mavericks, activists, pragmatists, and innocents" (Bullert 12). In general PBS programmers seek producers who attempt to balance their coverage of subjects, and "pragmatists tone down their work to fit public television's norms of journalism and aesthetic style, making compromises in both form and content that hard-core activists would refuse to make" (Bullert 14). Those qualities, and a previous track record with the service, facilitate getting programs on the air.

In many ways audiences play important roles for every group involved in the public broadcasting system. The original conceptions for the service wanted to address those who wanted more from television than the common-denominator fare of broadcast television. They also wanted to address and uplift those populations to be better citizens making more informed

choices. The audiences conceived by different interested parties differ from the original conceptions. These conceived audiences for public broadcasting were similar to those conceived for ETV, whose "marketing had pitched a viewership that was well educated, professional or managerially employed, and interested in culture, learning, and self-improvement" (Ouellette 95). The underwriting first set by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting followed this audience conception by describing "public television viewers as 'selective, decision-making, affluent, well-educated, and loyal' persons of influence in an 'uncluttered' medium" (Ouellette 96). For companies attempting to reach a more elite audience, sponsorship on public broadcasting provided a means to do so.

Audiences also prove important to PBS affiliates. Throughout each year, PBS stations run pledge drives to build membership. Members donate amounts at certain levels and often receive a PBS-related item in thanks for their donations. For fiscal year 2002-2003, public broadcasting membership provided 26.1 percent of the national budget, with 22.8 percent going to public television (Public Broadcasting Revenue Fiscal Year 2003"). For fiscal year 2003, WGBH drew in 14 percent of its budget from individuals for almost \$22 million ("WGBH Annual Report 2003-2004"). With the shifting political winds affecting the government sources of funding, the membership provides a viable source for additional funding. As such, the programming PBS provides must appeal to this audience and hopefully motivate its current members to keep donating and new members to join.

This group is so important to programmers and corporate sponsors that research on both educational television audiences and later public broadcasting audiences began in the 1950s and continues today. Arguably, this focus on audience research parallels the intense focus of

advertisers and big media on commercial television viewing audiences, but in general that focus is on the coveted 19-49 demographic. PBS, however, still claims its demographic "reflects the overall U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, education, and income" ("About PBS: Corporate Facts"), even though a CPB report from the early 1970s asserts the elite audience perspective (Oullette 102-103). In his brief history of ratings use in early public television, Stavitsky notes "a fundamental change in the nature of public broadcasting, away from its educational, service-driven origins toward an audience- and funder-driven orientation, in which public broadcasters target demographically upscale segments of the potential audience" (520). Thus, not only having an audience, but also a certain type of audience, remains just as important to public broadcasting just as it does to commercial broadcasting.

The influences and roles of the Federal government have been chronicled in the political history above. The President still appoints the members of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Board, and Congress still reviews and approves its operating budget. The FCC still oversees licenses and, if it deems necessary, fines. Private foundations also serve an important role, both in public broadcasting's development and continued operations. The Ford Foundation, in particular, provided much of the funding for early educational television and for early public broadcasting. Other foundations might contribute to programming development. *Jazz*, for example, had funding from a variety of charitable organizations, including Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, and The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, just to name a few.

Several components not related to *The Blues* series are omitted from this discussion, such

as the Independent Television Service (ITVS), National Public Radio (NPR), Public Radio International (PRI), and others. This discussion also omits several of the big media connections to the series, such as Sony and Universal Music. I discuss more about those companies in Chapter Six. It further omits the not-for-profit groups linked with the series, such as the Experience Music Project and the Blues Foundation. I discuss more about them in Chapter Six as well.

Overall, the variety of players in the public broadcasting system varies widely. Some represent government interests. Others represent for-profit interests, particularly the corporate sponsors and the local sponsors. Still others represent not-for-profit interests, such as the various foundations and the audience. Several represent the intersection of profit and not-for-profit interests, particularly the Sponsorship Group for Public Television. Others, such as the independent producers, possess interests so varied that placing them within a particular category would be impossible.

*The Blues* series intersects with this system in many of the usual ways for public broadcasting programming. PBS distributed the program, and WGBH served as its sponsoring station. It received finishing funding from PBS, and WGBH worked on getting Volkswagen as the national sponsor. The rhetoric surrounding the project -- the Web site, the interviews, and the episode introductions -- suggests a specific audience in mind for watching the production and possibly buying the multimedia offerings. Half the production funding came from Vulcan Productions, which takes a keen interest in cultural documentary projects, though it also funds fiction films. Independent producers -- most of them pragmatists, to borrow Bullert's category -- also created the series with public broadcasting in mind. It follows the marketing model set up

with Ken Burns' series, complete with the companion book, multiple CDs, DVD set, and Web site. Further, part of its outreach included lesson plans for bringing blues music into secondary school classrooms.

Still, *The Blues* represents some extreme steps in PBS' relationships with corporate media and other larger corporations. Those independent producers are not unknown but not necessarily known for public broadcasting programming. Instead, they are known for Hollywood filmmaking or commercial television. The funding for half of this production came from a media company that retained international distribution rights and used those rights to gain access to German movie theaters and the BBC, to name two sources. Individual episodes and even the entire series were shown at film festivals around the world, in some cases more than six months before the PBS debut. Further, the series is connected to federal legislation, the Year of the Blues decree, which resulted from lobbying from the Experience Music Project and The Blues Foundation, both of which were involved with the series.

But if it walks like a PBS series and talks like a PBS series, then *The Blues* must be a PBS series, right? Not if it honks like a goose in a 12-bar chord. The series positions itself as "not *Jazz*," and in some ways it succeeds in creating that distance, particularly through its "personal" focus and through its programming and distribution. In other ways it pushes the envelope of *Jazz*'s success, particularly with its sponsorship and with its marketing practices, as the following chapters will show.

Chapter Three begins this exploration with a look into the different directors involved with the series and how the roles of these directors were discursively created. Several of the directors possess strong ties to Hollywood, while several others possess ties with network and

cable television. The series promotional materials present their directors as auteurs bringing their personal ideas of blues music to PBS, but what implications do their personal visions have coming from directors with some degrees of mainstream recognition? How do their visions function within the usual operations of the service?

### CHAPTER THREE: Auteurs and their Personal Visions of *The Blues*

Documentary series on PBS usually follow a cohesive, expository style that favors anonymous authority over explicit markers of the filmmaker's personal knowledge. Ken Burns' work follows this style in *Jazz* and his other series. According to Grindon, Burns "eliminates the filmmaker's presence and any evidence of question-and-answer exchange" (7), allowing talking heads and other voices to convey and interpret information. *The Blues* takes the opposite approach: It offers and touts the directors' personal visions and explorations of blues music in each installment. According to series producer and episode director Martin Scorsese, "I decided early on that I wanted them [the series episodes] to be personal, rather than strictly historical surveys. [...] The teachers from whom I learned the most were always the most passionate, the ones with a deeply personal connection to the material" ("Director Interview: Martin Scorsese"). By creating these films as personal visions, Scorsese hoped to avoid what he considered boring recounting of information and generate more interest in the subject. He comments in the director interview accompanying each episode on the Web site, "By having each of them [the directors] come at the subject with his own unique perspective, I knew we'd come away with something special, not a dry recitation of facts, but a genuinely passionate mosaic" ("Director Interview: Martin Scorsese").

This emphasis on personal vision and experience fit trends in documentary production at the time. Earlier documentaries presented their subjects and information with a detached distance. Starting in the 1970s and continuing today, contemporary works often offer an



identifiable point of view and even center on the personal experiences of their makers. Morgan Spurlock made *Supersize Me* (2004) about his experiment with eating nothing but McDonald's food for 30 days. Michael Moore uses his personal and family connections with Flint, Michigan, as a starting point and an inspiration for making General Motors answerable to that city's downfall in *Roger and Me* (1989). These documentaries represent a shift in ideas about the nature of authority. In his article about what he calls "autodocs," A. O. Scott claims, "First-person testimony retains an authority that the apparently disinterested presentation of information has lost, in addition to feeling more intimate, more honest and more democratic" (Scott 41). In other words, documentaries with a more personal touch seek to retain not only some authority with, but also retain the greater interest of, their audiences.

In the case of *The Blues*, and displaying both its television and film connections, the series arguably has two authorial stamps: that of the series' executive producer (normally understood as the main author of television texts, as will be examined) and that of the episode director (normally the main author of theatrical film texts). As executive producer, Scorsese's personal vision for the series becomes its key organizing principle. On the other hand, each episode presents its director's vision, while the other components such as the Web site, Scorsese's episode introductions, and director interviews attempt to reinforce the centrality of this vision. The primary goal of this chapter is to analyze how not only the texts, but also the contexts, assert each director's personal vision of blues music and what this personal assertion means for the genre, the series, and PBS. Since much of the series contexts assume these seven directors as auteurs, this chapter begins with a discussion of the auteur theory, including its traditional considerations and its contemporary manifestations through different media and through

marketing. It then provides an overview of all the texts under consideration before moving on to their analysis. It concludes with the implications for the series and for public broadcasting.

### **Auteur Theory**

The organizational, promotional, and informational efforts surrounding *The Blues* suggest each director is an auteur. Part of that assumption is reflected in the asking of each one to share a personal vision of the music genre. If that director were not an auteur, then the director's vision becomes questionable and erodes the credibility of the series. If that director's vision was not established or credible, then the series would not have had as much credibility or selling ability. The same applies to the director's name. Without some merit to his work, the series would not have had as much clout as it did.

Traditional conceptions of directors as auteurs originate in the studio system of classical Hollywood. The assembly-line production of films situated directors as just one person within a team, but in post-World War II France multiple Hollywood films released in the theaters within a compressed time period allowed theorists there to see the textual commonalities across multiple films by the same directors. Writing in *Cahiers du cinema*, these theorists speculated that these directors created personal visions despite the mechanistic confines of the rigid Hollywood production systems. Andrew Sarris imported these French New Wave writers' ideas, and he applied them within his own writing, even going so far as to rank various directors. While his rankings created some controversy, his application of the ideas of film directors as authors created a dominant theory within film and media studies (Belton 350).

The 1948 Paramount decision broke up the Hollywood monopoly over the production,

distribution, and exhibition structure of the industry. This process allowed greater opportunities for more voices and for more diverse corporate interests to enter into the movie-making business, through the creating, delivering, and showing of different texts. As the golden age of Hollywood shifted to the golden age of television, more directors working outside the system found opportunities to make and exhibit their films. Directors educated in film schools such as Martin Scorsese at New York University -- sometimes called the "film school generation" -- brought new, edgier styles to filmmaking. Companies outside entertainment began assimilating studios into their larger operations, making films and television just another commodity to contribute to the bottom line. Since the new industry structure no longer guaranteed a return on investment, the focus on individual films emerged, moving away from the assembly-line production of the previous industry model. These film school generation practitioners' work soon became co-opted within these larger corporations, even though their styles and intentions earned them the "auteur" label, and it was often in the marketing interests of these corporations to promote the "star" power of directors.

Traditional approaches to auteur film studies focus on key texts created by a single director and make connections among these texts. Most often, these connections originate in narrative and formal conventions. Narrative connections might include similar plot lines or story structures, character types, or dialogue style. Stylistic conventions might include cinematography or editing techniques. Some directors make cameo appearances in their films. Industry practices such as casting also become part of the marks of an auteur. Overall, these aspects combine toward the creation of an artistic work even within mass-production expectations and motivations toward profits.

Within these ideas of auteurs also emerge some ideas about the auteur as a form of promotion and self-promotion. Promotional efforts from the Hollywood studios highlight auteurs' personal visions, their connections across their works, their awards and other recognitions, and their overall quality of work (see Tzioumakis). These efforts suggest that audiences can expect a better piece and expect the familiarity of the director's style. Other forms of promotion occur through cultural consecration of particular films by these directors. These acts of consecration include addition to film archives such as the National Film Registry, "best of" lists such as the ones by the American Film Institute, and awards such as Oscars and film festival prizes (see Allen and Lincoln). Further, the extension of auteur ideas comes through critical attention paid to them and their work. One of the most famous examples of this attention comes from François Truffaut and his volumes on Alfred Hitchcock.

Some directors engage in self promotion. Hitchcock provides a key example here as he made a concerted effort to shape his own image not only among critics, but also with popular audiences. His promotion of *The Birds* provides an interesting example of the extent of his efforts, including

the numerous tongue-in-cheek interviews with Hitchcock appearing in popular magazines (such as *Life* and *TV Guide*), the coast-to-coast pigeon race, the carefully orchestrated plugs for *The Birds* on popular television programs, the hilarious radio and lobby spots, and, not least, Hitchcock's ingenious ad campaign for the film featuring the very ungrammatical sounding but highly effective slogan, "*The Birds* Is Coming" (Kapsis 23).

While the above efforts attempted to appeal to popular audiences, Hitchcock further made efforts

to appeal to critics by arranging a retrospective screening of his works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Kapsis 24). While some of these techniques might sound familiar today, for the era these techniques proved unique and represent Hitchcock's efforts to control his own image as a serious director. Either way, promotion of directors works both as an institutional practice and as a personal one.

Several problems emerge when considering the usefulness of auteur theory, however. The first problem lies in the privileging of one person's vision, even though multiple people work on any one production in various capacities. The second problem lies in the approach -- the textual readings overshadow the decisions made during the production process. The third problem lies in the closed nature of auteur readings. They assume one reading of the auteur's work, and as a result, they shut down other possibilities for considering how the auteur's vision and image get created. Fourth, they negate the multimedia environment of conglomerate Hollywood and the complexities of those influences. The high degree of cross-pollination between film and television especially complicate the notion of one film or television text, as does the integration of newer media such as the Internet and other digital technologies. Last, they offer no empirical evidence linking audience expectations and authorial intentions, leaving the connection usually implied.

One new development in auteur theory addresses the limited reading question directly. In his article Yannis Tzioumakis explores the marketing of David Mamet through an analysis of the film trailers for Mamet's work. Drawing on research by Timothy Corrigan, Jon Lewis, and Justin Wyatt, Tzioumakis asserts that "industrial auteurism" offers a response to the limitations of previous auteur models for two reasons. The first reason is that issues of auteurship in film, with

this perspective, may be examined via "an industrio-economic context" (61). This aspect proves important because it allows consideration for historical, economic, and other influences. A second reason Tzioumakis gives is that the perspective enables studying how the film author "is produced in multiple ways," thus possibly producing a reading of authorship rather different from a text-centered one (61). Items available for study include ones related to the films themselves, such as film trailers, budgets, reach, and salaries (Tzioumakis 60), and ones related to the directors such as "background, interests, personal life, positions in the film industry, and finally, comments on the film itself" (Tzioumakis 61). In other words, instead of focusing on the texts themselves, this form of auteur theory considers the discourses surrounding the films and how those discourses contribute to the creation of the director as an auteur. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, a similar discursive approach will be argued for understanding the construction of film and television genres.

While this approach acknowledges some of the industry contexts that shape contemporary ideas of the industrial auteur, it poses several limitations, particularly within the contexts of *The Blues* series, the myriad directors, and public broadcasting. A key limitation focuses on the references to "contemporary Hollywood" and "New Hollywood." In both cases these terms fail to acknowledge the complexity of the current media industry. While consolidation has reduced ownership of big media to a select handful, this ownership spans media, including film exhibition, broadcast and cable television, home video, and now online outlets. The "industrio-economic context" Tzioumakis refers to proves more complex than both "Hollywood" terms suggest. Another limitation refers to the homogeneity already suggested. By referring to the "context" and "Hollywood," important distinctions among different types of

contexts disappear. Some auteurs, for example, build their names through independent means, such as with film festivals, art houses, museums, and even educational distribution. While independents often work with and rely on the major media companies (Allen 27-28), their definitions of auteur often center on their independent status. The multiplicity of contexts require further scrutiny than just their places within contemporary Hollywood.

Applying auteur theory to documentaries offers unique complications. For one, traditional approaches to this theory focus on fiction texts. Narrative structures in general and the classical Hollywood style in particular facilitate comparison. Looking at auteurs in documentary creates challenges in that the form offers a much wider variety of formal options and motivations than narratives do. Structures can include narratives, but they also can include thematic, point-counterpoint, argument, and chronologies, just to name a few. Formal options include a variety of conventions such as interviews, archival footage, observational footage, re-enactments, and voiceover narration. Distinctive mixes of these structures and options may link with certain documentary filmmakers, or they may not. The motivations for making a documentary also vary, from entertainment to consciousness raising to personal self-discovery to historical documentation, and these variations may occur within a documentary filmmaker's work as well as between different filmmakers.

However, other elements emphasize the salience of auteurship. Within a documentary production, a director potentially assumes more roles than just one. This practice emphasizes the director as an "author" more and addresses one of the critiques from the traditional applications of this theory. Errol Morris, for example, directed, produced, and edited his first film, *Gates of Heaven* (1978). As mentioned earlier, other documentary filmmakers are the central figure in

their works. In fact, an auteur approach has been taken throughout some histories of documentary development. Erik Barnouw, for example, groups documentary directors as auteurs within larger thematic categories that blend personality and motivations. In his *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Barnouw uses groups such as prophet, explorer, reporter, advocate, catalyst, and guerrilla. In his forthcoming article, Daniel Herbert describes the elusive case of German director Werner Herzog, who crosses the fiction-documentary divide with his films as an auteur. Instead of a cohesion, Herzog provides a strong sense of disruption, "where other film authors provide a coherent center to a body of texts" (Herbert NP). If anything Herzog's documentary work gains cohesion through his choice of topics, such as "speed-talking auctioneers, exploding islands, and a number of madmen" (Herbert NP).

In addition to the documentary genre, the medium of television offers another challenge to auteur theory. Much of the work applying auteur theory to television, similar to film, focuses on fiction works such as dramas and situation comedies. The television auteur requires an immense amount of power to impose a vision with any concerted effort:

[O]ne must have the power to invest (or more often, to get someone else to invest) millions of dollars on the production of a pilot that will very likely never get on the air; one must have the power to dictate to the networks rather than take dictation from them; one must have the power to mobilize a large creative work force to do one's bidding (Thompson 1).

The format of television, particularly advertising-driven network television, requires less vision and more efficiency of its directors. Demanding production schedules and tight budgets require deadlines get met and at cost or, better, below. As a result, television shows follow more of a



format, in that they contain a "set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced" (Moran 258). Elements for a situation comedy or a drama might include descriptions of the situation, potential storylines, and character profiles (Moran 258). The basic guidelines make programs easy to adapt for new combinations or for international program development, and thus leave little room for individual ingenuity and artistic vision.

As a result a director's role carries less importance than, for example, a producer. Thompson suggests that the more successful and recognizable television auteurs are more than just directors, and in fact often not directors at all. Instead, they are "'hyphenates': writer-producers, writer-director-producers, creator-producers, and so on" (Thompson 11). These auteurs become particularly highlighted for what John Thornton Caldwell calls "boutique" programming (105). This type of programming, which includes shows such as *Northern Exposure* and *thirtysomething*, retains a subtle and visually manifested personal touch that allows networks to hype "it as a guarantor and label of product relevance" (Caldwell 108). Dick Wolf and David E. Kelly represent more contemporary television auteurs, as both have multiple series and spin-offs. Some television producers cross into Hollywood producing as well, further complicating the ideas of television auteurs. *CSI* franchise executive producer Jerry Bruckheimer also holds producing credits for films such as *Top Gun* (1986), *Blackhawk Down* (1999), and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (2003, 2006, and 2007).<sup>24</sup> producer Brian Glazer shows credits for *Angels and Demons* (2009), *Frost / Nixon* (2008), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), and *Cinderella Man* (2005). Unlike many producers, he also claims a documentary production credit for *Inside Deep Throat* (2005).

With all the emphasis on fiction programming for profit, the notion of a television documentary auteur seems improbable, but several do exist. A lesser-known -- but no less important -- one is Frederick Wiseman, whose stubbornly observational documentary works about U.S. social institutions usually get broadcast on PBS. The rare exceptions of ones not broadcast on PBS, or at least WNET, are *High School* and *Titicut Follies* (Benson and Anderson 95). Wiseman's work challenges the conventions of television documentary through its subjects and its style, so often his works get bounced around the PBS schedule. When *Rape* debuted in 2003, several stations, including Cincinnati, chose to air the program in the early morning hours due to the difficult content. Nearby Dayton's PBS affiliate WPTD (Watch Public Television Dayton) refused to show the program at all.

The more popularly known television documentary auteur is Ken Burns. His work usually gets prime-time broadcasting across affiliate and member stations. Multi-media Web sites and home-distribution materials such as collector DVD sets and books accompany exhibition and further distribution. His work also draws massive corporate support, in particular from General Motors, which funded Burns' work during decade-long commitments until recently (Meredith D12; June-Friesen "Burns Pipeline"). Even the press label Burns as an auteur. A *Boston Globe* article calls him "auteur of the 18-hour classic, 'Baseball'" (Beggy and Carney D2), while an earlier *Chicago Tribune* article calls him the "celebrated docu-auteur of PBS' 'The Civil War' and 'Baseball'" ("Ken Burns Wins" Tempo 5). The recurring appearances of Ken Burns on PBS are no accident. In summer 2009, Burns had about seven documentaries in the works, with about half funded and all promised exclusive rights for PBS broadcast (June-Friesen "Burns Pipeline"). According to Bullert, PBS programmers take a "producer's track record" into consideration (16)

and prefer documentaries from producers who partner with PBS member stations and affiliates (23). Burns' *The Civil War* and *Jazz* feature partnering with WETA, the public broadcasting for the Washington, D.C., market.

### **Auteurship and *The Blues***

While Ken Burns and his series simplify consideration of television documentary auteurs on public broadcasting, the directors of *The Blues* series complicate it. For one, documentary programming rarely provides the foundation for a television auteur's career -- Burns and Wiseman are the exceptions. While both Burns and Wiseman maintain a consistent style within and across works, Scorsese's series consists of seven distinct documentaries.

For two, while many of these creators serve as hyphenates within this series and within their other works, they do not necessarily represent television auteurs in the hyped sense Caldwell describes above. Some of the directors are recognizable for their cinematic and television contributions, but even then their documentary and music documentary contributions vary widely. Scorsese offers the most visible contributor in his roles as director, producer, and series producer. His name appears above the series logo with the words, "Martin Scorsese presents." He is well-known in Hollywood for his gritty, violent films, and music fans might be aware of his editing contributions to *Woodstock* (1970) and his making of *The Last Waltz* (1978). Clint Eastwood comes to the series as more of an actor ("Good ahead -- make my day") and director, and even then his credits appear more on movie theater screens than television ones. Only one documentary credit appears on his series biography for executive producing *Straight, No Chaser* (1988), a documentary about jazz pianist Theolonius Monk ("Director Biography:

Clint Eastwood"). Otherwise, Eastwood's connection to music comes from his "well-documented assertion that he would have chosen to be a musician" ("Director Biography: Clint Eastwood"). Wim Wenders is known for his reunion/concert documentary about *The Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), as well as his documentaries *Lightning over Water* (1980) and *Tokyo-Ga* (1985). His other fictional work appears primarily in movie theaters. Like Eastwood, though not as well-known, Mike Figgis also directs feature films, such as *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) and *One Night Stand* (1997). His forays into documentary include two interview series, *Projections: 10 Hollywood Filmmakers on Filmmaking* and *Hollywood Conversations*. His earlier credits show extensive experience in music and in theater as a performer. Charles Burnett's credits extend primarily into independent fiction film, with one or two programs appearing on ABC and Showtime and one documentary titled *America Becoming* (1991). His association with music links to being a one-time trumpet player.

Marc Levin and Richard Pearce possess the most experience in television. Levin's documentary work such as *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock* (1994) and *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* (1996) have appeared on HBO and *CIA: America's Secret Warriors* (1997) aired on Discovery. He also partnered with PBS figure Bill Moyers for *The Home Front with Bill Moyers*. His work focuses more on politics and social issues than music. Finally, Richard Pearce has several dramatic films to his credit, not to mention documentary cinematography work on *Woodstock* (1970) and *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1971) and cinematography and producing credit for *Hearts and Minds* (1974). His television credits include works on HBO and ABC.

Interestingly enough, among all the bios and the directors' varied experiences with

television, documentary, and music, only one bio mentions PBS specifically, and not even for a straightforward documentary at that. Levin's fiction film *Twilight* (which also incorporates some documentary footage) aired on PBS in 2001. None of the interviews, even Scorsese's, mentions working with PBS. With this combined inexperience in television, documentary, and public broadcasting, these directors getting their works aired on PBS as part of a short-term series proves highly unusual. This is not to dismiss their previous achievements. Their lack of PBS connections, not to mention their specific television or documentary connections, stands in strong contrast to other independent directors and even Ken Burns' work on public broadcasting.

A further marker of each director's auteur status lies in his relative freedom in creating the documentary as he saw fit. While each director had a limited budget, each still was unrestrained by conventional running lengths. Instead of forcing each director's piece to conform to traditional programming blocks, such as half an hour, an hour, or even two hours, each director's film ran to according to the production length. PBS stations then had to fill the "extra" time with other, related programming, which is discussed further in Chapter Four. Usually, independent documentaries must be cut to 57 minutes or less for a one-hour time slot.

Within all of these different wildcards emerges the possibility to do something *different* from *Jazz* and from other documentary series. Even though some documentary series include a degree of personalization through expert hosts, few if any capitalize on the "famous fan" approach to music and music history that *The Blues* embraced. Even then, few of these *Blues* directors retain enough fame to be well known for their fandom of blues music and even less so retain enough knowledge and public awareness to be considered experts on it.

So instead of highlighting their previous achievements as auteurs, the promotion for this

series makes implicit that each director *is* an auteur without specifying how and emphasizes instead each director's vision when it comes to blues music. While some episodes make explicit the directors' visions, other episodes make nothing explicit. Instead, the personal-visions focus gets asserted through the various multimedia texts *surrounding* the series, with only some duplication of information across the different media platforms. These materials include the PBS Web site, DVD interviews, and the broadcast introductions. Consistent with an "industrial auteurism" approach discussed earlier, the following section will examine the ways in which auteurship of *The Blues* is constructed in these materials and the films.

### **Overview of the Texts**

The main page of the Web site, [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues), establishes the personal vision and film-centric directorly focus at the outset: "[S]even directors will explore the blues through their own personal styles and perspectives." The project overview reinforces this focus, by calling the series one "of impressionistic and iconoclastic films -- each director exploring music through his own personal connections." With each episode appear multiple Web pages, including a brief overview, a director biography, and a first-person essay. Each episode overview contains a summary and a quotable quote from its director. The director biography provides the usual background and accolades, but almost all of them take a paragraph to highlight the director's connections to documentary productions, however tentative those connections may be.

Further interviews with the directors appear as an "extra" or "bonus" feature on all the episode DVDs except *Piano Blues*. (An interview with Eastwood on *Piano Blues* seems superfluous since Eastwood himself appears in the film as an interviewer, performer, and

voiceover narrator.) The interviews run between eight and 13 minutes. Each one begins with a music introduction and the series logo floating to the left, while a question appears in the middle of the screen. These questions serve as the interviewer. A standard medium shot frames each director when he answers those questions. Only *The Road to Memphis* DVD features someone in addition to director Richard Pearce as producer Robert Kenner joins him. Questions probe deeper into the motivations and blues history connected to each episode. For example, one of Scorsese's questions asks, "What is the organizing principle behind the series?" Marc Levin is asked about the connections between blues and hip-hop music. However, other questions are more personal to the director. Wim Wenders answers the question, "As a German, did you understand the lyrics of the music you were discovering?" These interviews parallel in content to the longer statements attributed to each director on the Web site, wherein they expound on their motivations behind their subjects, the productions of their episodes, and their histories with music in general and blues music in particular.

During the original PBS broadcast, Martin Scorsese provides an introduction to each episode. Wearing a black suit and tie, and sitting before a city skyline, Scorsese addresses the camera directly. He gives some background or explanation for each director and his episode. He compliments each director in some way, sharing his own admiration of that director's achievements. For example, he says, "What can I say about Clint Eastwood that hasn't already been said?"; and "When I first imagined a series of films about the blues, it was with Charles Burnett in mind." These introductions, like much of the director's discourse, attempt to connect each director and film with Scorsese and his vision for the series.

While the Web site, liner notes, DVD interviews, and broadcast introductions set up the

discourses for these connections and their importance to the series, the series episodes offer other components within which to see how these connections develop, but they vary depending on the director and the film. The series consists of seven episodes by seven directors, with Scorsese serving as the executive director and series producer. As noted in Chapter One, the directors and their episodes were Martin Scorsese with *Feel Like Going Home*, Wim Wenders with *The Soul of a Man*, Richard Pearce with *The Road to Memphis*, Charles Burnett with *Warming by the Devil's Fire*, Marc Levin with *Godfathers and Sons*, Mike Figgis with *Red, White, and Blues*, and Clint Eastwood with *Piano Blues*. In that each episode offers a personal vision, each episode also offers its own subject and style without connection from one episode to the next beyond basic subject matter. The common connections occur through the uses of the documentary form and conventions, such as performance pieces, archival footage, interviews, voiceover narration, and reenacted sequences. In terms of considering the personal connections, however, the most relevant ones include voiceovers, physical presence, interviews, and intertitles. These conventions, along with the external texts, construct the notion of how "personally" these other directors created their visions of blues music in their films. The films themselves, then, enact their own auteurship not as much by a consistency of filmic style across these director's work, but in the often self-reflexive discursive turns made in the films. The following section will discuss each director's level of auteurship, starting with Martin Scorsese. From there, the discussion will take in order the installments in which auteurship is asserted most strongly.

### **Martin Scorsese**

In *Feel Like Going Home*, Scorsese situates himself as a film historian trying to educate



youth in particular and audiences in general about blues music. His words in a voiceover open the film: "I can't imagine my life -- or anyone's -- without music. It's like a light in the darkness that never goes out." With those lines Scorsese sets up the importance of *music* to his life, but not specifically blues music. He also sets up his role as one of the narrators. Most of his voiceover narration provides commentary about the history of blues music, including various performers such as Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker and various archivists such as Arthur S. Alberts and Alan Lomax. Scorsese himself only appears within the frame twice during in-studio performance sequences, and even then he stands in the background observing. His physical presence offers little bearing on the events before him.

Corey Harris instead serves as an onscreen guide to blues music in *Feel Like Going Home*. Unlike Scorsese, who bills himself a fan of music, Harris plays and studies music, particularly blues music. Harris says in voiceover early in the film: "To know yourself, you have to know the past." His voiceover alternates with Scorsese's words, though Harris comments more on the present than the past. Harris travels to the Mississippi Delta, then to Northern Mississippi, and finally to Western Africa in search of blues legends and players. Harris interviews the living blues artists on their porches and in their homes on both continents. He also plays guitar along with them. Further, he plays with various artists such as Taj Mahal in the studio. His status as a musician who regularly travels to Africa grants him access to people such as Ali Farka Toure, and his identity and background assist in his getting interviews and playing time with the living legends in Mississippi. Though Scorsese has strong connections to music through his fiction films and his documentary efforts such as *The Last Waltz*, Harris offers even stronger connections.

As the visionary and leader of this personal focus despite Harris' strong presence in the film, it is no surprise that Scorsese reinforces this focus in his statement, interview, and broadcast introduction. He affirms his identification with Alan Lomax in his personal statement, "I relate strongly to Lomax's instinct, his need to find and record genuine sounds and music before the originators died away. It's hard to overestimate the importance of what he accomplished -- without him so much would have been lost." His role as a film historian in his other documentaries reaffirms this identification. He also carries forward this focus in his broadcast introduction, providing viewers a frame for reading the film. He connects these visions with the blues music, and ultimately again to the presumed auteur nature of the series: "The best of the blues is so deeply personal and yet so fundamentally universal that it felt right to approach a group of different filmmakers, each with his own distinct voice, sharing a love for the music, to pay his own personal tribute."

### **Clint Eastwood**

Despite Scorsese's publicized role as the producer/director "hyphenate," arguably a much stronger "autodoc" narrative occurs in Clint Eastwood's entry in the series. *Piano Blues* provides a showcase of Eastwood almost as much as it does of other piano virtuosos and music. Eastwood serves as narrator; his voice opens the film with, "The piano is the most important musical instrument." He then appears onscreen, sitting at a piano in a studio, and he sits behind the piano for most of the film. Further, many of the piano players such as Ray Charles, Dave Brubeck, Dr. John, Marcia Ball, Jay McShann, and Pinetop Perkins sit with him. Eastwood interviews each piano player, asking questions about inspirations, starts, and careers. After, he invites each one to

play.

Near the film's beginning, Eastwood says in voiceover, "Many piano players have made their deep mark on the blues, and this is their story." Eastwood's own stories become part of this one. He mentions growing up listening to Meade Lux Lewis. He recalls how he brought Fats Domino to his home in the Grand Tetons once and put a piano in a field and asked him to play. As Domino played, several elk appeared up on the ridge and just stood there, waiting. Eastwood quips, "Everybody likes the blues." A quick cut shows an archival photograph of Domino at the piano in the field, with a younger Eastwood standing off to the side. Eastwood shows he knows the piano when he plays some notes to illustrate a tune Ray Charles discusses. A film clip showing him playing the piano as part of a film role reinforces this skill.

Eastwood also offers multiple observations on the genre, though frequently the genre gets associated with jazz. For example, in the voiceover he says, "Piano blues embraces all modes of jazz. A solitary player and a microphone, the sophistication of Duke Ellington, and the energy of bebop. The blues is the basis of everything." While he sits behind a piano, he says, "I've always felt that jazz and blues were true American art forms. Maybe the only original art form that we have." These statements imply strong connections between jazz and blues music, and certainly announce Eastwood's authority with such declarative phrasing as "I've always felt..." but they explain little about each genre's interrelationship. His deep affiliation for music is "well documented," but comments like these offer no specific sense of expertise or deep history.

Eastwood's personal statement reads like an extension of the film in that he continues to share stories. He repeats the Fats Domino story. He claims he learned to play piano from Fats Waller records by imitating them. Eastwood also mentions "being on the program" with Jay

McShann, one of his interviewees in the film, at a concert in Carnegie Hall. He recalls, "So, there I am playing on stage at Carnegie Hall, and all of a sudden I am coming to the end of my repertoire and Jay wasn't there. Afterward, Jay said, 'Well, you seem to be doing OK, I just thought I'd let you go.'"

In all, Eastwood offers few comments about the film itself. At one point he states, "In doing the movie about piano blues I want the camera to look but not get in the way of seeing." Scorsese's broadcast introduction further reminds of Eastwood's music background, such as his composition for films or *Bird*. Scorsese calls the film "a meditation on the magic of piano blues," but Eastwood's contributions seem more mundane than "visionary." As a presence in the installment, however, the iconic Eastwood dominates.

### **Mike Figgis**

Similar to Eastwood, Figgis brings his musical background to *Red, White, and Blues*. He places himself within the 1960s British blues movement and feels previous attempts to document it fail. In his online interview he states, "Having been through it myself, and being, in a limited way, part of it, and certainly as an observer very passionately a part of it, I've always felt the story wasn't really told properly." Scorsese's broadcast introduction casts Figgis as "a natural to take on this phenomenon because he was a part of it."

Figgis also places himself within the film. He organizes *Red, White, and Blues* around a recording session in Abbey Road Studios in London. He appears on camera during the recording session, though he remains in the background. During the interviews he remains off camera but asks questions from behind it. His questions demonstrate his specialized knowledge of the

subject. For example, he asks if trumpet player Ken Colyer forced everyone in the band to play slightly out of tune, an inquiry that interview subject George Melly denies. Figgis also leads with his questions. In talking about Big Bill Broonzy, who billed himself as the last of the Mississippi bluesmen when he moved to England to perform, Melly reveals that Broonzy actually was from and recorded in Chicago before coming to England. Figgis then asks, "That was an important lie, though, wasn't it?" Melly dismisses it as not mattering because Broonzy could perform.

Figgis establishes a rapport with guitarist Eric Clapton that allows his leading questions to reveal some interesting insights into a man revered and reviled for his playing and his attitude. In his online statement, Figgis explains,

I knew what I wanted, so each time it was like a one- to two-hour conversation, in and out. I knew the questions I wanted to ask, and I knew -- not the answers, because that would have been presumptuous -- but I knew enough about the musicians and I felt enough of an intimate knowledge of them to lead them into the area where I thought they would be most interesting (Director Interview).

The effects of this approach are revealed in a brief exchange with Clapton talking about his blues mission:

**Figgis:** Where'd the mission come from?

**Clapton,** pausing, then: Interesting, interesting. I don't know, I don't know. I was convinced at some point in my teens that if I didn't do it, no one would. Or that someone had to do it and I'd been chosen.

**Figgis:** Really?

**Clapton:** Yeah.

**Figgis:** You were so passionate about it.

**Clapton:** And so arrogant, too. I was the self-appointed ambassador to the blues in this country. And very judgmental of the people who weren't doing it the way I thought it should be done.

In this segment, Figgis pushes Clapton to go a step further with his comment and to clarify his

thoughts. The "Really?" implies either doubt or disbelief, and that one word proves just enough to get Clapton to keep talking. Figgis' final comment, "You were so passionate about it," recognizes Clapton's ardor when it comes to reviving and playing blues music and leaves the door open for Clapton to self-reflect and then comment.

Overall, Figgis places himself within his film as an expert trying to facilitate discussions about the music. He wanted to pay respect to the music and its origins, by "verbally talking about where it came from and giving the credit in interviews and in any kind of media straight back to the source which was what we consider to be a sacred group of black musicians who we felt were unsung heroes already" (Figgis "An Interview with"). As part of that movement, Figgis brings a level of expertise to the music that the other directors so far discussed do not. Through his questions, he creates a strong view of British blues music.

### **Charles Burnett**

Scorsese notes that Charles Burnett was one of his first choices for contributing to the series. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* explores the tensions between blues music and gospel music using a frame story. The frame story tells of a young boy who travels from the West Coast to Mississippi to spend a summer with his family. The boy, Junior, stays with his Uncle Buddy, who fills his life and home with blues music and wild women. During his stay Junior experiences women (in a way), visits a juke joint, meets David "Honeyboy" Edwards, learns about blues music, and even goes to a Robert Johnson-esque, "deal with the devil" crossroads, all of which contrast with his rather religious upbringing.

Interspersed throughout the narrative segments are multiple pieces of archival materials.

Similar to the transitions into musical numbers during classical Hollywood musicals, the narrative register (the story of Buddy and Junior) provides a cue or a point to the spectacle register (the archival footage; Belton 150-155; more about this in Chapter Six). These cues occur through playing a record, showing an album, or hearing a person speak. Effectively, though, the two "spaces" remain separate, creating three layers of history: the narrator in the present, Buddy in the past, and the archival materials even further into the past.

The voiceover narration links these two levels. It assumes the position of Junior looking back on that summer from the present. Junior has learned much about blues music since that summer and provides quips, observations, and details about the music and its history. In observation of Lucille Bogan's "Shave 'Em Dry," the narrator jokes, "Her lyrics would make Marquis de Sade blush." About W.C. Handy, he notes, "He was the first person to publish the blues." The narrator also comments on some of the narrative moments. In the crossroads segment, for example, he says, "Coming at the crossroads I found luck has nothing to do with God or the devil. It was a matter of fate." Charles Burnett wrote the words, but actor Carl Lumbly voices them.

How does this link to auteurship? In fact, Burnett claims the frame story comes from his own experiences. Scorsese's broadcast introduction makes this connection between Junior and Burnett explicit: "Like the character in the film you're going to see, Charles traveled in the 1950s from Los Angeles to Mississippi." In the DVD interview Burnett explains how his own background is similar to Junior's in that he is from Mississippi, he grew up in Los Angeles, and he spent summers in Mississippi. In his personal statement, however, he claims some distance: "The story I chose for *Warming by the Devil's Fire* isn't strictly autobiographical, but everything

in the film happened to a certain extent, and I used these experiences as guideposts to come up with a story that everyone could identify with."

Burnett's motivation for the story actually comes from the archival materials. In his personal statement, Burnett notes, "When we started his project, I screened a lot of footage on the blues; if I hadn't, I probably would have made a relatively conventional documentary." The good footage inspired the frame story, but Burnett walked the line between cinema and history, favoring the former over the latter. As a result, "a lot of people were essential to this era probably should have been included for historical reasons, but for dramatic reasons I wound up leaving them out" ("Director Interview: Charles Burnett"). Burnett even identifies his approach as similar to the ones of a blues artist. While perusing the archival footage, he "started thinking about if I was a blues player how would I approach this?" (Burnett). He answers his own question: "Take it and make it your own." (Burnett).

### **Wim Wenders**

If with Eastwood, Figgis and Burnett the installments explicitly proclaim the director's involvement, Wim Wenders' contribution (and the ones that follow) introduce more textual distance between subject and director. Wenders creatively uses the largest variety of documentary conventions in *The Soul of a Man*. In his film, which he also wrote, he looks at three key figures in blues music: Blind Willie Johnson, Skip James, and J.B. Lenoir. He appoints Blind Willie Johnson as his voiceover narrator and guide for the episode. Since Johnson died in 1956, Wenders uses Laurence Fishburne to voice the narrator. Johnson addresses us from beyond the grave and even beyond the stars, telling us how his song travels through space on Voyager.



The voiceover describes the events of Johnson's life and describes Skip James' recording contract in Grafton, WI. The voiceover also offers speculation as Johnson says, "I wonder what went through Skip's head that night. This had been a dream come true. The greatest day of his life. I wonder, Did he know he had marked his place in the history of the blues?" The voiceover also conveys a sense of admiration: "The name 'Skip James' -- a legend among bluesmen. Only the man himself had no idea."

In his personal statement Wenders describes the difficulty he had in choosing a point of view for his piece. His own perspective seemed too close, too intimate. He recalls how Johnson's "Dark Was the Night" had been included on the probe, and this connection led him to the decision. He explains, "He has the necessary distance, so to speak; he had a beautiful 'objective' point of view." That distance gave Wenders the perspective he needed in that the film "is really about the music and the songs, and not so much a film that is dealing with the biographies of my heroes." This discursive turn, then, frames the use of Johnson as a corrective in the series's self-proclaimed "no limits" nature, that a danger of the series was that it could be *too* auteurist, and that the filmmakers needed to be careful not to make it only about them. Ironically, then, Johnson's role, in Wender's words, ends up thus reinforcing the series as an autonomous, creative endeavor.

While the choices of including Blind Willie Johnson and Skip James make sense in terms of their popularity, the choice of J.B. Lenoir seems an odd one. Wenders makes an even odder choice in how he explains Lenoir's inclusion. The voiceover casts Wenders in the third person, explaining how a "young German film student" heard the song "The Death of J.B. Lenoir" by John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers and wanted to learn more about Lenoir as a result. The

voiceover explains further how the student became a director and how he continued looking for information and meeting other fans. While the voiceover continues to refer to Wenders in the third person, we see archival images of a young Wenders from a movie he directed and played a role in. In his personal statement, Wenders notes, "All these J.B. fans had something in common: They were convinced that this was one of the greatest singers ever, yet he remained strangely obscure."

Steve and Ronnog Seaberg then step in to share their enthusiasm and the two films they made with and of Lenoir. The Seabergs discuss their deep admiration for Lenoir, and Steve Seaberg laments not bringing more reels to the recording sessions because "our purpose was to introduce people to him." In his personal statement, Wenders explains how originally he had recorded multiple talking heads to comment on Lenoir but chose to use only the Seabergs in order to emphasize the music over the biography. He states, "It was much more intimate that way, and you'd get to know these bluesmen more than if you'd hear lots of people talking about them." Wenders allows the Seabergs' introduction of Lenoir in his film.

Scorsese's broadcast introduction to Wenders' film highlights Wenders' connection to the music as "a pure expression of Wim's affection for three legendary bluesmen." The music takes center stage, but still "*The Soul of a Man* is a beautiful, deeply personal reflection on the blues." Scorsese's label of a "deeply personal reflection" contradicts Wenders' ideas. Wenders found his own voiceover and presence too close to the subject, so he chose techniques to distance himself. Wenders appears in archival footage, and he is described in the third person. He allows the Seabergs to convey his enthusiasm for Lenoir, and he uses a voiceover from space to observe and comment. Instead of bringing him closer, these techniques keep him at a distance. Even so, the

film reflects Wenders' choices in subjects in that he focuses on his favorite bluesmen. He distances himself from the subject within the film in order to avoid the narcissism that potentially develops from this technique (see Scott), but his comments surrounding the film, as well as his own inclusion in it (even in third person) as "the young German film student" reinforce his visions for it.

### **Marc Levin**

In the DVD interview, Marc Levin contradicts the series' organizing principle outright: "I didn't want to make it a personal story." In fact, Levin writes in his personal statement, "This story of [Marshall] Chess we tell in the film is his personal story -- his family's story." Scorsese's broadcast introduction also confirms this approach in describing how Levin "tracks the budding relationship between Chuck D and the great record producer Marshall Chess as they travel to Chicago in search of the past to see if the spirit of the blues lives on in the muse of the present." Scorsese offers no strong description of Levin's approach or vision. His use of the word "tracks" casts Levin as more of a reporter than a visionary.

In *Godfathers and Sons* Levin uses a "fly-on-the-wall" approach. He avoids titles, allowing his camera, sound, and editing to create the authority for the subjects. Chess becomes the first voice, in voiceover, and he states, "The blues is part of my DNA. The blues is playing in my head 24 hours a day." Rapper Chuck D becomes the second voice as he states, "If you study the recorded history of blues, soul, funk, and jazz for the last 100 years, you'll get a timeline of how black people lived." Both Marshall Chess and Chuck D explore the history of Chess records and its artists, looking through the archives, meeting with various artists, traveling throughout the

city, going to a festival, listening in a bar, arranging a reunion, and working on a recording session.

Both men serve as experts and guides throughout the film. Chess represents the history of his father and uncle's record label, which he shows through old albums and stories. He highlights the struggles, particularly in dealing with racial tensions: "Some called us nigger-lovers. Others accused us of ripping off our artists. But really we both had the same agenda: We both wanted a better life." In addition to his recording career, Chuck D asserts, "I'm a musicologist. I've been a big fan of everything, especially, you know, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, rap, of course." Instead of Levin directing questions and conversations onscreen and asserting his own visions of the film, Chess and Chuck D provide the background and other information to supplement the other interview subjects' comments and the archival materials. Their perspectives shape the topic, and the cinema verite approach allows them to unfold.

The cinema verite style serves as a key marker of Levin's overall films. His production company's bio describes Levin: "A pioneer in the art of merging fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, Marc Levin brings narrative and verite techniques together in his independent films, episodic television and documentaries." ("Marc Levin"). Several of Levin's films, both fiction and nonfiction, use a verite style to capture their subjects. In addition to style, many of Levin's films focus on race and identity issues. *Brooklyn Babylon* (2001), a fiction work, focuses on a relationship between an African American man and a Jewish woman. Other of his films focus on crossing of cultural lines, particularly between African American and white cultures. *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock* (1994), for example, looks at gang cultures among white youth. *Whiteboyz* (1999), for another example, mocks a white teenager trying to emulate the gangster lifestyle

while living in Iowa. A similar theme emerges in *Godfathers and Sons* in that race relations play a part in the film's themes. Between style and theme, Levin's film fits more among his own works than it does among the series.

### **Richard Pearce**

A majority of Richard Pearce's experience is as a cinematographer, but for this film, Scorsese tells us in his introduction, "Dick was both camera man *and* director." *The Road to Memphis* employs the techniques of cinema verite, which bears a unique style long-since co-opted by forms of reality television such as *Cops*. The early manifestations of this style include "the restless, wandering movements of lightweight, hand-held cameras; the blurred, grainy images of fast, monochrome film; the preference for (even unintelligible) synchronous sound over authoritative voice-over narration; and the impromptu performances of apparently preoccupied social actors" (Hall 224). This form eschews formal interviews and voiceover narration. Some directors working in this mode, such as pioneer Robert Drew, drew on the principles of objective journalism, while others, such as Jean Rouch, saw themselves as provocateurs in the realities they recorded (Beattie 83-86).

This form allows immense freedom and access (if granted) to a wider variety situations, such as traveling on the tour buses, going to interviews with B.B. King, and even following Roscoe Gordon as he visits Beale Street for the first time in decades. One unique moment occurs when the Bobby Rush's tour bus stops and finds a homeless man along the street, who performs and to whom Rush gives a dollar. Rush then plays the guitar for the man while the man sings along.

The cinema verite form creates a sense of immediacy. In his director's statement, Pearce notes, "[W]e decided to try to keep everything as much in the present tense as possible." In the DVD interview producer Robert Kenner joins Pearce. He echoes Pearce's assertion of how they "try to keep everything as much in present tense terms as possible." Pearce explains in the director's statement how this focus worked: "Filming Bobby [Rush] was a chance to show the world that circuit [the chitlin circuit] and do it in present-tense terms." The access Rush offered facilitated this approach: "We arrived at this gas station in Mississippi. We just piled on the bus, took off, and he started telling stories and introducing us to the band members" ("Director's Statement: Richard Pearce"). Pearce highlights the realistic nature of the verite process and, therefore, the film itself: "We're in the middle of the real thing. It was exciting."

The excitement about the situation is notable because the DVD interviews with Pearce and Kenner raise some questions about the choice of Rush. According to Kenner, "He wasn't actually from Memphis, and we're not sure it was exactly the blues." Pearce adds, "Other than that, he was perfect." Among the three men profiled for the film, only Roscoe Gordon was born in Memphis, while King hails from Indianola, Mississippi, and Rush hails from Louisiana. Interestingly enough, Rush is listed in several blues music guides, including ones by Robert Santelli and the All Music Guide staff. According to Jason Ankeny's entry in AMG, Rush started in Chicago blues bands before moving toward his own sound. Rush "opted to forgo the blues market in favor of targeting the Chitlin circuit, which offered a more receptive audience for his increasingly bawdy material" (483). Rush's unique sound and style cross the lines of soul, funk, and blues.

This uncertainty about the choice of Rush reflects on an early statement by Pearce in the

DVD interview. He notes, "It's completely a world I have no experience with." He explains how he learned about blues music from other white boys while growing up. If Pearce holds a deep affection for and knowledge of the subject, his film and its extras make no showing of it. Even Scorsese's broadcast introduction makes no mention, either. Instead, Scorsese states, "*The Road to Memphis* goes straight to the heart of the music. It's also a celebration of life on the road, the exhaustion of it, and the lure of it."

Pearce's directorial vision draws directly from his background and strength as a cinematographer. Pearce trained with Robert Drew, one of the primary visionaries of the cinema verite movement as it emerged in the United States. Instead of imposing his own vision on a subject and its history he knows only something about, Pearce highlights his skills in capturing the events as they unfold from the perspective of an observational journalist. His approach allows him unprecedented access, which in turn allows him to bring forward his subjects. Along with Kenner's contributions, Pearce's cinema verite approach on its surface works against the auteurist claims driving the series.

## **Conclusions**

Bullert divides independent producers for public broadcasting into four categories: mavericks, activists, pragmatists, and innocents (12). As the label implies, mavericks forge their own paths in their topics and styles. Mavericks create programming outside the schedule-mandating length norms and "create highly partisan documentaries that challenge conventional beliefs," while activists create "programs with strong points of view and an agenda for change" (Bullert 13). Pragmatists are more tempered versions of mavericks and activists in that they

follow journalistic principles in their productions (Bullert 13). Innocents possess no knowledge of working with public broadcasting or creating work for it (Bullert 13). Pragmatists are the most likely to get their works accepted on public broadcasting, but they compromise in order to do so. According to Bullert, "They may still have strong personal opinions, but they tailor their proposals and programs to fit within the boundaries of acceptability in the world of public television" (14).

With *The Blues*, most of these directors fit within the pragmatist category, but they do not conform to the typical independent producer working with or for PBS because they do not rely on the service for their livelihood. Each director brings his own approach to telling about a particular aspect of blues music and its history. Wenders, Figgis, Burnett, and Eastwood draw directly from their own experiences and interests, while Scorsese, Pearce, and Levin focus on the experiences of others. Not all directors perceive their films as following Scorsese's vision. Interviews on the DVDs and statements on the Web site offer insights into the directors' intentions behind their episodes and explanations for the choices they made. These extra pieces of information sometimes affirm, as is the case of Wim Wenders, Scorsese's personal vision, while others, as in the case of Marc Levin, flatly deny it. Scorsese's vision is not everyone else's vision, and the interviews allow this disjunction to play out. Scorsese's introductions follow the directors' cues; instead of attempting to force his own visions upon them, Scorsese's comments adjust accordingly. For some, he affirms their visions, and for others he mentions content of the episodes instead. Overall, Scorsese's basic vision gets carried out in that the individual directors get the opportunity to explore blues music on their own terms. It also gets carried out in that it becomes the organizing principle used to explain the series, which it needs, since subject matter



and documentary form offer not enough unity for a week-long series.

The vision / organizing principle attempts to reach audiences differently than the chronological / cultural history found in many of Ken Burns' films. It also works rather differently than most documentary series on PBS, in that it involves multiple directors with an abundance of freedom and with no need to work with PBS again unless they so choose. But this principle, externally imposed, creates some problems. For one, the mosaic might be not be cohesive enough to keep viewers' attention from one night to the next. For two, the mosaic reveals gaps in the history, leaving out prominent contributors, events, and themes. For example, the story of W.C. Handy's discovery of blues music garners only passing mention in *Warming the Devil's Fire*, yet it serves as the foundation for studies of blues music and as part of the "Year of the Blues" Congressional decree. The series leaves out major contributions by women such as Ida Cox, Bertha "Chippie" Hill, Alberta Hunter, Sara Martin, Lizzie Miles, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Edith Wilson (see Harrison). It is arguable, however, that the mosaic structure also facilitates the revelation of these gaps, while Burns' documentaries, with their more chronological approaches, appear to smooth them over.

A third problem relates to how the blues across generations nearest to the directors and offers little to appeal to the current generation. Only rapper Common might appeal to the current generation, and he appears briefly in Marc Levin's piece. Critics also noted that some inclusions in the series were unconventional, not clearly associated with blues music, and as such may have diluted the essence of (or at least essences of) the genre, such as Eastwood's jazz leanings in his piece (see the review by Cromelin). Such dilution may have resulted from the personal vision/autodoc format of the series.

But who are these directors and why should we accept their visions of blues music? The series materials set up these directors as auteurs with visions for the music, yet it offers little explanation for why these directors, most of whom maintain only a fan's passion for the blues, were chosen. Blues historian Peter Guralnick assists with writing on occasion, but the primary focus here lies on the directors. Considering the long shadows of Burns' reputation and this series' very visible attempts to distance itself from that reputation with the personal focus, the fact these directors bring almost no authority to the subject proves problematic because the series loses credibility as a result.

What public broadcasting gains, however, is the highly visible and marketable presence of Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, and Mike Figgis, in particular. Public broadcasting used to be a haven for bringing works that failed to fit the constraints of commercial broadcasting, though cable television and even now online distribution draw others away from the service. At the time of the series, PBS programming executive Pat Mitchell had "made some inroads with Hollywood's creative community" (Frutkin and Burgi 30). Robert Redford served as an executive producer on a series, and Scorsese offered another example. In 2005 Scorsese directed *No Direction Home*, a four-hour documentary about Bob Dylan that also aired on PBS, though none of the other directors have created additional works for the service. These examples suggest an opportunity for getting their visions broadcast on the service. Bringing in these big Hollywood names might even attract more sponsors and donations as well.

Frutkin and Burgi also are quick to point out that the Hollywood connections established "are the exceptions" (30). For the series, these directors are exceptions not only in their relationship with the service, but also in that they sidestep the usual programming standards.

Their personal visions might receive exposure, and possibly better exposure, elsewhere, yet public broadcasting becomes their chosen venue. The broadcast of these personal visions also squeezes out an opportunity for a new voice to gain an audience through the service. PBS changed its standards in allowing this series to air, bringing in top names with puffery promotion that only marginally obscures the lacking credibility of these directors and their visions. The Hollywood names might have been good publicity for *The Blues*, but perhaps not-so-good public pedagogy for the blues.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Broadcasting *The Blues*:

### Mixing Genre, Scheduling, and PBS Identity

Traditional approaches to genre study work from the inside out by grouping films, books, and shows according to their shared textual features. This insular approach draws generic boundaries that blur and shift as new texts are added, and this approach proves useful for comparisons across culture, time, and other contexts. While it considers social, cultural, production, and historical contexts, it sometimes fails to account for the other texts that facilitate shaping a genre, such as trailers, print ads, interviews, reviews, and other cues. These external factors figure prominently in television, which "utilises genre classification not only as a shorthand means of *scheduling*, targeting and maintaining popularity, but as a whole organising principle in the case of genre-based television channels such as the Cartoon Network or the Sci-Fi Channel" (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, and Lewis 137; emphasis in original). These uses of genre facilitate maintaining the flow of programming, the identity of the channel, and the attraction of audiences, broadening our understanding of genre beyond the traditional approaches.

Genre is a key element for public television, just as it is for every network. For PBS, the genre of the "limited series documentary" is especially central to its network identity. Before the current multi-media, multi-channel environment, PBS served as the primary home for television documentary and documentary series. The Carnegie Commission for Public Television recommended documentary as part of PBS's cultural programming offerings. Still today PBS offers multiple documentary series, such as *NOVA*, *Frontline*, *POV*, and *American Biography*.

While Discovery, History, HBO, and other channels also regularly show documentary programming, PBS remains the primary home for the long-form educational or long-form documentary series. These series become the signature programming pieces for the service. *The Blues* represents an interesting example of this genre and PBS's use of it in its programming.

A key thematic feature to these long-form documentary series is coherence. The term typically refers to how well a group of texts holds together through connections among their internal features. With this in mind, one goal of this chapter is to place *The Blues* in the larger context of documentaries on television. However, this chapter also moves outside the series texts to the various elements involved with the series broadcast on one local member station, WPSU, to consider its external coherence as well. Drawing on the cultural studies approaches to genre outlined by Jason Mittell, it situates *The Blues* within the programming practices of public television. It demonstrates how this series works within and against the scheduling standards of the service, and it shows how its generic structure and construction facilitates its distribution to and exhibition in other venues as well.

### **An Overview of Genre Theory in Film and Television**

Questions of genre -- usually defined as a set of texts grouped by common features or interests -- long have preoccupied scholars studying media. Film scholars follow two dominant traditions: classical genres and revisionist genres. Approaches to classical genres assume an ideal prototype exists and read other possibilities against it for how successfully they follow the model (Corrigan and White 317). Revisionist genres view "film as a function of changing historical and cultural contexts that modify the conventions and formulas of that genre" (Corrigan and White

317). Instead of upholding the prototype with each subsequent film, revisionist genres acknowledge the influence of external factors on shaping a representative title within that genre. These external factors might include technological developments, cultural attitudes, industry regulation, and even popular trends.

Though the revisionist approaches to genre take into consideration the external factors, both the classical and revisionist traditions rely primarily on textual features for their analyses. In his review of Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres*, A. Williams states, "For the phrase 'genre films,' referring to a general category, we can frequently, though not always, substitute film narrative. Perhaps *that is the real genre*" (121, cited in Neale 20; emphasis in original). These traditions focus on narrative features to define their categories: character types, plots, and settings. Formal aspects such as camera framing, shot editing, lighting, and costume design also facilitate the visual creation and interpretation of these narratives.

War films offer one example of how traditional approaches to genre study operate. These films' shifting narratives from war to war often get attributed to the real-life theater of that particular war. In *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Jeanine Basinger outlines the basic elements of the genre listed in her title. Her chosen method included screening "more than a thousand films over a five-year period in order to see what happens to one presumed genre" (Basinger 7). From this corpus she develops 16 points that define the combat film, including the multi-ethnic group, their goal, the unseen enemy, and women's absence (Basinger 56-57). Tensions within the group emerge less so from identity and background issues and more so from individuals putting aside their differences so they can function together as a unit so they can survive. If an individual indulges his own sense of heroics, he likely ends up dead. Films

Basinger uses to create this definition include *Bataan*, *Guadacanal Diary*, and *Destination Tokyo*. Her analyses extend beyond textual borders, however, in that she suggests "the attitudes that an audience should take to the war are taught through event, conversations, and actions" (Basinger 57). In other words, these films educate audiences about the war and the opinions they should have of it.

Central to genre analyses is the idea of audience expectations. These expectations are twofold. On the one hand, audiences attend a genre film with an idea of the story lines, character types, and the iconography that they expect appear within the film. On the other hand, audiences do not expect a complete conformity of a film to a particular genre. Instead, they hope for a degree of variation or novelty to balance the potential monotony of the generic formula. Langford calls this twofold set of expectations "the generic 'contract,'" wherein "familiarity leavened with novelty seems to offer some guarantee that the price of admission will purchase another shot of an experience already enjoyed (once or many times)" (1).

Langford extends the ideas of genre construction to filmmakers' identities. He notes, "[O]rganising production around genres and cycles holds out the promise of attracting and retaining audiences in a reliable way, reducing commercial risk" (1). In *Contemporary U.S. Cinema* Michael Allen describes ways in which genres help filmmakers. For example, filmmakers can reuse materials as a means of saving money and speeding up the production process (Allen 180). Both of these concerns are important in today's era of media conglomeration, when "an economic atmosphere in which safety, predictability, and security of investment are the paramount concerns" (Allen 182). Genres can also help build a filmmaker's reputation, such as Scorsese and his mob films. As a particular filmmaker's oeuvre in a genre

develops, the reputation builds a fan base, which in turn builds the security of investments.

Genres become part of the defining features for cinematic and production entities in addition to that of the individual auteur. Studies of Hollywood history connect various studios with certain genres, such as MGM to musicals, 20th Century Fox to screwball comedies, and Warner Bros. to crime dramas. The vertically integrated industry structure of the time facilitates these comparisons, but since 1948, these businesses have been consolidating rapidly and aggressively (Allen 7-10). Interesting, then, in film the connection between specific genres and studio identity has eroded since the Classic Studio Era (with the exception of Disney). However, in television (especially but not exclusively cable), the connection between genre and distributor identity is strong. Genres even become the organizing principle of some cable networks. DIY, for example, features how-to programming; Cartoon Network features almost exclusively animation; The Food Network logically features cooking programs. Some networks use documentary programming as the bulk of their schedules include The History Channel, Discovery, and Animal Planet.

Genres are pervasive and in practice have a strong cross-media nature. Although genre studies in print literature, music, film and other humanities fields often are organized by medium, many genres transcend medium specificity, and as such may be transformed to various extents when being translated from one medium to others. For example, films noir have their origins in pulp novels (Belton 224). Contemporary blockbusters have been influenced by comic book characters and the graphic novel (see McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich).

Genres on television bring forward an even more complicated set of questions, so much so that "[a]s an academic tool of analysis, the genre approach may be finally losing relevance"



(Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, and Lewis 137). The variety of shows on television challenges the narrative approaches of film studies. Some shows such as soap operas, situation comedies, and dramas employ clearly defined narrative features. Other shows such as news, game shows, talk shows, and variety shows may use narrative elements, but other non-fictional principles organize the shows, such as the inverted pyramid structure for news. The current broadcast environment also features an overwhelming abundance of "reality" programming. Many of these genres blur the boundaries of narrative and nonnarrative consistently. The large number of programs that air on television -- especially in the digital cable era -- and the large number of episodes produced within a series -- also encourages the mixing and blurring of genres as creators search for story ideas and the ideal mix of the familiar with the novel. Gitlin argues that for these reasons television is a medium that especially leads to hybrid, or to use his term "recombinant" genres.

Setting the boundaries of television programming also proves a challenge. While television shows possess opening and closing credits, the shows still are situated within a stream of commercials, public service announcements, station identifications, and other segments. Such shows are also promoted throughout the medium from weeks before to minutes before a particular program airs. As Raymond Williams writes, "In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form" (79). This constant flow of television complicates the definition of "text," and also of genre, as Feuer argues

Television programs do not operate as discrete texts to the same extent as movies;

the property of "flow" blends one program unit into another, and programs are regularly "interrupted" by ads and promos. Critics have argued that perhaps the unit of coherence for television is found at a level larger than the program and different from the genre -- for example, an evening's viewing on a particular network or all possible combinations of programs a viewer could sample during one evening (157).

Given this, does "text" refer to the show itself? If so, does it refer to one episode or an entire series? Or an evening of viewing? Does it refer to the moments of the initial broadcast or its rebroadcast, not to mention its recording into a digital video recorder or its viewing on Hulu? In addition with new media, additional texts may be added via accompanying website supplements (such as web extras about creators, characters or even subplots) as a kind of textual "overflow" (see Gray). Any of these "texts" offer up a different reading depending on viewing contexts.

For the above reasons, then, the study of genre and the related elements of narrative, textual definition, and industry identity become even more complicated through television. Textual analysis approaches that center on the elements within texts fail to provide an adequate connection between the genre and the broadcasting identity. While some might claim that a PBS documentary resembles Associate Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's claim about pornography ("I know it when I see it"), the claim still falls short. In all it requires a shift away from a reliance on texts and expansion to consider other aspects of *The Blues* and its broadcast.

In his book *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, television scholar Jason Mittell offers a corrective approach that potentially provides a holistic means to examine genre in order to make relevant, salient connections external to texts. While

his book focuses primarily on fiction-based genres, Mittell's overall framework is useful for analyzing *The Blues* as a function of genre and scheduling. He notes five core points to his framework. First, the features of a text's medium play an important role (Mittell 23). A program appearing on live television provides a different experience than the same program playing on television through video playback, streaming through an internet site, or playing on a DVD. Next, "genre studies should negotiate between specificity and generality" (Mittell 24). Instead of approaching a text as wholly unique, it becomes useful to a specific text as a case study, which allows addressing questions both of specificity and generality. Third, genre histories move away from linearity and toward a broader set of contexts, such as production techniques, sponsorship, scheduling, and station identity (Mittell 25). Fourth, like all discursive practices, genres function as part of cultural practices; these practices -- including how various other sources symbolically construct the categorizations of texts -- influence social understanding of television programs (Mittell 26). His last core point highlights ideology: genres function as part of other systems of cultural and power (Mittell 26).

Mittell's approach thus does not preclude integrating analysis of television programs as part of a larger genre analysis. However, focusing exclusively on the series texts fails to offer much opportunity to make broader statements about public broadcasting's identity, cultural contributions, or business practices. In order to consider how this series functions as a part of public broadcasting, it requires a look at documentary's role in public broadcasting, a discussion of the long-form documentary series' place within public broadcasting history, an analysis of the series broadcast in terms of coherence, and a discussion of its place within other exhibition outlets.

## Documentary and Public Broadcasting

In order to understand how documentary appears a “natural” choice for public broadcasting programming, we first must answer a basic question: What is a documentary? When held up against Hollywood genres such as the western, the war film, musicals, and romances, in many ways documentary becomes defined by what it is not: nonfiction, nonnarrative, nondramatic, nonspectacle, and, some would argue, nonentertaining. Other definitions of documentary focus on its conventions, such as talking heads, on-location sequences, observable moments, archival materials, and voiceover narration. These textual-based definitions lead to different types of categorization. For example, Bill Nichols classifies documentaries into different modes, such as expository, observational, interactive, reflexive (Nichols, *Reality*, 34-68), poetic, participatory, and performative (Nichols, *Introduction*, 102-137). In “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” Michael Renov considers more the intentions behind documentary as a means of explicating and grouping them. His four functions – “to record, reveal, or preserve,” “to persuade or promote,” “to analyze or interrogate,” and “to express” (Renov, “Poetics,” 25-35) – situate different documentaries as part of a larger documentary discourse. Both Nichols and Renov posit now long-supported views on documentary and its functions, and these views, grounded both in film theory specifically and cultural theory generally, attempt to provide a more totalizing definition. While useful for a starting point, these definitions prove limiting because with their textual focus they fail to account for broader cultural understandings and functions of documentary in institutional settings, in media environments, and in audience expectations.

Documentary as a form carries with it a cultural weight that gives it a greater sense of

credibility than other forms of programming. In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bill Nichols explains this weight by situating documentary alongside other "discourses of sobriety," such as "[s]cience, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, [and] welfare" (3). Within these discourses lie power and the possibility to effect change:

Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are the vehicles of domination and consequence, power and knowledge, desire and will (Nichols 4).

While documentary belongs among these other discourses, it has yet to reach the full power to create change on a widespread level. Some documentaries have corrected specific miscarriages of justice, such as Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) exposing the incongruities among the witnesses in the Randall Adams case and eventually becoming a catalyst for setting a wrongfully convicted murderer free. Not every documentary, however, possesses or even strives to attain this level of difference in society.

Similar to other genres, documentary carries with it a set of expectations for audiences. While fiction-genre audiences expect and even hope for some deviation, documentary audiences expect the texts to adhere to reality, at least in varying degrees. How much of a degree depends on factors such as the subject, the style, the director, the exhibition venue, and the nature of the audience itself. Keith Beattie describes these expectations as a documentary contract, or "a tacit contractual agreement or bond of trust between documentary producers (whether an individual filmmaker or broadcasting institution) and an audience that the representation is based on the

actual socio-historical world, not a fictional world imaginatively conceived" (11). In the United States breaking this agreement carries no financial punishment (though it does in Great Britain), but doing so can raise questions about the director's credibility and reputation. Michael Moore's skewed timeline in *Roger and Me* and its reception among critics and audiences becomes one example of what happens when those questions arise (Corner 155-170).

Documentary programming provided an alternative to the entertainment on network television during the 1950s. This situation changed in the 1960s when networks began expanding their news divisions and their programming options. Televised documentary specials such as *Harvest of Shame* (CBS, 1960), *The Battle of Newburgh* (NBC, 1962), and *Hunger in America* (CBS, 1968) came from these news divisions, and they stirred audiences, networks, and politicians (see Raphael). Further, "The first four years of the 1960s saw more documentaries produced and broadcast in network prime time than any other comparable period" (Curtin 18). As implied by the discussion of the commercial imperatives placed on network television discussed in Chapter Two, even with the alternative and cultural weight documentaries offered, getting sponsors for them proved difficult. According to Curtin, "network sales staffs suggested that one of the benefits of this arrangement was the association audiences would make between the program's sophisticated, public service content and the identity of the sponsor" (249). But ultimately the non-advertising centered nature of the subject matter proved too tough of a sell in most cases. Since the 1960s -- the height of the networks' television news divisions -- the decline of documentary programming has been dramatic and steady. Curtin suggests the inability of the documentary programming to draw sponsorship as a strong reason because potential sponsors shied away from the controversial content (249).

Today's cable industry carries a wide variety of documentary programming, so much so that critics point to this proliferation as proof that public broadcasting no longer is needed. Discovery offers some of the most extensive documentary programming, from social issues to nature programming. These documentaries often receive global distribution as well. But this presence and availability results in a rather bland and repetitive version of the documentary form. Hogarth calls these documentaries "McDocs -- bland, uniform, risk-free products that please and inform no one" (76). These documentaries become "infotainment," which "uses an audiovisual language originally associated with mainstream entertainment television, such as sensationalism, fast pace, spectacle, enhancing music and narrativisation" (Donnelley 139). While they fill a schedule and offer easy modification for international distribution, they fall short of public broadcasting ideals. As Fursich explains, "Discovery's strategy and the genre of nonfiction entertainment successfully emulates and undermines the programming postulate of public service broadcasters but inherently falls short of the central idea of public broadcasting -- that is, creating an informed citizenry and a public forum for communication" (132).

Networks such as HBO and Showtime also offer documentary programming. HBO in particular uses documentary to separate itself as a premium network, and it also uses documentary programming to distinguish itself from the multiple other channels offering movies (McAdams 42). The network attempts to push boundaries with its documentary programming. The documentary series *America Undercover*, for example, looked at Atlanta strip clubs (McAdams 41). Other HBO documentaries include Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, a strong critique of what failed to happen in the wake of hurricane Katrina. HBO uses the documentary form to establish its quality reputation and possibly to justify its costs as a premium cable

channel. Those costs create an elite, but small, audience.

Documentary also played an important role in the programming of educational television (ETV), public broadcasting's direct predecessor. The programming on ETV fell into two categories: "in-school" or "instructional" television (ITV) and cultural (McBride 197). The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television wanted both forms of programming to continue, but it specifically did not want public broadcasting to become an extension of instructional television, which included broadcasts of college lectures. In addition to children's programs, lighter shows, and theatrical and concert performances, "documentaries on subjects of national concern or which require a national approach" were suggested by the Carnegie Commission (Conant et. al. 44).

Today documentary programming seems a "natural" choice for public broadcasting in part because of both the form's and the service's educational intentions and missions. The ideas of documentary long had possessed and had been designed for educational purposes. Produced by Frank Capra during the early 1940s, the *Why We Fight* series educated soldiers and audiences about different aspects of the war, including the enemy, the history, and the motivations (Ellis and McLane 131-135). In *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films, 1945-1970* Ken Smith describes how various production companies made films for use in schools. These films addressed such subjects as sex, drug dangers, proper driving, good hygiene, and all-around good behavior. These films "were deliberately made to adjust the social behavior of their viewers," though their success is difficult to ascertain (Smith 28). Other educational films in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to calm people about the workings of the atomic bomb and to prepare them for an attack, which guided them to "duck and cover," as mocked in the compilation documentary *The*



*Atomic Café* (1982).

With this legacy of education and social relevancy, and given the stated mission of PBS and CPB, documentary programming -- both instructional and cultural -- has played a strong role in public broadcasting since its formal inception. Even today, the service features shows about public affairs, culture, science, nature, and various how-to projects (Bullert 15). For public affairs *Frontline* has served and still serves as a pioneer home for documentaries. As a series that both produces documentaries and is an outlet for independently produced documentaries, *Frontline* has no real equivalent on the commercial broadcast networks. Going back to one of Mittell's elements that make up a cultural approach to genre, documentaries on *Frontline* often are ideologically pointed, challenging those in power or conventional practices. Writing about *Frontline* during the 1980s when public broadcasting was especially under attack, Engelman notes, "The topics and perspectives contained in its documentaries seem to defy the political limits of public television during the Reagan era" (201). Other series also serve as homes for documentaries through PBS. *NOVA* reveals the mysteries of science to curious scientists and non-scientists; it first aired March 3, 1974 (Stewart 165). More independent nonfiction perspectives on cultural and social issues became part of *POV*, which started in 1988 as "a catchall for independently produced programs" (Bullert 31) and is perhaps even more counter-hegemonic than *Frontline* (as the controversial example of *Tongues Untied*, discussed in Chapter Two, indicates). For how-to programming, one of the most well-known examples is Julia Child's *The French Chef*, which began in 1963 on WGBH and continued to be broadcast on PBS (Stewart 129-139).

Outside MTV and VH1, music programming also finds a stable home on the PBS

schedule. This programming represents a variety of music genres, both in terms of performances and artist profiles. One favorite is *Austin City Limits*, which features performances by artists of pop, rock, folk, country, bluegrass, and other genres. Shows featured Corinne Bailey Rae, KT Tunstall, and The Pixies, for example ("Austin City Limits -- ANTHOLOGY"). The episode broadcast after *The Blues* series broadcast concluded featured Stevie Ray Vaughn. *Soundstage* originally ran from 1974-1985 with performances by Tina Turner, Jim Croce, and the BeeGees , and the show was resurrected in 2007 with more recent performances by the Dave Matthews Band, Joss Stone, and Daughtry ("About Soundstage"). *The American Masters* profiles figures in a variety of cultural venues, and music portraits include Les Paul, Leonard Bernstein, Aretha Franklin, Muddy Waters, and Willie Nelson ("A-Z List"). While focusing primarily on the fine arts such as dance, opera, and classical music, *Great Performances* lives up to its name with concerts by Andrea Bocelli, Joshua Bell, Eric Clapton, and Cream ("Great Performances"). *Evening at Pops* showcased classical music from the Boston Symphony Orchestra ("Evening at Pops 2004").

The music programming represents just one type of cultural documentary programming on PBS. All of the programs mentioned above, both music and nonmusic, function as parts of long-running series on the service. These programs, particularly the concert performances, walk the line between prestige programming and everyday programming. But the usual intersections of music and documentary, primarily in the form of concert films, often fail to bring critical acclaim and deep respect for their makers. Only a small handful of these films achieve a degree of critical success, such as D.A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1967) about Bob Dylan, the Maysles brothers' *Gimme Shelter* (1970) about the Rolling Stones, and even Scorsese's *The Last*

*Waltz* (1978) about the Band. These films represent more than just the artists and their performances; they also comment about the cultures of the times. These films represent the exception, however, for most concert films get dismissed (and rightfully so) as fluff merchandise used to part fans with their money. These films rarely address political implications of the music, its artists, and its industry, yet these political implications become particularly important for African American artists who struggle to achieve the same respect, opportunities, and pay (see Kofsky).

Documentary serves multiple functions within public broadcasting. It fulfills the educational functions specified by the Carnegie Commission. It offers a credibility with audiences unavailable with other fiction programming; those seeking information, learning, or something else from television programming potentially find it in documentaries. It further offers an alternative to the network programming of the era.

This brief overview already reveals some of the complications of *The Blues* series in terms of documentary and public broadcasting. One, as a stand-alone mini-series (or, as will be labeled below, "long-form documentary"), the episodes fail to conform to other long-running documentary series already broadcast on PBS. According to Bullert, independent producers stand a better chance of getting their works broadcast if those works conform to already existing series. Two, the series fails to fall within the current norms for music and documentary on public broadcasting. It aligns neither with the current performance series or the portraits of *The American Masters* series. In fact, several episodes offer a combination of both.

A further complication is that the series still falls within the ideas of documentary and public broadcasting. Unlike concert films, music performances, and artist portraits, it offers a

more comprehensive approach to its subject. It addresses a cultural subject of importance, an importance certified by the Year of the Blues declaration. Yet its designation as a documentary alone fails to explain how the series works within PBS programming and identity. It requires another step in order to provide a fuller picture.

### **The Long-Form Documentary Series**

Genre scholars such as Mittell argue that larger genres may sometimes be broken up into smaller "subgenres," which can especially be valuable as analytical categories as they develop their own cultural coherence and become universal markers for various interpretative communities (11). According to Barry Dornfeld in *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*, public broadcasting continues to provide the primary source for one such subgenre, what he calls the long-form documentary series. Dornfeld notes this type of series "remains a principal, 'culturally recognized,' form we associate with public television and a category of program PBS features in an effort to distinguish itself" (93). PBS broadcasts at least one series like this per year (Jarvik 275). These short series often open the fall or spring seasons. Examples of these series include much of the longer works by Ken Burns, such as *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994), and *Jazz* (2001), but others include *Cosmos* (1980), *Vietnam* (1983), and *Childhood* (1991).

For his book-length study of *Childhood*, Dornfeld completed a media ethnography on the series' production, an ambitious one that looks at children and families from around the world. Dornfeld grounds his analysis in observations of the production process and in interviews with the people involved. From this interaction he outlines and applies the framework for considering

the long-form documentary series. Since his ethnography included access to behind-the-scenes workings and information, it proves useful for analyzing the series within a broadcast context. In addition, the author takes up many issues involved with the genre (or subgenre) of *Childhood*.

Dornfeld notes from the outset that "generic distinctions within educational programming prove more elusive and indistinct than with fictional texts: a horror film or a television soap opera complies with articulable conventional definitions much more easily than a major PBS documentary series (though we seem to know a PBS documentary when we see one)" (91). Since documentary remains slippery when it comes to creating an overarching definition, a concept external to the form but related to the genre provides the theoretical connections needed to unify these series. This concept is "coherence." The ideas of coherence remain a strong component of genre studies. At their foundation genre studies rely on this concept to facilitate making some sense of the grouped texts, particularly through textual comparison (Feuer 141). Feuer notes, "Genres are made, not born. The coherence is provided in the process of construction, and a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world" (144).

Dornfeld highlights how coherence functions within the texts that are understood to be within the subgenre of the long-form documentary series. It appears with common features that get repeated across the episodes, such as through observational footage, experts, voiceover narration, and an onscreen host. These features provide "the establishment of a coherent organizing principle" (Dornfeld 124). A majority of Ken Burns' series offer this internal coherence. In *The Civil War*, for example, Burns uses archival photographs from the era, and most of those photographs appear faded or sepia-toned. He uses Shelby Foote as a primary

expert and Barbara Fields as a secondary one throughout the entire series. Voiceover narration by David McCullough offers explanation and thematic links and transitions within episode sequences and across the episodes. No onscreen host appears, but the thematic content and these other routinely found elements provide enough glue to link the episodes.

How, then, do we understand *The Blues* in this traditional text-centered view of genre (or, in this case, the sub-genre of the long-form documentary series)? In fact, finding internal coherence in *The Blues* episodes proves difficult. Its unconventional production context of one series featuring distinct episodes directed by different strongly identified "auteurs" complicates its obvious categorization within the texts themselves. All the episodes use a degree of observational footage, but some use observational footage for the entire documentary while others intersperse it with other conventions. *Feel Like Going Home* uses both filmed sequences and archival footage, while *The Soul of a Man* and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* use reenactments over observational footage. Experts appear in various episodes, and some appear even in more than one episode such as Dick Waterman, Skip James' manager during his revival as a blues artist in the 1960s. At the same time, though, some experts appear only within one film, including Marshall Chess in *Godfathers and Sons* or Bobby Rush in *The Road to Memphis*. Voiceover narration varies from episode to episode with *Feel Like Going Home* using two narrators, *Warming by the Devil's Fire* using one narrator, and *The Soul of a Man* using a voice from outer space! No one onscreen host appears from episode to episode, also limiting its coherence as a genre series.

But again, this coherence within the texts only provides limited explanation for coherence of the long-form documentary series on public broadcasting. Since the internal coherence proves

tenuous, is it possible to find, following Mittell, a generic coherence outside of the episode texts themselves? Mittell suggests drawing on the televisual practices of distribution and exhibition toward a different understanding of genre. He notes how these practices become particularly important in terms of program scheduling and channel identity (58), ultimately contributing to a discourse of genre establishment.

With its lacking internal coherence, *The Blues* challenges the usual channel identity that long-form documentary series offer. Instead of finding that coherence and identity internally, then, the coherence must come from external factors surrounding the series at the moment of its broadcast, which in this case is one key moment when the coherence for this genre becomes symbolically constructed. Thus it requires considering the programming strategies across the broadcast season, the time slot, and the broadcast structure. Going back to Feuer's earlier point about one possible television text being an evening of viewing, the structure of PBS with its more than 350 fiercely independent affiliates especially is interesting. Since local schedules are not as standardized in prime time on public television stations as they are on the commercial broadcast networks, this means that, even if one viewer were to leave his/her television on one public television station all night, the "evening's text" experience would be likely different from market to market. With this caveat in mind, the following section focuses on one particular member station's airing of *The Blues*, WPSX, out of central Pennsylvania. The goal will be to understand how the genre of *The Blues* was constructed by the extra-textual discourses for this particular market's experience.

## **About WPSX**

WPSX is one of 56 member stations affiliated with colleges and universities. The television station began even before the formal inception of public broadcasting with a limited schedule in 1964. It serves a large and possibly bifurcated market in that it addresses one of the largest university communities outside a major metropolitan area and an expansive rural, though growing, area as well. According to the station's Web site, it reaches "530,000 households in 29 counties," and with cable transmission the station reaches the northern and southern borders of Pennsylvania (WPSU "Coverage Area"). Its coverage area includes several smaller cities such as Altoona, Williamsport, Johnstown, and State College. In addition to these geographical communities, WPSX also includes the intellectual community of Pennsylvania State University's main campus in particular and it must address this audience along with its other programming.

## **Season Debut and Series Scheduling**

Discussing the original broadcast of *The Blues* requires dividing it into multiple, incrementally localized parts or levels. The broadest level considers the broadcast "seasons," which traditionally refer to the scheduling of prime-time programming on the networks across three time periods each year: fall, spring, and summer. The fall season begins with the premiering of new series and new seasons of favorite series, in the case of serialized series picking up where the previous spring's cliff-hangers left off. The summer season remains the down season, with repeats of the previous year's programming, short series, and inexpensive specials filling the time slots. More recently, networks and basic cable outlets have begun experimenting with shorter, non-traditional seasons, with less installments and different time



schedules, such as starting in March and ending in May or starting in June and ending in September.

Public broadcasting also follows these seasons, but scheduling recommendations for a series must watch the commercial competition carefully and program wisely. Since its programming must fulfill the service's mission and since its programming also fails to carry a more broad-based appeal, the service takes care not to schedule its premiere programming against high-profile commercial network offerings, especially those that might appeal to the same basic demographics. This practice becomes part of a technique called counterprogramming, which involves strategically offering programming that appeals to a particular audience that might not be addressed by shows on the other networks at the same time (Fuller and Ferguson 238). Counterprogramming by definition is a part of PBS's schedule strategy given its mission to service publics that may not be defined as desirable audiences for the commercial networks to offer to advertisers. However, because viewer donations are a key part of public television's finances, attracting economically "desirable" audiences may also factor into counterprogramming scheduling decisions.

Limited series -- the industry umbrella term for the long-form documentary series and narrative miniseries -- may serve as part of this counterprogramming strategy. Certainly the lack of documentary on the commercial networks -- still on average the most visible and highest rated channels on television -- mean that by definition a limited series always is counterprogrammed. However, the unique scheduling of *The Blues* complicates a traditional counterprogramming strategy. Limited series may be scheduled in one of two basic ways. Typically, these series run weekly for their episode duration. However, they go through "stripping," or airing a program on

consecutive nights if the series' material proves engaging enough (Fuller and Ferguson 239). According to Fuller and Ferguson, the definition of "engaging" hinges on "production budget, advance promotion, casting, subject matter, and less well-recognized variables such as timing, quality, and appeal to the public television audience" (239). With its budget, extensive promotion, Hollywood representation, and the Year of the Blues decree, *The Blues* conceptually fits within these criteria. Stripping complicates the counterprogramming strategy, since with each weeknight the series is going up against different competition, unlike the once-a-week strategy where the competition is likely to stay the same. However, stripping is also a form of status-conferral that can augment counterprogramming benefits. Fuller and Ferguson list "timing" as an indicator of a series engagement: in fact, the "engagement" factor of a limited series is enhanced by the decision to strip. Stripping a new series in primetime is rare; to do this signals a "special" program, one worthy of stripping. In this case, then, the scheduling decision to strip itself becomes a promotional and series-defining event.

The suggested scheduling for the original airing of the series follows the stripping pattern. *The Blues* broadcast on WPSX ran from Sunday, September 28, 2003, to Saturday, October 4, 2003, with one episode shown each night. It also served as the fall season premiere for public broadcasting that year, as PBS discourse, including a press release for the series, indicated ("Martin Scorsese's 'The Blues'"). The season premiere week usually means rolling out new episodes and building hype around them (Adams and Eastman 141-142), but public broadcasting operates under different assumptions about its audiences. According to Dominick, Sherman, and Copeland, "most public TV programmers view their audience as selective and discriminating" (397). These selective viewers choose their television viewing carefully, and

something with high production values and even cultural value such as blues music suggests a good match for this audience. In the case of *The Blues*, the stripping was used by PBS to construct the series through its PR materials as a kind of week-long blues "festival," making it more of a cultural event than TV show ("Martin Scorsese's '*The Blues*'"). Labeling the series as a "festival" invokes a connection to the series' exhibition at both music and film festivals throughout the summer prior to its broadcast. With this reference PBS in a way brings the festival home to viewers.

One problem with these series and their stripping is viewer drop-off. Dornfeld divides viewers into two categories: consistent, or those who watch every episode, and occasional, or those who watch here and there (120). The series somehow must address both these types of viewers, and coherence provides a key way for doing this. The first episode of the series must accomplish several functions, including introducing the perspective, characters, styles, programming elements, key themes, and the rest of series (Dornfeld 120). Martin Scorsese's episode *Feel Like Going Home* launched the series, but it offers no formal introduction to the other episodes. It presents its own subject and its own style, just as the other six episodes do. As discussed in Chapter Three the individual directors' passions for the subject vary so widely that they provide little adhesive for holding the series together. The episode contributes little if anything to the overall coherence. Dornfeld notes, "Coherence, therefore, is related to clarity and concentration of exposition and some form of narrative and / or aesthetic integrity" (124). Neither this concentration nor this integrity exists within the series episodes.

But is this lack of coherence a problem for either the consistent viewer or the occasional viewer? For the consistent viewer the series appears at the same time each night for a week, and

theoretically a discriminating viewer with an interest in the subject will watch regardless. The lack of coherence offers even less of a problem for the occasional viewer. Each episode features a distinct vision by a different director; each episode remains self-contained, and there is little or no serialization between episodes. As a result someone curious about blues music origins and blues' relationship with gospel music might tune in to *Feel Like Going Home* Sunday and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* Wednesday without missing a decade of timeline or a key, interrelated topic as might happen with a more coherent series such as *Jazz*, which follows a chronological order. This "dropping in" approach to viewing falls under Scorsese's vision for the series in that people gain different impressions of blues music, and hopefully one of those impressions -- be it a song, an artist, or a historical moment -- leads to further exploration (and therefore viewer loyalty).

A key point to note about the "national schedule" is that for public broadcasting, it is encouraged but not required that stations follow it. Unlike networks, public broadcasting stations pay PBS for programming, and these member stations choose what they broadcast and when. Station programming directors feel their first obligation is to their local audiences, not to PBS, and they program their schedules accordingly. This clearly creates a tension between localism and network "branding." This programming situation / strategy leads to some grumbling from local stations about PBS's attempts to maintain the PBS identity with pressures to air nationwide programming at set times. Although managers of local stations do have the option of alternative scheduling, they also know that promotions, extra-textual elements such as closing narration (as examined later in this chapter), and press reviews often assume a certain uniform scheduling. It also contributes to the fragmented identity of the service. Further, it hinders attempts at drawing

national sponsors, who want as much exposure for their sponsorship dollars as possible, and routinized, widespread primetime airings of series maximizes such exposure.

WPSX followed the suggested national schedule for *The Blues*, though such was not the case with all PBS affiliates. In New York City, where two PBS stations share the same coverage area, WNET ran *The Blues* series during the scheduled time. Program differentiated provider WNCY, however, ran the series at a later date, March of the following year. Stations such as WNET, WGBH, and other producing stations often set the priorities for PBS with the expectations that the smaller stations follow. The smaller, less-metropolitan stations often resent this expectation, citing the importance of their service to the local audiences. If something locally took precedent over this series, WPSX might have shown it at another time. However, many local stations do not receive enough funding to create their own programming to attract local sponsors, so these national series serve that function instead, potentially undermining the strong "local" identities smaller stations attempt to maintain.

### **Time Slot**

A consistent time slot proves important to maintaining flow, audience attention, and overall coherence for a limited series. If an episode airs at 8 p.m. one night and 8:30 p.m. the next night, viewers might not realize the time switch and opt to watch something else. Getting this time slot during the competitive prime-time hours proves even more important as that period draws the greatest, desirable audiences for these series. Getting this time slot across seven days might prove difficult because local PBS programming and stations' regular schedules take priority. Situating these series as season openers might facilitate garnering some leniency on the

audience's part.

*The Blues* series episodes ran in the 8-10 p.m. time slot on WPSX. Most programming slots follow an hour or half-hour format length, with the main show slightly shorter to allow for sponsorships and PBS promos. None of *The Blues* episodes fit neatly within the designated time slot. In fact, even with the promos and sponsorships, most ran quite short of the near-two-hour length. Under his vision Scorsese refused to dictate actual running times to the other directors. Instead, Scorsese wanted to free directors from this constraint. PBS agreed to allow the series episodes to air with these inconsistent running lengths. This allowance served as another way to promote the series as a special cultural/aesthetic "event," and not routine.

As a result member stations had to fill the extra time. Thus the local "text" of *The Blues* varied more widely than the local broadcasts of other public television programs that fit routinized time slots more snugly. WPSX took the opportunity to showcase other blues documentary programming and to show other behind-the-scenes footage from the series. Two episodes were followed by documentaries not related directly to the series. *Feel Like Going Home* was followed by *All Day and All Night: Memories from the Beale Street Musicians*, directed by Robert Gordon and Louis Guida in 1990. Though dated, blues music fans might recognize a younger B.B. King as one of the talking heads early in the film. After *Warming by the Devil's Fire* appears *Honeyboy: A Feature Music Documentary*, directed by Scott Taradash in 2002. David "Honeyboy" Edwards is the subject of this film, and at 87 at the time he represented a living embodiment of the Delta bluesman. The thematic connections between the documentaries and the series episodes remain weak. Better juxtapositions might have added *Honeyboy* after *Feel Like Going Home* or even *The Soul of a Man*, both of which focus on Delta

bluesmen, and have added *All Day and All Night* after *The Road to Memphis*, where Beale Street is located. While both of these documentaries offer further insights into blues music, its history, and its culture, neither of them facilitate the thematic coherence of the series broadcast, nor were either of them localized to that station's market or geographic location.

"Hendrix and the Blues" follows Marc Levin's piece *Godfathers and Sons*. This 12-minute short begins with Muddy Waters performing and then transitions to Jimi Hendrix. It features archival materials of Hendrix in interviews, in solo performances, and in ensemble performances. Interviews include bluesmen, his cousin Bob Hendrix, and others. Though series producer Alex Gibney serves as one of its directors, this short piece's connection to Levin's piece seems nonexistent as Hendrix represents rock music, not necessarily the Chicago blues or the hip-hop music of the film.

The other nights' additional materials offer more direct, logical connections in subject and style. "A Conversation with Wim Wenders and Alex Gibney" follows *The Soul of a Man*, wherein both the series producer and the episode director discuss the making of the film. They talk about such aspects as using a hand-cranked camera for the 1920s and 1930s scenes. They also talk about getting the contemporary artists to perform in sequences that were shot live.

"In Love with the Blues" offers a more traditional documentary follow-up to the cinema verite style of *The Road to Memphis*. It retraces the key performers in the film, including Bobby Rush, B.B. King, and Roscoe Gordon, and it offers an additional, new performance by Robert Delfour called "Done Got Old." Intercut with these performances are multiple talking heads, including series producer Robert Gordon, directors Richard Pearce and Robert Kenner, and, most interestingly, blues historian Peter Guralnick. Some of the directors' interview footage appears on

the DVD extras, but for those seeking a coherent commentary on blues history, Guralnick provides it, albeit briefly. He comments on the key sequences and players within the film, including Sam Philips, WDIA radio, and historic Beale Street. In many ways, this short piece provides an extension of the film and offers a more "typical" documentary for public broadcasting with its interviews with experts, its insights and explanations, and its archival materials.

The final two extra materials seem the most self-serving. Following *Red White and Blues* appears "A Conversation with Mike Figgis." This 16-minute piece rehashes clips from the film while Figgis discusses them. Some of these same comments appear on the DVD director interview. Following *Piano Blues* appears "Seven Riffs from The Blues," a 20-minute montage of extended sequences from each of *The Blues* episodes. The material presents nothing new -- it just repeats sequences audiences might already have seen.

In all, these related materials complicate the sense of coherence in the series broadcast. On the one hand, only in some cases do they extend that night's episode or the series in general. The other cases bring in new, unrelated materials that probably match better with other episodes. Some content gets repeated from the episodes into the follow-up pieces, but most of it gets situated into new contexts, particularly through Guralnick's comments after *The Road to Memphis*. On the other hand, in all cases, these additional materials bring the series episodes into conformity with the same length of time slot night after night. From a time-length perspective, then, some coherence appears, but with the locally provided content, the coherence remains dubious at best. By allowing the inconsistent lengths, the series supports the auteuristic claims explored in Chapter Three, but the gaps in programming blocks forced stations to scramble to fill



them. Instead of following up with commentary, history, and performances about local blues connections, stations such as WPSX arguably filled the time with promotional materials for the series, particularly the series recap and footage from the DVDs.

However, other textual elements of *The Blues* add a textual coherence to the local broadcast. Some of these result from the nature of public television flow, and others from the structure of *The Blues*.

### **Broadcast Structure and Flow**

Because of the flow of television broadcasting, pinpointing the actual start of a broadcast "text" proves difficult. Bugs and other screen graphics, not to mention closing-credit voice plugs and outright promotional spots, all point toward what programming is coming next -- including immediately after, later in the evening, or at a later date -- in order to keep viewers watching and keep them coming back. Does the series begin with the promotions, the opening credits, the first interview, or the first guitar riff? Interestingly enough, and in contrast to the commercial network stations, on PBS stations it arguably begins with the local sponsor.

An episode broadcast consists of multiple components representing multiple involved parties. During *The Blues*, multiple promotional spots appeared for PBS and one for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Underwriting messages appeared for Volkswagen, the national sponsor (as well as logo placement at the end credits of episodes and some extra materials), and for the local sponsor. Different sub-texts embedded in the series include opening credits, Scorsese's introductions, episode preview, episode opening credits, series closing / preview, episode closing credits, and a series logo bug. WPSX viewers saw a station logo

graphic and a member recognition.

All of these elements flow together in attempt to create a coherent viewing experience, to promote and create goodwill for underwriters, and to reinforce the station's mission and identity. That PBS does not interrupt its shows with commercials makes creating this flow that much easier because most of these materials serve as bookends to each episode. Not all pieces are discrete, however, because the logos and bugs overlap the other texts. The basic flow of an episode broadcast is as follows:

- ◆ Local Sponsor
- ◆ Local Station Member Thank You
- ◆ Widescreen / Digital Promo
- ◆ Episode Preview
- ◆ Volkswagen Spot / "Spoonful"
- ◆ CPB Spot / Viewers Like You
- ◆ Series Opening Credits
- ◆ Scorsese's Introduction
- ◆ Episode with Series Logo Bug / Station Bug
- ◆ PBS.org Promo
- ◆ Series Closing / Next Episode Preview
- ◆ Home Video and Audio CD Promo
- ◆ Volkswagen Spot / "Spoonful"
- ◆ CPB Spot / Viewers Like You
- ◆ Episode Closing Credits
- ◆ "We Are PBS" Promo
- ◆ PBS Show Promo
- ◆ Extra Blues Material/Timeslot Filler
- ◆ Local Sponsor
- ◆ Local Station Member Thank You

The flow starts with local identity, moves to national PBS, moves to the series, combines the series with PBS, and shifts back to local identity. The local identifiers include a local sponsorship spot for Horizon Wood Products of Ridgway, Pennsylvania, which provided a grant for the series broadcast. They also include a "thank you" to the members of WPSX for their donations. A further identifier is the WPSX logo in the lower-right of the screen during the series

episode broadcast. Both the Horizon Wood Products promo and the WPSX member "thank you" also appear at the end.

Multiple national components related to CPB and PBS also appear. Most serve some kind of promotional purpose. The Widescreen / Digital piece announces that the series presentation occurs in both formats, which is representative of a PBS station in transition from analogue toward digital in preparation for the 2009 switch. It also represents a degree of prestige in that WPSX can afford to make this presentation six years in advance and that this series is worthy of this kind of upscale presentation. As the episode ends, a promotion for pbs.org appears atop several blues history clips and music. (It is striking about the importance of network promotion, though, that the promo suggests pbs.org, the PBS main site, and not pbs.org/blues, the series site.) Another promo mentions the VHS, DVD, CD, and companion book for the series available through PBS Home Video by calling a phone number. A "We Are PBS" spot appears following the closing credits, and then appears a promo for a PBS series. These promos switched between *Frontline* and an episode of *Mystery!* titled "Coyote Waits," about two Navajo detectives unraveling a complex murder case. While all of these serve as identifiers of PBS, about half attempt to promote the series for its educational function (pbs.org) and its multimedia components (PBS Home Video). The other half promote the identity of the service and its shows.

Viewers play an important signifying role within these promos. Using standard persuasion techniques of second person and first-person plural pronouns, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting gets its name in with a short message, and it also thanks "Viewers Like You" for making these presentations possible. The "We Are PBS" also helps include this audience, and even provides a visualization of potential members of that audience. Both imply the illusion of

agency the audience possesses in bringing this programming to the service through their viewership and, more importantly, their donations.

The Volkswagen sponsorship appears in the underwriting spot and as a logo / tagline. The promo spot is an example of slick advertising and series promotion all in the same 30 seconds. The spot uses Willie Dixon's "Spoonful," a song made popular by Cream's covering it, and uses multiple people enjoying the song to bring them and the pretty red Passat together. The Volkswagen VW logo and "Drivers wanted" slogan appear in the credits at the end of the extra materials, along with Roadmovies and Vulcan Productions logos.

All of these promotional materials function with a much greater coherence than the promotional efforts on commercial broadcasting. While networks feature advertisements for multiple products and services from disposable mops to cheap car insurance, along with promos for station programming and identifications, the PBS materials rhetorically gather around the series and its broadcast. The national and local promotional spots connect Volkswagen and Horizon Wood Products to public broadcasting through their cooperation in bringing the series to viewers. The local station identifications and the national service identifications function in much the same way, this time bringing viewers into the partnership. In all, the messages convey the sense that everyone works together to bring *The Blues* and other prestige programming to service audiences. The promotion conveys a degree of coherence in the broadcasting, but it obscures the complexities of the interrelationships, particularly glossing over the depths of the sponsorship deal with Volkswagen, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The series components also provide some degree of coherence among their materials, while maintaining (and especially promoting) Scorsese's "personal" vision for the series. The

credits for the series function on a series level and an episode level. At the series level appear the series opening credits and closing credits / preview. The series opening features Muddy Waters singing "You Can't Lose What You Ain't Got" over a slickly produced combination of series episode shots and archival materials with the fragmented and blue-tinged words "The Blues" scrolling over them. The credits open with the words "Martin Scorsese Presents" and continue with the series title, names of the series producers, and blues-related imagery. At the end of each episode appears a sequence best described as a combination of closing credits and episode preview. A bass, male voice addresses the audience with, "You've been on a musical journey with the blues. Seven films. Seven directors. Seven nights devoted to the music that changed the world. The journey continues tomorrow night..." The voice then briefly introduces the next night's episode, along with some clips from it. This same narrator voice occurs with the pbs.org spot and the PBS Home Video spot, aurally linking those pieces together.

With the exception of the episode-specific preview content, the opening and closing sections remain the same for all seven broadcast episodes. The opening sequences introduce some key iconography from blues music, such as U.S. 61 going through Mississippi, African American hands (both archival and re-enacted) playing guitars, and women dancing. The opening song further evokes blues music history in that it comes from Howlin' Wolf, another iconographic figure in that genre. The opening shots draw from different episodes within the series as well, such as Corey Harris playing, a re-enactor's fingers hovering over a 12-string Stella guitar, and Nick Cave performing. In a different way, this imagery tacitly sets forth some of the key ideas for the series, including older African-American men performing the songs, contemporary artists covering them, and multiple audiences enjoying the music. It also offers a

short hint of things to come in the episodes, but it makes no effort to make explicit the origins of these shots. Getting the series name and credits forward becomes the priority for these sequences.

The timing of the series credits within a night's broadcast proves a bit awkward, though. Since the opening sequence is buried after a series of seven pieces before it, including the *episode* preview, it provides a marker of some sort of start, but it is unclear the start of what. Does it start that night's episode? Does it start the overall series? Does it start some other kind of introductory material? The closing sequence provides a clearer marker through its rhetoric ("tomorrow night") and its preview of the upcoming episode. It also appears almost immediately after the episode's end, with just the pbs.org promo in between.

In terms of the overall broadcast, however, these sequences provide a degree of unity related to the series. These features offer the coherence across the stripping of the episodes, and they set up a sort of flow into the following night's episode. The closing sequence in particular assumes the local PBS station follows the service's broadcast schedule suggestion of sequential evenings, though stations not following that order might remove or edit this component from their broadcast.

Three elements work together at the episode level. The preview from the previous evening's broadcast provides the setup for the overall flow, and this repeated episode preview at the beginning of the episode provides that evening's follow-up. (Only *Piano Blues* is missing a preview.) Each episode offers its own unique opening and closing credits to reflect style, content, and makers. The sole consistency among the episode credits (beyond the series' packaging) includes the logos for Road Movies, Vulcan Productions, and WGBH.

Dornfeld mentions as part of his ideas for creating coherence across a broadcast series is an onscreen host to introduce episodes and sequences therein. He envisions this host serving not only this practical function to provide symbolic (or, in the world of marketing, brand) consistency, but also a thematic one in that the host provides commentary or even contributes expertise. With *The Blues*, Martin Scorsese himself provides a short introduction to each episode. In each he wears the same suit, sits before the same background, and addresses the camera -- and the viewers -- directly. His name appears with every mention of the series, and it appears on all of the series' associated elements -- home video, CDs, Web site, and the like. This short piece offers the closest example to an on-screen host, but instead of appearing throughout the episodes, Scorsese appears in this capacity a total of seven times during the broadcast. His introductions occur right after the series opener and right before the episode start, providing some focus for that evening's installment and sometimes reasserting the series' personal focus, as discussed in Chapter Three. He provides some coherence in his consistent presence and purpose, though his frequency raises questions about just how effectively his introductions to the series contribute to its generic or narrative coherence. However, his name as a verbal signifier and his visual presence clearly serves a promotional function to add cultural status to the series.

Overall, an episode broadcast consists of about 20 different items related to public broadcasting, the series, and its sponsors. While deconstructing these different elements reveals some places where coherence falters, they actually function together to create the needed structures to make the series flow from one night to the next. Since the series offers little internal connections to create this coherence, these external workings become the generic glue that holds everything together. They become the foundations for constructing *The Blues* into a long-form

documentary series.

But all these elements function in other ways as well. For one, they affirm the identity of public broadcasting through the consistent links to the service's identity, its programming, and its mission. It reinforces both the local WPSX affiliate and the national PBS. It hails the viewers directly, both the PBS members and the WPSX members, and thanks them for their contributions. These members prove a key part of the service's identity for without their donations, the service might not even exist.

They also serve promotional purposes. Horizon Wood Products and Volkswagen of America serve as the exclusive holders of the local and national sponsorship spots, respectively. (More about sponsorship will be discussed in Chapter Five.) They become the only two non-media companies to get visibility through this series. Everything else promotes PBS in some way, such as through its other programming, PBS home video, or pbs.org.

Overall, then, even though *The Blues* series remains internally incoherent, these different elements surrounding the broadcast facilitate the creation of some coherence. Scorsese's introductions link the episodes to his grander organizing principle for the series. The series opening and closing credits help frame the individual episodes. The local sponsorship provides the bookends to each night's broadcast.

But the larger contributor to the series' coherence lies in that it is being shown on PBS. Fifteen out the 20 elements consistent across the episode broadcasts refer to public broadcasting in some way, through simple identification, through viewers' hailing, or through external connections to PBS-related things such as the Web sites or the home video sales. If those markers are not enough, the sponsorship spots -- as opposed to regular commercials -- provide yet another



marker. Further, the counterprogramming strategies of using these series as "season openers" also identifies it as PBS. So while these attempts at coherence not only frame the series, they also function to organize the network identity as well.

### **Other Exhibition Contexts**

But what happens when *The Blues* gets removed from the public broadcasting venue and gets distributed and exhibited elsewhere? As noted in Chapter One, individual episodes and even the entire series were shown at film festivals around the United States and the world, on foreign television such as the BBC and in Italy, in movie theaters in Germany, and on college campuses in Australia. Part of the production arrangement gave Wim Wenders' Road Movies international distribution rights.

Another exhibition context comes from the DVD box set. The box set became available a week after the series' broadcast, while the individual episodes became available about seven months later. This distribution pattern suggests the primacy of the entire series as a coherent text -- and as a commodity -- even though the individual episodes can stand and be sold alone.

The series episode's flow on the DVDs proves much less complicated than the PBS broadcast. It begins with the same series opening credits, shows the text of the production companies' credits, and then the episode starts. The episode closes with its own credits (the same ones from the broadcast), though none of the logos for Road Movies, Vulcan, or WGBH appears. Afterward, a harmonica starts and words appear on a sepia background, eventually coming to read, "Volkswagen proudly joins PBS to bring you The Blues project." As the music fades, the VW logo and its "Drivers wanted" appear. Emphasizing the promotional "value extra" to

sponsors that DVDs offer, the VW spot also becomes a "special feature" on the DVD extras.

The coherence offered by the extra-textual PBS broadcast does not carry over to the DVD episodes, and the branding of public television is not as prevalent on the DVD as it was during the broadcast. The VW spot following the logo offers the first specific mention of PBS and its involvement, and other connections to PBS prove difficult to find. The primary box for the episode DVD features a one-quarter inch logo for WGBH, PBS, and CPB in the lower-right corner of the back, but above those appear logos for big media companies such as Columbia, Legacy, Columbia Music Video, Hip-O Records, and Universal Music Enterprises. Logos for Volkswagen, Vulcan, and Road Movies appear to the left of the public broadcasting ones. The only other mentions of public broadcasting appear on the back of the box and the last page of the liner notes, with "WGBH Boston presents the series on PBS. Public television funding is provided by PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting" and "[www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues)" on the box back. The individual episode cases make no mention of public broadcasting at all. On the inside front of the box appears a picture with the CD offerings with no mention of public broadcasting below it. Instead, the names for Universal Music Enterprises and Sony Music become attached to them.

Overall, then, the strategy of offering the limited series in a stripping pattern with 20 textual components to the broadcast creates a coherence for public broadcasting, but it easily falls away for home video distribution. Even the wording on the box fails to mention PBS and moves back toward the "personal visions" focus analyzed in Chapter Three: "Under the guiding hand of Martin Scorsese, *The Blues* is a seven-part television series of personal and impressionistic films." Even the notion of this series being a television one is underplayed in that

the rest of the episodes become referred to as "films" on the box back and the DVD cases. Further, as the presence of public broadcasting becomes diminished, the presence of the Big Media companies becomes more prominent. The series becomes a blues series, a Martin Scorsese series, a television series, a film series -- but not a PBS series. In this case, then, the revenue generation potential of direct sales -- a potential enhanced by the cultural capital of Scorsese filmic-ness -- takes precedent over the promotion of public television's contribution and linkage to the series.

Even then, without all the shorter pieces introducing it and especially removing the series opener, the episodes become stand-alones, self-contained units of meaning available for use in other contexts. While the "personal visions" direction for the series tries to link these disparate episodes together, they stand well enough on their own as well. This fact became a challenge for trying to sell the series as a group, particularly on public broadcasting, but at the same time, their individuality frees them up for nontraditional forms of distribution, particularly festivals, which became important during the Year of the Blues celebration. Numerous blues festivals occur throughout the country on an annual basis (more than a dozen in Iowa alone), and these festivals helped bring attention to the series and its episodes, not to mention to the "Year of the Blues" decree and Volkswagen as well.

## **Conclusions**

Genre studies typically focus on the internal features as a means to creating coherence among a group of texts. But generic coherence among a group of texts also can be constructed through the industry practices, bringing together a disparate group of texts under one system.

Further, these generic practices can function as a creation and assertion of network identity. This happens with the broadcast of *The Blues* on WPSX, wherein the multiple elements create the discourses of public broadcasting around this series and thus turn it into a PBS series. These discourses address both consistent and occasional viewers. They further facilitate the easy incorporation of both local and national identity elements, not to mention the national and local levels of sponsorships.

When these multiple elements get removed, however, the series functions assume a further polysemy in different venues. The home video distribution shows how the series identity shifts away from PBS toward a more autonomous and even flexible one, in that the episodes can function together as a film or television series or they can function as stand-alones in other venues such as film festivals and international distribution as single broadcast, incorporation into another series, and other potential options. This flexibility proves important for non-broadcast and international distribution.

*Jazz* would not work in these contexts. Burns' series functions too cohesively and chronologically internally to offer this degree of flexibility in distribution and exhibition. Pulling episode five and showing it without seeing episodes one through four would not offer the proper flow or coherence. The first episode sets up the key themes, and subsequent episodes build on these themes and the genre's chronology. Showing one episode almost mandates showing the remaining ones in that they are designed to function as a cohesive, though long, whole. It would not work to show the series at a film or music festival, nor would it be easy to bring the entire work into international distribution. This is not to say that *The Blues* is neither better nor worse than *Jazz*, but instead to show how the series differences open and close various possibilities

through generic coherence.

But is this shift away from public broadcasting contexts a good thing? On the one hand, it allows texts usually relegated to the service to get distribution to other venues and potentially gain access to wider audiences. (The assumption here is that the texts prove accessible enough for those audiences.) But with this accessibility, the possibility exists for big media to appropriate this series for itself and distribute and exhibit it with minimal or no reference to public broadcasting whatsoever. This removes some of the elitism of the service, but in doing so it also raises questions about the service's exclusive hold on this program format and its programming strategies. Considering the series box set, this big media appropriation seems pretty evident in the diminishing of public broadcasting's contribution to and role in the cultural series. Further series like *The Blues* might open doors for public broadcasting (especially in terms of certain revenue streams), but they also allow more partnerships with big media companies, potentially at the expense of furthering exposure for the service both nationally and internationally. And at what cost does the separation of texts from a public television context ultimately undermine public broadcasting? After all, one justification for the elimination of public television is that cable networks like Discovery provide much of the same thing. One irony of this, of course, is that networks like Discovery recycle documentaries that were originally produced and distributed by PBS. *The Blues* on DVD generates revenue for public television, but separates the program from its public television origins which may ultimately undermine the service's contribution and perceived value. And this is especially true given the other Hollywood signifiers (Scorsese, Eastwood, festival showings) that dominate the symbolic hierarchy of the various contributors.

One of the most "commercial" aspects of the series broadcast is the Volkswagen promotional spot. The spot provides a visible announcement of Volkswagen's role as exclusive national sponsor, but it also bears a strong resemblance to network commercials and fits within the automaker's "Drivers wanted" campaign at the time. Chapter Five analyzes the Volkswagen sponsorship deal with *The Blues*, a deal that extends well beyond the series broadcast into other media outlets.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Volkswagen, Sponsorship and *The Blues*

The Carnegie Commission conceived public broadcasting as independent from commercial influences in order to facilitate a greater range of programming. This independence theoretically would be enabled by non-commercial funding sources, but the Public Broadcasting Act tethered the service's budget to the whims of Congress, which may or may not (usually not) fund a full budget for the service. As a result public broadcasting has had to seek funding from other sources to continue operations. Member donations and pledge drives offer two sources, but a primary one comes from corporate sponsorship.

One of the most visible aspects of *The Blues* series outside its episodes is Volkswagen's exclusive national sponsorship. The Volkswagen sponsorship deal with public broadcasting was extensive and unprecedented. The campaign even earned industry recognition for its reach and its success, and it has become a model for current campaigns. Usually, sponsorship refers to the spots that appear during the broadcast, but with the current multimedia environment and the Year of the Blues decree, this corporate sponsorship extended well beyond the fluidity of television. It included the multimedia products, associated Web sites, and educational materials. Further, this association allowed Volkswagen to take advantage of the multimedia products for its own promotional purposes.

This chapter explores the corporate sponsor relationship between Volkswagen and *The Blues* and how the relationship pushes the boundaries between not-for-profit and commercial interests. It provides an overview of sponsorship, and the relationship between for-profit and not-

for-profit media. The chapter then considers its developments in public broadcasting, particularly focusing on the changes occurring around 2002-2003. It continues by addressing Volkswagen's relationship with the series, highlighting how its successes have become the foundation for a model now used by the Sponsorship Group for Public Television run by WGBH. It concludes with some discussion about how Volkswagen used the series products as part of its own promotions and implications for the commercialization of public broadcasting.

### **An Overview of Sponsorship**

Sponsorship is so prevalent now that multiple how-to books exist for organizations and corporations interested in cultivating these relationships. In her aptly titled *Made Possible By: Succeeding with Sponsorship*, Patricia Martin defines sponsorship as

A marketing strategy in which an individual or organization (the sponsor) invests cash, goods, or services in another organization or some aspect of that organization (the property) to gain access to specific assets (such as organization members or impressions) that are expected to improve the sponsor's marketplace position (xiv).

Like most transactions, it involves an exchange of money for another product, such as exposure or eyeballs, or another intangible. Both parties benefit from the transaction, though benefits are not equally distributed among all parties at all times. When compared to the other major advertising system used in media, "magazine-style" spot advertising, the number of sponsors in a given media program is much smaller (sometimes with just one exclusive sponsor). In this case, the leverage in the relationship arguably goes to the sponsor, since the media program is more



dependent upon the one sponsor. In addition, the connection between the advertiser and the media content, talent, or producer/distributor is stronger than in spot advertising.

In his book *The Commercialization of American Culture*, Matthew P. McAllister writes, "*Sponsorship* is a corporate activity that stresses both the philanthropic goals of corporate giving and its promotional goals" (178; also ref. Paradise 23; emphasis in original), at least in theory. The promotional / commercial functions of sponsorship took hold early in U.S. broadcasting. Radio and early television programming features statements and promotions for various sponsors, which included tobacco companies, hair spray, food products, and others. In many cases, the sponsors, or their agents (advertising agencies), actually produced the programs. According to Andersen, "Sponsor-controlled programming established patterns of advertising influence that have endured to the present" (14). Though writing in 1995, Anderson's statement still proves true today with shows such as *American Idol* featuring contestants using products such as Ford vehicles and Coke.

Not all sponsorship agreements occur between for-profit institutions, however. They also commonly occur between a for-profit institution and a not-for-profit one. In these contexts it serves as a business practice and a marketing strategy for the for-profit institution. With its air of philanthropy, the companies gain a "feel good" association for their economic participation and resulting symbolic connections, and hope that this association extends to the business image. Further, this association allows exposure to potential audiences otherwise inaccessible by conventional promotional means.

The not-for-profit organizations involved in receiving sponsorships benefit primarily from the influx of cash and from the additional publicity generated by the for-profit institution's

promotions of the association. However, with a weakening economy, more pressure is exerted on not-for-profit organizations to demonstrate the bottom-line benefits of the investment to actual or potential sponsors. Further, to ensure the benefits from these investments, the for-profit companies might attempt to exercise a degree of control through various conditions, such as demanding exclusivity for sponsoring, prohibiting competitors from donating, and exercising control over content and other aspects. In turn, the not-for-profits may anticipate such demands and make sponsor-friendly decisions before demands are even made. With all these demands, it becomes more and more difficult to consider sponsorship as a philanthropic activity. In fact, it is more of a business one than a philanthropic one. The latter characterizes the sponsorship arrangements with public broadcasting. "Underwriting. Enhanced underwriting. Sponsorship," begins Judi Puritz Cook in her chapter titled "Advertising on Public Television" (85). Even with the variations among the terms, both Cook and Paradise find the term "advertising" more applicable (27). Although "underwriting" is a technical and regulatory term for non-commercial stations used by the FCC, this chapter will use "sponsorship" because it better encompasses the range of activities under consideration, and not only the brief underwriting messages that appeared before and after the airing of the episodes of *The Blues*.

### **Sponsorship and Public Broadcasting**

Despite the Carnegie Commission's best intentions for insulating public broadcasting from political influence, the funding of public broadcasting still remains a political issue. The system was conceived as a public and democratic service, but according to McChesney, "Public broadcasting was set up in such a way as to ensure that it was feeble, dependent, and marginal"

(*Rich Media* 248). As discussed in Chapter Two, the federal budget for public broadcasting is strongly tied to political winds and as such it is vulnerable to political attacks. Presidents, usually Republican ones, have tried to reduce or eliminate funding for public broadcasting. Richard Nixon was the first to make a project of PBS, criticizing programming that was "anti-administration," becoming wary of the "liberal" Ford Foundation grants, and ultimately vetoing funds for the service in 1972 (Ledbetter 59-61). Coupled with its susceptibility to cuts during economic downturns, public broadcasting was forced to seek other ways to ensure enough money for its operations. A movement toward privatization -- especially through an increased emphasis on viewer donations and corporate sponsorship -- resulted.

Corporate sponsorship is not neutral in its support, but favors programming that is ideologically advantageous or apolitical. Typically, public broadcasting sponsorships were linked to more fictional and narrative-based programming, or to programming not about public affairs or news. Exxon Mobil, for example, was one of the long-standing generous contributors to public broadcasting. In 1973 the company donated almost \$2 million to CPB (Ledbetter 87). Mobile also became a long-time sponsor of *Masterpiece Theater*. By the time Mobile withdrew its underwriting of the show in 2004, it had given "more than \$250 million to PBS programs in the last 32 years" (Jensen A16).

Sponsorships of programming do not imply a corporation's purely altruistic intentions, however. In the mid-1990s, for example, *Masterpiece Theater* was retitled *Mobil Masterpiece Theater*, giving the sponsor symbolic priority (Goodman B12). Despite adamant insistence otherwise, this affiliation can influence the content of other PBS programming. Hoynes discusses the series *MacNeil/Lehrer's Newshour's* coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. He notes that the

show features interviews with Exxon execs, including apologies, but nothing from the conservationists who might have explained the environmental impact of the spill (Hoynes 78-80).

Lack of sponsorships also affects programming, with corporate funding serving as an influence on the agenda of what is on (or not on) public television. Jensen notes a Tony Hillerman-adapted, Robert Redford executive-produced episode of the series *Mystery!* failed to draw requisite funding (A16). While Johnson & Johnson sponsored *American Family* for its first season (Jenson A16), lack of an underwriter suspended the show's production for a year before it found a new sponsor to enable production and broadcast again. Even in the case of *Masterpiece Theater*, the program has not had a corporate sponsor since Mobil withdrew its support. Perhaps as a result of the strong symbolic association with Mobil, other sponsors came to see the program as promotionally contaminated. Although *Masterpiece* still airs, it now requires more funding from other non-corporate sources, potentially influencing the financing of other programs.

Corporate sponsorships seem at odds with the not-for-profit, public nature of the service, yet reliance on them and other private funds has grown continually since the 1970s. According to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, private sources of funding to public broadcasting went from 51.4 percent of the total revenue in 1991 to 56.7 percent in 2004 (Corporation for Public Broadcasting "2004 Revenue") to 61.1 percent in 2007 (Corporation for Public Broadcasting "2007 Report"). Much of this is sponsorship money. Hoynes points out, "Between 1982 and 1991, seventeen major corporations provided at least \$5 million each to support public television programming" (100). PBS itself proclaims, "Each year, hundreds of corporations reach millions of viewers through their support of public television programs and services" ("PBS |

Sponsorship").

Corporate benefits for this type of programming are twofold: one, the donation is tax deductible, and two, it assists in public relations (Ledbetter 142). The latter corporate benefit is enhanced by the degree to which promotional messages stand out because of the mostly clutter-free landscape of public broadcasting, at least when compared to commercial television. In 2003, for example, on primetime broadcast network television, commercials and program promotions consumed over 17 minutes per hour with commercial cable television being even more (McClellan 13). PBS cites an independent study showing how its media landscape remains comparatively clutter-free, with just 5:01 minutes of primetime not allocated to programming. Its promotional materials claim, "PBS delivers your message in the program-rich, clutter-free environment that our viewers have come to expect and appreciate" ("Stand Out").

Federal restrictions limit the promotional intrusiveness of underwriting messages on PBS, although these restrictions have loosened over the life of the service. The first corporate sponsorship messages were indicated by a discrete credit at the start and end of a program. They were limited to just a few words, such as "Made possible by a grant from Throne Bathroom Products." It also might include the company's logo, but no other embellishments. These original limitations attempted to prevent corporations from using the spots as advertisements, but the 1984 Public Broadcasting Act changed the rules for these corporate underwriting credits. This act allowed for underwriting credits, called enhanced underwriting, to include logos, names, slogans, and even descriptions of products or services so long as no comparisons or value claims were made (Hoynes 5; Paradise 25; Frutkin and Bergi "Reinventing PBS"). In early 2003 PBS expanded its sponsorship spots from 15 seconds to 30 seconds for national sponsors in hopes of

keeping existing sponsors, getting them to spend more, and attracting new ones (Eggerton 18). Though expanding the promotional time allowed, PBS still limited spots to twice per show and to follow "underwriting guidelines: no qualitative statements, comparisons, price information, calls to action or inducements to purchase" (Eggerton 18).

Reactions to these new spots were mixed. For PBS, the move only made official a practice already in place, for 26 stations in the top 30 markets already used the system (Eggerton 18; Shields, Frutkin, and Brown 4). It also offered a chance for stations to compete better with commercial broadcasting and cable. Commercial broadcasters were less enthused about the change and although likely the source of this attitude was an economic one in terms of PBS as a commercial competitor, arguments were framed in terms of the service's mission. "It's ridiculous. It's the antithesis of what they're all about," said Steve Mauldin, of KTVT in Dallas. "The idea of being in the business of selling spots fundamentally contradicts their mandate as a public broadcast" (qtd. in Shields, Frutkin, and Brown 4). Furthering privatization, the 30-second spots occurred just in time for the Bush administration to propose even more budget cuts for PBS (Shields, Frutkin, and Brown 5; McConnell 30).

Much of the discussions on sponsorship leave out two crucial factors: type of sponsor and length of contract. Almost all of these changes in the sponsorship spots attempt to make them more appealing to *corporate* advertisers, large corporations with some money to spend and most likely with advertising already available on commercial television. Foundations, alternatively, would be less concerned about the airing of promotional spots to tout their involvement. In addition, PBS has a tiered system of sponsorship, with more money spent by sponsors being rewarded with longer promotional messages. In 2004, PBS lowered the threshold for "the

Premier Sponsorship Club," membership in which included the use of 30-second messages, from \$2.5 million to \$1.5 million ("PBS Hones"). (Volkswagen was an exception at the time.) The motivation behind this lowering was to "attract more corporate sponsors with credits of the 30-second length they know from commercial TV" (Enger "PBS Execs"). Lowering the rate by \$1 million hardly opens the field for different sponsors to step up and participate. Instead, it reinforces the hopes for big-business sponsors and, as the above quote indicates, sponsors who normally advertise on the commercial networks.

Length of contract is another important issue behind PBS sponsorships. Each comes with a time minimum, often associated with the broadcast season for a particular show. As indicated earlier, PBS underwriting more strongly ties the image of the program with the image of the sponsoring company. With the dollar minimum, the time minimum, and the symbolic association, potential sponsors demand a return on their investment. However, one issue that PBS faces is that the current ratings system is set up to measure the ratings of commercial networks and stations: Nielsen is about facilitating the sale of audiences to advertisers by the networks. As a non-commercial system of stations, PBS struggles to deliver the proof. Thus the commercial networks, although more cluttered, require none of the restrictions on commercial messages that PBS does and guarantee audiences with hard numbers. PBS, on the other hand, is not as embedded in the Nielsen system to the same degree as commercial networks, and not all local stations subscribe to Nielsen's services (Webster, Phalen, and Lichty 44). Instead, the service "offers up a more touchy-feely measurement referred to as 'points of impact': a combination of ratings, reviews, and Internet response" (Frutkin and Burgi 29). Viewer donations may be another indicator used to attract, or placate, sponsors. For some sponsors the PBS brand

identity association might not be enough to justify spending that much to gain access to a reduced-clutter broadcast and a loyal demographic.

Still another problem lies in the sales process for these spots. No central sales office represents all PBS stations when it comes to securing corporate sponsors. For a while the PBS Sponsorship group -- run by WNET (New York), WGBH (Boston), WETA (Washington, D.C.), and WMPT (Maryland) -- served a semblance of this purpose, but it dissolved amid infighting. While that group was in operation, individual stations also would pursue corporations for sponsorship, creating competition where none should be (Frutkin and Burgi 29). Currently, the Sponsorship Group for Public Television -- run by WGBH -- attempts to partner corporations with its programming. But creating a partnership through this group offers no guarantee of a consistent schedule or a service-wide broadcast, even though the PBS sponsorship page claims a 99 percent coverage rate of the U.S. broadcasting market ("PBS | Sponsorship"). Just because the coverage is there does not mean that people are watching.

Much of the discussions about sponsorship focus primarily on the spots, their changing content, and their broadcast. However, PBS usually offers much more than just a show to corporate sponsors -- many of its productions feature a wide range of associated materials as well. According to the Sponsorship Group for Public Television Web site, the benefits of sponsorship include both on-air and off-air possibilities. The site lists several possibilities, including "on-air visibility, flexible scheduling, category exclusivity, new media, home entertainment, educational outreach, talent, promotions, and screening events" ("SGPTV | Why Sponsor"). Ryan makes these possibilities more specific, with "teachers' guides, Web sites, educational videos, and DVDs, which could all potentially accommodate corporate logos and



messages" (B16). Such possibilities offer the sponsor a wider reach, but also more strongly associate public television with corporate interests in different social venues. Unlike the broadcasts, logos and corporate messages associated with these other aspects are not as regulated and can be much more enduring. PBS's Web site, for example, can feature banner ads for sponsors on a program's Web page, and these ads (at least for non-children's programming) can incorporate more blatant selling techniques such as calls-for-action than the broadcast messages and can be just a click away from taking users to the sponsor's site. Although not among the giants of the medium, the PBS site still is a visible one with a large reach. According to Internet ranking site Alexa.com, pbs.org ranks 1,663 among the multiple millions of sites out there ("pbs.org -- Traffic Details"). Though more subtle than the broadcast spots, these other multimedia products and elements require consideration as well.

### **Automotive Sponsorship and Volkswagen Advertising Campaigns**

Automotive companies are no strangers to underwriting programming on PBS. Even before the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, the Ford Foundation funded a good portion of the programming and efforts of ETV, and even after the act, the foundation continued to offer grants for public broadcasting. The Ford Foundation was established by Henry Ford and his son Edsel, the same family famous for the Models T and A, not to mention the mighty Mustang. Even today, the Ford Motor Company is one of the Big Three U.S. automakers. Another Big Three automaker name often appearing on PBS is General Motors, which, for multiple years, served as the exclusive corporate sponsor for Ken Burns' works. According to June-Friesen, that funding "covered about 35 percent of Burns' production budgets" ("Burns Pipeline"). (For comparison

purposes, the production budget for Burns' *Jazz* ran at least \$13.5 million.) The company even committed to decade-long contracts, starting with Burns' *Civil War* in 1990. More recent automotive sponsorships have come from import automakers Subaru and Toyota.

Volkswagen holds its own iconic status among cars in the United States. Its U.S. branch began in 1955, and by 1970 had taken "7 percent of the U.S. market," with the Beetle and the Transporter (or "Bus," as it is commonly called) leading the way ("About the Company"). Though originally known for its more economic offerings, today Volkswagen features a full line of vehicles from subcompacts to sport utility vehicles, from sporty cars to family vehicles. It also sells luxury models such as Audi and Bentley in the United States.

Volkswagen is well known for its unique advertising. Its "Think Small" campaign from the late-1950s tops *Ad Age's* list of top advertising campaigns for the last century ("Top 100"). It also has a long history of the use of music in its promotions. In the past, Volkswagen has been a sponsor at The New Yorker Festival and Monterey Jazz Festival. But an especially music-centric campaign from 1996-2005 was "Drivers wanted," created by agency Arnold Worldwide. The campaign's complete tagline reads, "On the road of life there are passengers and there are drivers. Drivers wanted." According to a Business Wire release, the campaign's goal -- reflecting a youth-oriented "lifestyle marketing" approach -- targets "people who want to connect back to life and fully experience the act of living" ("Volkswagen Debuts"). It shows people driving their Volkswagens in contrived everyday situations with the music in the background. The campaign included the rollout of the new Beetle, and it resulted in increased sales in Passats (Enrico B09). *AdWeek* writer Eleftheria Parpis calls the campaign "some of the best advertising the industry has to offer" (24). The ads carefully address the Volkswagen driver with "a self-deprecating humor

that breeds confidence and honesty for a company that is unafraid to admit its customers aren't always perfect" (Parpis 24). The campaign ran through 2005, though in September that year Volkswagen fired Arnold and hired a new agency (Elliott "With Sagging Sales"). The campaign was retired soon after when the new advertising agency took over.

A large element of the campaign was its self-conscious use of strategically chosen catchy music designed to both link with a youth demographic and generate buzz. One advertisement for the Cabrio included Nick Drake's song "Pink Moon." Styx's "Mr. Roboto" and Trio's "Da Da Da," both perfectly synced with the commercials' visuals, made for other memorable mergings of music, model, and image. The company's "Independence Day" campaign for the then-new Jetta includes "Molly's Chambers" by Kings of Leon.

Other promotional elements emphasized the connection between hip music and the Volkswagen brand, arguably being a leading force in the modern blending of music and advertising. The company's Web site, vw.com, at one time a page featured a stream of its music-based commercials along with the title and artist of the song each one uses. A now-defunct Web site titled radiovw.com also offered streaming music. In 2001 Universal Records released *Street Mix: Music from the Volkswagen Commercials, Vol. 1*. In addition to Nick Drake, Styx, and Trio, the CD includes Hooverphonic, Fluke, Velocity Girl, and even Charles Mingus. Apparently, the "Vol. 1" designation proved too optimistic as no subsequent volumes have been released. However, another 2002 CD by Ben Neill featured only tracks originally written for Volkswagen commercials (Bess). And a 2003 promotion offered a free custom iPod for VW buyers, emblazoned with the "Drivers wanted" logo ("Volkswagen New Beetle"). Arguably, part of the branded linkage of music, promotion and Volkswagen was the company's involvement with *The*

*Blues.*

### **Volkswagen and *The Blues***

In late 2002 Volkswagen became the exclusive national sponsor for *The Blues*. Though the series aired for only one week, Volkswagen still committed to a year of funding, from January 2003 to January 2004, which overlaps with the Year of the Blues decree timeline. At the time Volkswagen was looking to launch new models, and according to the Sponsorship Group for Public Television, the company found "a multi-tiered, fully integrated marketing opportunity that would reinforce this brand essence while reaching millions of potential customers through a highly visible, ongoing campaign" ("Case Study"). As exclusive national sponsor, Volkswagen had access to broadcast audiences, Internet audiences, home video audiences, events audiences, and even educational audiences without competition from other national companies.

As described in the previous chapter, Volkswagen's sponsorship spot aired at the beginning and end of each episode. It thus was one of the first-viewed textual elements of the program, airing after each episode preview. Its mix of advertising goals -- including the hailing of particular targeted demographics -- and connection to *The Blues* presented a text with arguably problematic ideological meanings of decontextualized music and representation.

The television audience saw a 30-second spot that features a song from the first episode in the series, "Spoonful" by Willie Dixon. The underwriting message also features a shiny red Volkswagen Passat. The spot is fairly simple visually, narratively, and aurally. It begins with a montage of four people: a young man with his bicycle going into his apartment, a young woman at an outdoor café reading, a barber giving a man a shave, and a delivery man waiting with his

delivery. Each one in some way repeats the catchy rhythms of the phrase "that spoon, that spoon" from "Spoonful." The young man sings it, the young woman sings it, while the delivery man hums it. In a shot after this quick montage, a man in his apartment reacts to hearing the thumping bassline of the song as a car passes by under his window. The next shot shows the red Passat passing underneath as the music gets louder. The next shot returns to the scene of the outdoor café and the car passes there, with the music at its loudest. Two men, presumably from inside the car, exchange words about the lack of parking on the crowded streets. The next shot shows a man's feet donned with blue socks as the voiceover announcer says, "Volkswagen proudly sponsors the PBS film series that explores the power of the blues." The final shot shows a white field with the Volkswagen logo superimposed and centered in it with the "Drivers wanted" appearing below. A man's gruff voice scats a few notes and the spot ends.

Visually, the spot situates the music within a highly urban setting, within the space of a couple city blocks. This spot makes an interesting move with the urban setting in that it transplants what many consider a musical genre with rural origins in the Deep South into an unnamed city. Another interpretation might be attempting to connect the blues music with Chicago, one of the major stops on the blues migration and the setting of Levin's *Godfathers and Sons*. But there is more at work with evoking this urban setting than just relocating the music. Volkswagen typically targets its advertising toward younger, more upscale buyers. These buyers are more likely to live in urban areas. This is consistent with Volkswagen ads such as "Da Da Da," which emphasized its urban setting.

On a narrative level, this spot includes several people from different age groups, ranging from a twenty-something man to a thirty-something woman and from a forty-something man to a

sixty-something man. Of the four people who appear on camera humming the song, all of them are white. Only one member of another race appears in the commercial, and he is an African American who puts down the newspaper to look out the window at the car going by. This representation of diversity reads multiple ways, but two suggestions are valid here. On the one hand, the diversity attempts to show how the blues can be, or is, enjoyed by people of all ages. It demonstrates the reach of the music across generations. On the other hand, this commercial also alludes to idea of how many listeners of the blues are actually white, not African American.

Aurally, the commercial features the song "Spoonful," by Willie Dixon. On the surface the song's lyrics suggest an ominous meaning:

It could be a spoonful of water  
 To save you from the desert sand  
 But one spoon of love from my forty-five  
 Will save you from another man  
 Men lie about that spoonful  
 Some cry about that spoonful  
 Some die about that spoonful  
 Everybody fight about a spoonful

In *Understanding Popular Music* Roy Shuker explains how he thought the lyrics made reference to illegal drug use. Shuker disproves his reading of the lyrics with an explanation from the song's writer:

The idea of "Spoonful" was that it doesn't take a large amount of anything to be good. If you have a little money when you need it, you're right there in the right spot, that'll buy you a lot. If a doctor give you less than a spoonful of some kind of medicine that can kill you, he can give you less than a spoonful of another one that will make you well (Shuker 144)

The complexity of the lyrics and their offering of multiple interpretations create a challenge for

commercial makers who want to use popular music in their spots. Any ambiguity of meaning (especially if encompassing negative interpretations), any suggestion of political implication, and even any wording of subversive activity have no place in a commercial trying to sell a product or service. While viewers might interpret a commercial through their own experiences, advertisers want tight control in order to prevent confusion and image detraction. Blues songs sometimes contain lyrics that connote sex, misogyny, violence, and race issues. Dixon's song appeals to more universal themes, but multiple interpretations still are possible. To sidestep these undesired interpretations, the song gets reduced significantly. The simple chorus and toe-tapping bassline become the sound links among the different shots of people vocalizing it. The words to the rhythm offer no significant insight or comment on the visual; they are, simply, "that spoon, that spoon, that spoonful." The song becomes rendered into everyday background music without any consideration for context or content.

Given the tone of the complete lyrics and this commercial context, this song makes for an interesting choice. More people probably are familiar with the song through Cream's cover of it in the 1960s. The song topped the charts for several weeks and still receives plenty of airplay, even on today's "classic rock" stations. The song is included in greatest hits compilations of Cream's music as well. Cream did not, however, stick to the song's generic roots when covering it. Instead, the group added its own musical influences, creating a rock-inspired tune. The drug connotation for the song potentially comes from this cover, as the band was part of a scene known for experimenting with illegal drugs (Shuker 144-145). . Coupling the lyric fragment with a pumped-up bassline reduces any potentially unwanted implication. This potential intertextual meaning from the rock cover moves the original song's raw emotions toward a more commercial

friendly use.

This spot aired 14 times during the *The Blues* series broadcast, with one showing before each episode started and one showing after it ended. It stands out in the already clutter-free environment, and it feels almost nothing like a traditional sponsorship spot in that it includes music playing, people interacting with the product, and the slogan appearing along with the promotional words. No explicit claims occur through words, but in today's visual culture the implicit still makes the associations of the Passat, middle-class urban culture, and cool blues music clear. Despite the slickness of the spot, it appears only during the broadcast and nowhere else among *The Blues*-related items.

Another commercial appears on *The Blues* DVDs as a special feature titled, "Volkswagen Commercial: Proud Sponsor of *The Blues*." Visually and aurally this spot is much simpler than the broadcast one, and it aligns closer to the original ideas of enhanced underwriting than the broadcast one. A blank sepia-toned screen appears while a guitar-harmonic piece plays on the soundtrack. Then words appear: "The blues traveled / from the Mississippi Delta / to Memphis and St. Louis / to Chicago, / Philly and New York. / That's some road trip. / Volkswagen proudly joins PBS to bring you The Blues project." As one phrase appears and fades, another follows it. After the words, the Volkswagen logo with the phrase "Drivers wanted" appears. The piece borrows the road trip metaphor that appears throughout the discourses of the series, including the Web site and several of the episodes.

Both pieces function as promotional spots for Volkswagen's sponsorship of *The Blues*. The DVD one, which makes for a dubious addition as a "special feature," feels more like an enhanced spot than the broadcast one, which feels more like a network broadcast commercial



than a PBS sponsorship spot. This choice is ironic given that the DVD spot is not subject to the same restrictive regulations for underwriting messages on non-commercial broadcasts as "Spoonful." Though both spots note the sponsorship for PBS, they also both fit within the automaker's "Drivers wanted" campaign. The broadcast spot features music and a situation faced by people driving a Volkswagen, similar to other additions to the commercial campaign. In the commercial spots, though, the situations prove less mundane, such as picking up a smelly chair from the curbside and abandoning it because of its smell a little bit later. In the PBS spot, the car drivers seek a parking spot on a crowded street. The commercial spots feature more contemporary music, while the PBS spot features music from the series, though its toe-tapping rhythms facilitate audience identification with it.

Though visually much simpler, the DVD spot still links the PBS spot with the Volkswagen campaign. The dominant theme of the journey provides the connection. The "road trip" in blues music refers to the blues migration and general African American migration following Reconstruction, into the 1920s and 1930s, and later. These African Americans sought work in the north, and some blues musicians moved north to improve their chances with their careers. Calling this migration a "road trip" diminishes the hardships and troubles surrounding it, but the series in many ways erases or sanitizes these struggles, too, as Chapter Three briefly demonstrates. However, the language of the ad is influenced by its commercial nature. Calling it a "road trip" facilitates its connection to the complete slogan for the campaign about "the road of life."

As much as the public broadcasting rules prohibit the possibility of product claims, value claims, and ideological statements, both spots represent all three of these. Almost all of the

loosening of spot regulations attempt to draw major corporations away from the commercial networks. In the process of doing so, however, these regulations allow spots such as these to be broadcast on the service and included on its DVDs. Volkswagen's sponsorship of the series offers an interesting degree of synergy between its own advertising efforts and the series' themes. It manages to sidestep one of the major complaints about creating sponsorship spots for public television. Guy Carter, a senior vice president and director of entertainment marketing at OMD UDA, complains, "If you're an advertiser who has just spent \$750,000 on producing a 30-second ad through focus groups and meeting after meeting, that 30-second spot contains the essence of your brand communication. But now that I've gone through that process, I can't use it on PBS" (qtd. in Frutkin and Burgi 29). In many cases the PBS sponsorship rules force companies to make multiple spots -- one for network broadcast and one for PBS broadcast. Volkswagen's music-oriented and driver-focused marketing meshed well with the public television context, even though the spot suppresses the fuller meanings of blues music.

While the spots prove the most visible and by extension critiqued aspects of the PBS sponsorship program, their actual reach is questionable. PBS hypes the loyalty, quality, and commitment of its audiences, but the ratings prove far lower than most primetime network shows and some primetime basic cable shows. In a modern advertising context which emphasizes ROI (Return on Investment) and maximizing brand "impressions" to target markets, this raises questions about the other "points of impact."

### **Beyond the Spots**

Most major documentary series broadcast on public broadcasting feature multimedia

products and information to accompany them. Some of the multimedia offerings are commercial extensions such as home videos, CDs, and books. Others of these multimedia offerings include companion Web sites and even teachers' guides. These are all subject to sponsorship. According to Frutkin and Burgi, "Most advertisers believe there is added value in PBS properties such as its Web sites and educational extensions" (29). These appearances mark one shift for the extensions of sponsorship on public broadcasting, as illustrated by *The Blues*.

With *The Blues* series, the offerings include a companion Web site, a DVD box set, a VHS box set, individual DVDs, 25 CDs, and one book. *The Blues* project (not just the series) featured four related Web sites, including one for Year of the Blues at [yotb.org](http://yotb.org). The blues lesson plans available on the Web site appeared in a packet mailed to 45,000 schools round the country. The Volkswagen logo and "Drivers wanted" slogan appeared on all of these materials. These materials mailed to and used in public schools differ from those appearing on the Web site because in many ways these students become what Alex Molnar calls a "captive audience" for exposure to branding and certain ideologies (35). Molnar explains, "When teachers use products developed by marketing firms, instead of lesson plans taught to benefit students, the curriculum promotes the objectives of a third party whose interests may well conflict with those of the children, their families, and the country" (36). While the blues materials were developed by not-for-profit music education and preservation organizations, the Volkswagen logo still brings in the third-party interests into the classroom. Teachers wanting to use the materials get stuck with the company's logo, while people looking through the Web site possess the freedom to find similar information -- without the logo branding -- elsewhere.

By exploiting the promotional opportunities of the above as part of an integrated

campaign, the series and its broadcast on PBS become only part of a much longer, more involved Year of the Blues promotion. In addition to the concert recorded for *Lightning in a Bottle*, Volkswagen benefited from having its logo and slogan throughout events marketing. Events included concerts, festivals, and exhibits. Concerts included one at Radio City Music Hall designed to kick off the proclamation's celebration. The On the Road tour brought the music and the Volkswagen sponsorship into various festivals around the country. Some of these festivals included Sundance, the Chicago Blues Festival, and the Monterey Jazz Festival. Further, a traveling exhibit titled Sweet Home Chicago also featured the Volkswagen name as its exclusive sponsor.

In addition to getting its brand name recognized along with the various *The Blues* project entities, Volkswagen used the blues as part of its other promotional and marketing efforts. During that year, the automaker wanted to build hype for three new models, such as the Phaeton. Part of its incorporation of the blues products into its own marketing included branded receptions for owners and dealers. For buyers and owners, Volkswagen offered them the chance to call a toll-free number and received a blues-related CD or book. The blues promotion was not the only partnership for Volkswagen that year. As mentioned earlier, new buyers also could get their choice of iPod with a new vehicle purchase. The iPod mostly likely was more popular than the blues materials.

### **A Model for Others**

The success of this integrated marketing among *The Blues* project, PBS, and Volkswagen is staggering. According to the Sponsorship Group for Public Television, the campaign reached

19.5 million television viewers, 20 million Web site visitors, 12 million media impressions, and 2 million festival-goers ("Case Study"). Further, the campaign reached 1 million students, for a total of "more than half a *billion* impressions generated" (emphasis in original; "Case Study"). The Sponsorship Group for Public Television even quotes in its literature Brand Marketing Manager for Volkswagen Kevin Boyle, who states, "*The Blues* surpassed our highest expectations. The amount of exposure Volkswagen received through this sponsorship was truly phenomenal and demonstrates the kinds of results companies can achieve through such fully integrated, multi-tiered marketing opportunities with public television" ("Case Study").

This sponsorship deal between Volkswagen and PBS offered year-long brand exposure for \$1.5 million. The sustained marketing reached broadcast audiences, Internet audiences, home video audiences, events audiences, and even educational audiences. The success of this campaign is framed as a case study on the Sponsorship Group for Public Television's Web site. This group, run by WGBH, attempts to pair corporations with various PBS (well, in this case, WGBH) programming for sponsorship opportunities. The case study literature outlines the goals, strategy, and tactics used to make this partnership beneficial *primarily to the corporate sponsor*, in this case Volkswagen. All five of the goals listed benefit Volkswagen's marketing objectives, such as "introduce and generate buzz for three new Volkswagen models," "connect with existing Volkswagen owners, dealers and employees to reinforce brand loyalty," and "allow the company to connect with potential buyers in person, on a one-to-one basis" ("Case Study"). The literature even emphasizes Sponsorship Group for Public Television's willingness "to customize the sponsorship opportunity to meet Volkswagen's marketing goals" (quoting Bill McGowan, Executive Vice President, Director of National Broadcast; "Case Study"). Further, "the project

would provide Volkswagen with a customized, multi-platform sponsorship opportunity that would give the automaker a long-term, sustained sponsorship presence across multiple media channels" ("Case Study"). In all of this language, benefits for public broadcasting receive no mention. All of this case study centers on how Volkswagen benefited from the sponsorship opportunity and how other companies can, too.

The wisdom behind presenting this model as a case study is dubious. While a good portion of PBS programming offers multiple media extensions, most limited documentary series will not have a connection to a Congressional decree establishing educational and other festivities honoring a music genre. *The Blues* presented a unique opportunity for a variety of interested groups to honor and celebrate the music and to promote the music and their own interests at the same time. Other PBS shows, even children's shows, offer no such extended opportunities as this one did. This is not to say that this is a one-of-a-kind deal, but organizing a duplicate set of circumstances so that another sponsor could take advantage of it would be an immense undertaking.

## **Conclusion**

By 2004 PBS's guidelines for sponsorship had changed even further. According to *Current* writer Karen Everhart, the new guidelines allow "people speaking on camera, lyrics, sound effects, people appearing with products, and well-established slogans that contain qualitative or comparative language" ("PBS May Start Foundation"). These new guidelines do not apply to children's programming, and Everhart notes that these guidelines still remain more restrictive than the FCC ones.

But where does the line between sponsorship and advertising blur or even end? So many of these rules intend to maintain public broadcasting's non-commercial status, yet that line gets pushed, blurred, or overstepped. In 2005 Chipotle Mexican restaurant created a PBS sponsorship spot that spoofed the service's pledge drives while it also underwrote *How to Cook Everything: Bittman Takes on America's Chefs*. According to Ives, the spot represents the tensions PBS faces: "[T]o raise money for noncommercial programming, producers and distributors increasingly allow their corporate underwriters to turn their credits into something resembling regular commercials" (C1). In the Chipotle spots, people eat the burritos and become distracted from their tasks (in this case, answering phones to take pledges) because of them, but according to the guidelines, they must not enjoy the product *too* much. Ives comments, "[T]he producer instructed the actors in its pledge drive spoof not to look too thrilled" (C1). Motavalli notes dancing O's looking like Cheerios and other instances that raise questions about the duck suits the sponsorship spots seem to be wearing (1).

Focusing on underwriting guidelines, though, overlooks the other commercial / sponsorship lines being crossed regularly and probably accessing even larger audiences than the ones viewing the programming. With *The Blues* access to these audiences moves beyond multimedia and into venues and events -- a whole new world of corporate sponsorship for public broadcasting. Volkswagen gained the opportunity to reach those audiences through its sponsorship, but the opportunity was integrated into the automaker's own marketing goals for the year. The sponsorship spots bring together the people's car with the people's music, while the other venues for the Volkswagen logo to appear also bring the logo to the people as well.

The extensiveness of this sponsorship deal raises some serious questions about public

broadcasting's efforts to preserve its noncommercial status. The promotional spots, which aired during the broadcast, also aired with the series episodes at special events and festivals. They pushed the boundaries of the spots even then, and the rules soon changed to allow those changes in an effort to draw more commercial advertising. These spots also integrate well into Volkswagen's own commercial campaign efforts. Further, the Volkswagen logo and slogan appear on all the multimedia products, both for consumer purchase and for educational purposes.

Unlike most limited documentary series, though, the sponsorship does not stop there but reaches into events and concerts as well. Half a billion impressions for a brand logo is extensive for any campaign, and they managed to accomplish most of those impressions *outside the PBS broadcast*. The successful partnership between the Sponsorship Group for Public Television and for Volkswagen even becomes a model for other corporations to consider. The series' timing and links to the Congressional decree facilitate that success immensely, but they open future opportunities for integrating sponsorship with commercial activities beyond sponsorship.

Volkswagen represents just one company with corporate interests in *The Blues*. Both Sony and Universal Music Enterprises participated in the series through making available their catalogs for the multiple soundtrack and compilation CDs. These CDs, along with the episodes and the Web site, become part of the blockbuster model used by PBS for these documentary series. Chapter Six delves into blockbuster texts and marketing practices, further demonstrating the commercialization of the service while it maintains its own vision and further demonstrating the service's vulnerability to big media appropriations.



**CHAPTER SIX: PBS, *The Blues*,  
and the Documentary Blockbuster Series**

The term "blockbuster" has made its way from the movie screen to the television screen, and even to documentaries on public broadcasting. Referring to both texts and marketing practices, the term often is used to describe the works of Ken Burns. *Orlando Sentinel* writer Hal Boedeker writes, "The War will be PBS' blockbuster next season" (1). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* calls Burns' *The Civil War* a "blockbuster" ("Birth of 'Jazz'" F3). Robyn Meredith calls Burns' *Baseball* and also *The Civil War* "blockbuster documentaries" (D12). *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert Lloyd even goes so far as to call Burns "the father of the public television historical blockbuster" (E1).

The term "blockbuster" usually refers to high-profile Hollywood films that attempt to become big draws at the box office. These films feature a full range of marketing, including television advertising, Web site, CD soundtracks, book, and other merchandise. These films, usually part of larger franchises, take advantage of a company's ownership of multiple media outlets in order to minimize investment and maximize exposure and, hopefully, profits. This invocation of the term "blockbuster" to describe Burns' documentary series, then, raises questions about the term's application and about the increasing commercialization of the service. Laurence Jarvik invokes the ideas of a "blockbuster" in his book *PBS Behind the Screen* as a fundamental critique of a not-for-profit enterprise using money-making techniques to garner profits. For Jarvik, this practice and these profits support his argument to defund public broadcasting altogether. In a chapter about the documentary series *Free to Choose*, Jarvik notes,

"PBS broadcasts at least one prestigious 'blockbuster' miniseries each year" (275). He leaves the term "blockbuster" in quotes without explanation, and instead he continues to list some representative examples and comment on these series' collective educational purpose. His more pointed comments refer to the books that accompany some of the series: These books "became best-sellers due in part to the promotional value of television exposure, making rich men of the authors and producers" (Jarvik 275). He cites other statistics about home videos earning in the millions and concludes, "So PBS special programming is valuable not only to PBS in terms of enhanced prestige and increased pledges, but also to the program producers and talent, who earn literally millions in sales because PBS's target audience is composed of literate, upscale, educated book-buyers" (Jarvik 276). He offers no statistics to support his claims for the "millions" the "talent" earns.

Jarvik's use of the term, however, does suggest a way to discuss the structural operations behind *The Blues*. On its surface the series resembles other long-form documentary series on PBS, but as previous chapters have shown, the series offers multiple opportunities to push the boundaries and limits of PBS relationships with corporate sponsors and other partners. The blockbuster concept as a model can reveal the intricate relationships among the different parties involved in this series' production, distribution, and exhibition. But it also reveals the strategies and workings of PBS, which create certain limits and set certain expectations. In the end, by adopting some of the practices of the blockbuster, PBS becomes a conduit for big media's workings, while the service still manages to fulfill its expectations. The documentary components of the series, the CDs associated with it, and the Web site affiliated with it all shape and challenge the "blockbuster" approach to PBS series.

## Blockbuster Texts and Techniques

The term "blockbuster" refers to both a text and a marketing practice, and is commonly claimed to be a dominant strategy of modern Hollywood. In terms of text, the contemporary definition refers to fiction films long on spectacle and short on story and complex characterization. Such movies are often heavy on special effects. Action and adventure tend to be dominant modes rather than intricate dialogue. They typically feature familiar actors/directors, as well as characters, often originating from a "presold property" such as "best selling novels, comics, or computer games" (Jockel and Dobler 85). Most blockbuster films feature archetypal heroes and villains and a basic conflict-resolution narrative that ends in an upbeat manner and offers the protagonist as the victor.

Pinpointing the textual features of a blockbuster film proves challenging. A survey of chapter titles in Julian Stringer's edited collection *Movie Blockbusters* reveals some scholarly ideas for examples of blockbusters, including *Contact*, *The Fugitive*, *Titanic*, and *Star Wars* (v-vii). Inarritu, Gardels, and Medavoy list *Jurassic Park* and *Independence Day* as blockbusters. McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich cite films based on comic-book superheroes such as *Superman*, *X-men*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman*.

While all of these examples are relatively recent, blockbusters are not an exclusive feature of contemporary Hollywood. In fact, their idea and existence go back almost a century. In his *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, for example, Barry Langford makes a case for D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* as early blockbusters (238). Stringer cites *Gone with the Wind* as another classic example of a blockbuster (1), or a superspecial (Langford 239). After the 1948 Paramount decision, the blockbuster idea became more salient in the industry and its

press. According to Neale, "The introduction of 'blockbuster' as a term in the early 1950s coincided with the beginnings of a period of a sustained and increased investment in productions of this kind and with the increasing use of an additional term, 'epic,' to mark, describe, and sell them" (48). Another synonym for "epic" and "blockbuster" is "colossals" (Neale 49). No matter the term, Neale still lists several examples from the post-divestiture period, including *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Patton* (50). Into the 1970s Allen cites the blockbuster smashes of *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* and *Jaws*, cleverly noting "the success of *Jaws* permanently hooked the industry on the promise of blockbuster windfalls" (21, emphasis in original).

Taken in the long term, blockbusters become difficult to define based on their narrative, formal, or generic features. Neale notes that contemporary blockbusters appear to "consist almost solely, from a generic point of view, of action-adventure, science fiction, and disaster films" (47). Using genre analysis, Langford attempts to define the action blockbuster through iconography, structure, and theme (234-235). While many of the aforementioned films might fit into these categories, several others do not. *The Sound of Music* falls under a musical genre, *Patton* is a biopic, and *Titanic* draws on melodrama. Using genre to define the textual features of a blockbuster thus fails to encompass the full variety of these films, even though the action-adventure genre becomes the dominant one since the late 1970s.

Defining the common text-centered features of a blockbuster requires more abstract concepts not necessarily bound to genre. Three possible features include source materials, spectacle, and technology. Many blockbusters draw on existing source materials such as popular books, comic books, video games, television shows and even amusement park rides for their

premises, characters and storylines (see McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich). Characters and settings are often visually distinct (superhero costumes or wizard castles, for example). In terms of the blockbuster, spectacle refers to the "physical scale" of these productions (Langford 239). This scale represents part of the excess, which "includes such factors as running time and length, the size of a film's cast, and the nature, scope, and mode of cinematic presentation of the events and situations depicted" (Neale 48). Technology refers to the contributions to the film's images and to the image's size. Use of digital technologies expands the possibilities for the worlds and creatures created, particularly for use on a mass scale (Allen 201). These technologies even can create people (Huang 68). Widescreen and IMAX technologies greatly expand the image size, even making an IMAX movie "up to eight-storeys high" in specialized theaters ("Corporate Profile"). IMAX creates both nature documentaries and fiction adaptations for its technologies. In these cases, the technology maximizes the spectacle not only *in* the image, but also the spectacle *of* the image.

Overall, the most common unifying feature of a blockbuster is the concept of "size" (Stringer 3; McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich 110). While this concept refers to the marketing and distributing efforts, it also refers to the textual features mentioned above. Some source materials, particularly comic book and graphic novel series, possess extensive histories and story lines behind them. This depth of material contributes to the cultural capital and potential additional plots/characters of the films and to their possible sequels. The spectacles and the technology create not only large-scale and in-depth special efforts and visuals, but also large images on even larger screens. While these concepts prove rather abstract from traditional generic constructions, they still facilitate description of a blockbuster film.

A blockbuster also refers to a marketing practice or strategy. Typically, New Hollywood and big corporate media employ them. The studios and their financial partners invest heavily in a film's production and its distribution, with a significant portion of that money heading toward saturation advertising, particularly on television (McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich 110). The big media companies use their ownership of multiple media outlets to generate hype for a film, distribute it widely and to disseminate additionally licensed multimedia products such as CD soundtracks, books, and video games. They partner with other companies to promote the film further through toys, clothing, fast food products, and other merchandise (see Meehan, "Holy Commodity Fetish"). These films, with emphasis on familiar and visually distinct characters and happy-ending narratives, are assumed to generate sequels such as *Spider-Man 2* -- and, eventually, generate film "franchises" (*Spider-Man 3* and 4). The emphasis on visual design, action and relatively simple narratives are believed to be appealing as much for the international as the domestic market, if not more (Olson 3-17).

The blockbuster text and marketing practice both are geared toward garnering the most profits predictably, quickly and efficiently, but also with long-term economic potential. Designed for a big-opening weekend, they are integrated into a studio's budget projections as a revenue-generating "tent-pole" (Prince 3-7). They rely on a large corporation's synergistic (or cross-media) integration to ensure a return on their investment, combining the ownership of different media and properties under one corporate umbrella. Arguably, this strategy comes in response to the 1948 Paramount decision, which broke up the vertical integration of the studios by a forced divestiture of their theaters in the motion picture industry that was then organizationally separate from television and other media. The vertical structure (owning production, distribution and

exhibition) ensured a return on their investments. The synergistic structure attempts to do the same.

A blockbuster mentality is not just the practice of big media companies, however. Alisa Perren notes how Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), the industry-labeled indie success story, was plugged by an extensive promotional strategy that tweaked the blockbuster formula via "niche" (including youth) marketing and eventually demonstrated a greater investment on return than most big-budget blockbusters. The film's budget was \$1.1 million, while it earned \$24 million at the U.S. box office (Perren 30).

But situating a documentary within a blockbuster model raises questions about the usual associations of particular texts. The marketing and distribution strategies of the above documentaries may be blockbuster-like, but their textual qualities are not an obvious fit. After all, most documentaries do not feature superheroes flying in to save the day. Reality does not always present an entertaining face and happy ending. They create a foundation from which to consider *The Blues* as a PBS documentary blockbuster series.

### **Documentary Blockbusters**

This demonstrated marketability also occurs with documentaries, some of which have come to be called "blockbusters." A key example is Michael Moore's controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which opened 23 June 2004 in 868 theaters around the United States, cultivated heavy press coverage and brought in \$23,920,637 during its opening weekend ("Documentary Movies" BoxOfficeMojo). Other documentaries such as *March of the Penguins* (2005), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Sicko* (2007) also have garnered significant profits and significant marketing.

Several documentaries mirror the cross-media licensing strategy of blockbusters by including ancillary products as well. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, features an official reader by Moore and two related CDs, while *March of the Penguins* features a book, CD soundtrack, and a Nintendo-system video game. One version of the video game bundles the cartridge, a children's tie-in book to the movie, and a stuffed penguin toy.

We must acknowledge a primary difference. Most of the episodes in this series follow the conventions of documentary, which asserts itself as grounded in reality and therefore nonfiction. As Keith Beattie writes in *Documentary Screens*, documentary holds with its audience a contract wherein the documentary asserts a truth and the audience can trust that truth as reality (11). This idea of truth, however, is highly subjective, though it often depends on a balance of viewpoints, respect of evidence and its contexts, adherence to timelines, and maintenance of director neutrality. The further a documentary strays from these principles, the more likely it violates the documentary contract, leaving viewers with a sense of betrayal.

Further, documentary makers working with or trying to get their work on public broadcasting face a narrower set of standards. In her book *Public Television: Politics and the Battle over Documentary Film*, B.J. Bullert explores how several documentaries became controversial for their content and their broadcast on PBS. She uses the "typical" conceptions of documentary on public broadcasting as part of her backdrop to measure the extent of the controversy. These typical conceptions center on ideas of "fairness" and "balance" (Bullert 14, 23). Both fairness and balance hark back to the ideas of journalistic standards, ideas that often undergird criticisms of documentaries being "biased" or "untrue." Given the political vulnerabilities of public broadcasting in terms of public criticism and funding, this adds another



layer of pressure to conform to standard documentary expectations.

And the "blockbuster" label also adds certain textual expectations. Blockbuster documentary series often have an accessible cultural, historical, or scientific subject to them. The subject must be familiar enough to PBS audiences to pique their interest, but it must be unknown enough to make them curious to watch seven nights' worth of it. The subject must offer a degree of familiarity in its presentation of said subject, but it also must contain some new and surprising elements so as not to become an elementary-level history textbook. Further, the subject must have the breadth and depth of scope to cover a large expanse of time. Without the expansive subject and the long running time, the series most likely becomes part of another standing series on the service such as *Frontline*.

### **The Blues as Blockbuster: Textual Factors**

Typically, a well-known subject's history presents a strong binary between culturally dominant-- well-known and accepted -- stories (or even the singular story) and revisionist ones. In terms of blues music history books such as Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* and Alan Lomax's *The Land Where the Blues Began* provide a more dominant history, while Angela Y. Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* and Elijah Wald's *Escaping the Delta* provide revisions. Conventional histories focus on Handy's discovery of the music and the Delta bluesmen, while revisionist histories recognize women's contributions and the mythology behind Handy's discovery and Johnson's selling his soul to the devil in exchange for playing a mean guitar. From a PBS documentary series therein lies an expectation of the dominant history's representation as the main narrative but with a few revisions or controversies thrown in to appeal to the audience's

more discriminating members or, in this case, fans. In general PBS audiences are more educated and discerning, but that fact does not imply they expect "educational" to equal "boring." If audience members are already familiar with the subjects at hand, they may view the series for affirmation of their own knowledge; or, if they are wanting to learn more about a subject, a series offers that opportunity as well. A similar process happens with *The Blues* as with most blockbuster series based on popular comics characters. Each story (whether from a video game or the front page of the newspaper) is a cultural construct that serves as the foundation for these blockbuster texts. And although a difference lies in that one construct is understood as fiction with its sources in consumer texts such as fictional books and television shows, while the other construct is framed as being grounded in the real, with its sources coming from history, each is arguably a mix of the conventional with the revisionist.

In addition to the depth of subject with a cultural appeal filling multiple hours of a documentary series, a documentary which follows a blockbuster model also must be marketable in multiple venues. Not all subjects lend themselves to easy repackaging. Michael Moore's work aside, strongly political subjects such as wars, women's and religious issues, and economic concerns do not easily lend themselves to blockbuster marketing practices. Music, on the other hand, proves otherwise. Blues music is one of the most researched topics in both critical scholarship and popular media. It influences a wide variety of music contemporary music genres, including jazz, rock and roll, and even rap and hip-hop. The genre has its heroes, legends, and myths. Theatrical films such as *The Blues Brothers* (1980) and *Crossroads* (1986) keep it in the public imagination. It also has its share of existing albums already available to consumers, though its share of the market remains small. With the songs available, the potential exists to

create compatible, related products to accompany the series. Similar to other older genres, not all of the songs are available through original recordings by original artists, and some songs never have been released to general audiences. Their existence creates a further marketing opportunity with their "rareness."

A blockbuster documentary series about a subject must present something "different," however. Multiple documentaries about blues music exist, particularly the works of Robert Mugge and Les Blank. Popular portraits of several blues artists also remain available, so the subject of blues music is far from being covered thoroughly in documentary. Most of those available documentaries, through, are single features or shows. Scorsese's series arranges the subject in a greater scale not before seen with blues music, in this case a series with seven episodes. It stands out for not only its scale, but also its timing. While blockbusters go for the "event" weekend, this series was associated with an entire year celebrating its subject. Further, that year had Congressional backing to it, further establishing its credibility and visibility.

Spectacle refers to "the focus of the audience's engagement being grounded almost purely in action and physical events" (Rowe and Wells 55). The image itself provides a draw for our attentions. It usually offers something new, something never seen, and implicit in this offering is some form of awe-striking entertainment, at least for fiction films. Fiction blockbusters often offer amazing special effects that not only attempt to create "realism" but also attempt to dazzle us in some way. With documentaries special effects might push the boundaries of reality too far, breaking the documentary contract, but these films still offer their own version of the spectacle of something different, unique, or unseen.

In this case the spectacle becomes the archival materials. The term refers to anything not

created by the documentary makers. Many of these materials are visual -- photographs, newspaper headlines, official documents, and even motion picture and television footage. But in the case of histories of sound, there is also a kind of spectacle, or awe, that can be constructed around the aural dimension. Jordan, for example, argues that, contrary to Walter Benjamin's famous argument about early film, mechanical reproduction of sound can impute an "aura" on art, especially as related to the reification of musical authenticity. In this light, important to documentaries about music are archival sounds, including radio performances and interviews, and studio and performance recordings. Aged materials both visual and aural create a strong connection to historical periods. They often (but not always in today's age in camera phones and Web cams) possess senses of "oldness" and "rareness" about them. The more obscure the materials, the more credibility they offer to the finished documentary, the more spectacle they offer to viewers (especially given certain techniques within the films), and the more potential they offer to marketing.

All seven episodes feature some archival materials, some moving images with synchronous sound, and some audio-only with improvised pictures. Pieces from private collections offer one kind of exclusive archival materials. In *Godfathers and Sons*, for example, Marshall Chess and his son stand in a room lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with albums upon albums. Chess pulls out several of the albums and talks about them, including Muddy Waters' first electric album and Electric Mud's album. *The Soul of a Man* offers the Seabergs' exclusive video recordings of performances by J.B. Lenoir and of their interviews with him. Other archival materials include the only two known pictures of Robert Johnson, not to mention his death certificate, clips of songs recorded by Alan Lomax and old performances by Ray

Charles, John Lee Hooker, Professor Longhair, and Skip James.

Most blockbuster franchises follow a particular structure or order. In subsequent sequels, we can expect Spider-Man or Batman to face his newest foe, usually hinted at in the previous installment. Chronology usually moves forward from its particular starting point. Even in a particular blockbuster movie, the narrative may be structured in an episodic way, as action movies such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* explicitly mimic the style of old movie serials. Many PBS documentary series follow the same pattern. Episodes build on a related topic or theme, and each episode contributes to creating a fuller picture or filling in a timeline (see Dornfeld). Ken Burns' longer works illustrate this practice. *The Civil War*, for example, links each episode to a topic and a year, with episodes "branded" with a marketing-friendly label. Episode 1 is "The Cause (1861)," episode 5 is "The Universe of Battle (1863)," and episode 8 is "War is All Hell (1865)." For *Jazz* episode 1 is "Beginnings to 1917," episode 2 is "The Gift 1914-1924," and episode 3 is "Our Language 1924-1929."

The structure of *The Blues* follows a different course both across the series and within particular episodes; in this case the tension may result from seeing *The Blues* as a blockbuster, but also looking at the marketing potential of each individual installment as a mini-blockbuster. The series overall follows no particular chronology. Different episodes touch on different time periods, and some episodes even touch on the same time periods from different angles. It follows no particular episodic structure, either. *Feel Like Going Home* explores the origins of the blues from both the Mississippi Delta and Africa using contemporary blues musician Corey Harris as its guide. In *Warming by the Devil's Fire* Charles Burnett focuses on the year 1955 and the clash between blues and gospel music. *The Soul of a Man* starts with the blues of Robert Johnson in

the 1920s and ends with the work of J.B. Lenoir in the 1960s, covering a time period overlapping the other two films.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the lack of a grand narrative in the series results from the much-publicized "director's autonomy." the series followed. Here we see a blockbuster mentality in the names associated with the series and the installments. Perren notes the importance of personnel involved in the production of blockbuster films (20). In particular, she points to the producers' (and directors') affiliations and stars' statuses as identifying features of a blockbuster. Usually, these personnel work with larger studios in order to bring funding and publicity to the project. In *The Blues*, we have the Hollywood mystique with Scorsese and Eastwood, and indie credibility with someone like Wim Wenders.

But the involvement of stars in the modern blockbuster comes with complications, and one such complication is the production companies owned by stars. The amount of producers for this series is staggering, though in some cases their popular recognition is nonexistent. Scorsese has the biggest pull, which he used to bring Vulcan Productions on board. Vulcan Productions -- formerly Big Blue Sky Productions -- brought along the philanthropy of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and his Experience Music Project, a not-for-profit foundation for music preservation and education in Seattle. Wim Wenders brought RoadMovies on board, and his company helped provide the other half of the production funding. His company also maintained the international distribution rights, however. This mix of for-profit companies and not-for-profit foundations makes the composition of series affiliations more complicated than the standard blockbuster, which primarily uses the text for garnering more profits more efficiently.

Overall, blockbusters refer to something special, something different. The discourses

surrounding a blockbuster attempt to showcase how this text or television show or even limited series is different from the usual fare. Considering *The Blues* as a spectacle on television seems contradictory to the technological considerations behind the movies, but a blockbuster must be defined in terms of the venue that shapes it and how that venue puts the texts forward. For Hollywood, the large-scale, big-budget productions are special or different. For PBS, however, these limited documentary series serve that same function as the Hollywood films. They are something special, something different, and as a result they receive different broadcast and multimedia treatments than other series associated with the service. As discussed in Chapter Four, the counterprogramming strategy, for example, highlights the series during the fall 2003 season's debut instead of the service's other programming. PBS uses these series to draw viewers to the service but not to compete directly with the network programming or with its own programming.

The multimedia consumer options, in fact, go beyond the usual single DVD with multiple sets. Further, the series gets its own subdomain on the PBS Web site, [pbs.org/blues](http://pbs.org/blues). Most long-running series carry this designation, but in this case, a limited-term series gets one as well. Clearly, PBS saw the series as a cross-media license that was more than a TV series, as the following section explores.

### **The Blues as Blockbuster: Companion CDs as Merchandising**

*The Blues* features an extensive amount of multimedia texts related to the series. These texts include a compilation book, DVD and VHS box sets. These texts also include a grand total of 25 CDs, more than twice the number that was associated with Burns' *Jazz*. The CDs break

down into one "best of" compilation; one five-CD box set; seven episode soundtracks; and a dozen single-artist compilations. The extensive CD offers allow viewers the convenience to explore the music heard in the episodes or the artists mentioned or shown. Most of the clips in the films cut performances and edit them together with interviews and voiceovers, thus interrupting them. (This type of editing is common in concert films.) The CDs allow the opportunity to hear these songs and their lyrics without interruption. Further, both traditional and contemporary artists perform the songs, theoretically introducing listeners to modern blues performers as well. If series fans want to explore an artist in further depth, the dozen single-artist collections feature a combination of classic and contemporary artists, including The Allman Brothers, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, J.B. Lenoir, Muddy Waters, Son House, Robert Johnson, Taj Mahal, Keb' Mo', Bessie Smith, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. All the CDs carry the same imagery of a silhouetted man carrying a guitar over his shoulder with "The Blues" written on the body of it and the words "Martin Scorsese Presents" at the top, unifying the branding of the series. Since the music component of this series is the most extensive and since the political economy of music is arguably an underexplored area (see Smith, Hull), I focus exclusively on the CDs and the industries and industry practices operating behind them. Since much of our cultural production occurs through Universal and Sony, it is important to consider how their influences shape what cultures we do see. These influences become even more important in the case of blues music and blues artists. The next few pages will outline some background about the music industry and the major corporate players behind *The Blues* television series as a music brand.

The CDs related to the series emerged from a complex process of negotiations among



corporate entities, series executives, and blues artists or their estates. After all, "mass-produced culture is a business, governed by corporate drives for profit, market control, and transindustrial integration" (Meehan, "Batman," 49). These negotiations center on getting, keeping, and maintaining power, with the larger corporations fighting to retain their dominance and their profits at the expense of the artists and others involved.

The music industry is vicious about collecting and ensuring its perceived, entitled profits, and currently the industry feels a strong (but real) threat in this digital era. The Internet, lossless file formats, and even free recording and conversion software and inexpensive equipment make music reproducing and sharing quite easy. The digital era allows artists to sidestep traditional systems of production and distribute their music through other venues. Trent Reznor with his Nine Inch Nails is the most visible and successful entrepreneur in this new system, with his making new albums available for free or off-price (\$5) through various download sites. Further, some artists skip the entire copyright system and make their works available for free through Web sites such as Jamendo or eMusic.

The industry's reactions to these changes have not been graceful. Instead of adapting to the changes, the industry has attempted to recoup its losses by going after those who violate copyrights and other infringements. The Recording Industry Association of America represented 18 labels in its 1999 lawsuit against file-sharing site Napster for copyright infringement. The industry equated the site with "stealing a record from a record store" (Graham 03D). The site ended up getting shut down by a court order, and now is run as a subscription / streaming service owned by Best Buy. The RIAA also has pursued individuals and institutions for illegal downloading. Individuals from teenagers to grandmothers were sued, and recently a Minnesota

woman's order to pay \$1.92 million for downloading 24 songs was upheld on appeal (Karnowski "Woman Ordered"). Thirty thousand similar suits reached the trial stage, and most people settled by agreeing to pay \$3,500 (Karnowski "Woman Ordered"). Part of the strategy for identifying "potential" illegal downloaders involves issuing subpoenas to internet service providers in order to get them to identify the names of people (Channel 10-11). Colleges and universities remain part of the targets for this practice, and some schools targeted included University of Arizona, University of Michigan, Indiana University, and University of Southern California (Channel 11). Another method the industry uses is digital rights management (DRM) software on both music downloaded and music copied from CDs. iTunes, Apple's music downloading site, until recently used FairPlay for its DRM (Harvey 22), while Sony included software called XCP in its CDs in order to prevent songs being removed from the CDs and uploaded to Web sites. XCP turned out to have malware (malicious software) attached to it and exposed people's computers to hacking and other attacks, so Sony recalled the CDs and offered replacements. Lawsuits were filed against Sony as a result ("Recordings"). Today, most CDs come with a sticker that contains an FBI warning about piracy being illegal and carrying a hefty fine.

Companies operating within the recording industry actually belong to larger media corporations. As of 2003, the dominant media market in the United States was owned by a total of five major corporations. Those companies included Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, News Corporation, Viacom, and Bertelsmann (Bagdikian 3). While the big media companies represent a large portion of the overall media industries, the music companies hold even tighter control on both the U.S. and global markets. Various accounts note how these divisions control about 75 percent of the world music market (Bishop 443). In 2003 the "big five" included Sony,

BMG Music, Vivendi Universal, EMI, and Warner. The "big five" became the "big four" in 2004 with Sony's merger with BMG's music group.

The remaining 25 percent of the market belongs to independent labels. Some independent blues labels include Chicago-based Alligator, Possum, Telarc, Earwig, Wild Oats, and Deep Rush, among several others. Depending on the artist, some independent labels will use the big five to distribute their titles. Independent distributors also exist, but even some of them, such as ADA and RED, are owned in part by the big media. The independent labels also face persistent threats of buyouts by big media, as happened with labels such as hip-hop label Def Jam.

For *The Blues* series CDs, the two largest music companies, Sony and Universal Music Enterprises, agreed to open their catalogs and release the series-related CDs. The two companies formed a similar partnership for the release of Ken Burns' *Jazz*, which resulted in a renewed interest in the genre and a jump in sales (Morris 7). A similar jump was hoped for blues music, which, at the time, accounted for 0.5 percent of total sales (Morris 7).

Both companies possess extensive catalogs and other holdings within the music industry. Universal Music Group, owned by Vivendi, is "the world's largest music publishing house with more than a million copyrights under its control" and "owns the largest catalog of recorded music in the world" ("Universal Music Group Fact Sheet"). The company includes such labels as Interscope / Geffen / A&M, Island Def Jam, Motown, Universal Music Enterprises, Universal Music Group Nashville, and The Verve Music Group ("Universal Music Group Subsidiaries / Affiliates").

Some of Universal Music's history is linked with Universal Pictures' history, though its music history originates with the venerable Decca Records. Founded in 1934, Decca released

Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" in the 1940s and it bought Universal Pictures in 1952. MCA bought Decca in 1962 and reorganized its music productions as MCA Records. It bought blues label Chess Records in 1985 and grunge label Geffen in 1990.

In 1991 the wave of larger corporation ownerships began, with Matsushita buying the company and creating the MCA Music Entertainment group. In 1998 The Seagram company purchased Polygram and merged the two groups. French media company Vivendi bought Seagram in 2000, later selling the production assets to General Electric but keeping the music assets for itself.

The company holds interests in a variety of music-related components. It owns all or half-interest in several concert halls. It owns eMusic, an online music-selling site, and possesses interest in other online music sites. Until 2005, the company owned its own means for CD manufacturing, but later sold those assets. It still retains its production and distribution arms. Further, it holds an immense music catalog.

Universal used three labels in releasing the series CDs: Chess, Hip-O, and Universal Music Enterprises. UME, as the latter is known, serves as an umbrella label for the other two. It serves as the catalog / reissue division for Universal Music Group. Hip-O was founded in 1996 in order to mimic the success of Rhino Records. Its primary task is to reissue albums from the massive catalog, including the Motown and Chess labels.

Chess Records deserves some extended mention here. The label helped define the electric Chicago blues sound and introduced some of the key blues artists. Founded in the late 1940s by brothers and Polish immigrants Leonard and Phil Chess, the company started with jazz recordings and eventually expanded to blues as well. It signed and recorded Muddy Waters,

Willie Dixon, Bessie Smith, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker. It issued B.B. King's debut CD, *Mr. Blues*. After his father's death, Leonard's son Marshall took over the company in between January and October 1969 before he went to work with the Rolling Stones. The label itself was sold in 1969 to General Recorded Tape, and the Chess masters bounced around several places before becoming part of MCA in 1985. Part of this label's venerable history becomes the focus of Levin's film *Godfathers and Sons*, thus serving as both a subject and a revenue partner in the series.

Sony's origins begin in manufacturing equipment instead of making and distributing content to listen to, to watch, or to play on it. The company began in 1946, and throughout the decades it has made tape recorders, televisions, pocket-size radios, video cassette players, stereo components, portable cassette players, portable CD players, personal computers, MP3 players, video gaming systems, digital cameras, and the Blu-Ray DVD players. The company experiments with data distribution formats, such as the failed BETA tape, the successful CD (with Philips), the MiniDisc, the Memory Stick and Memory Stick PRO, and the Universal Media Disc. It further attempts to create its own software and file formats, particularly for its older music players, but with only moderate success.

With all these means to play or show personal entertainment, Sony offered little content to play or show on it early in its corporate existence. In 1988 the company bought CBS records for \$2 billion, and in 1989 it bought Columbia and Tristar Pictures for \$4.9 billion. These massive purchases basically created Sony's entertainment arms. In 2000 and 2001 the Sony Music Group, the arm created from the music division purchases, garnered \$4.6 billion in revenues, or 24 percent of the company's total revenues (Hull 127-128). In addition to production

and holdings, the company manufactures and distributes.

Though Sony's foray into music and movies is recent, CBS Records carries with it a long history. The Columbia Gramophone Company began distributing the machines and the wax cylinders in 1889 and began making records in 1902. It bought Okeh Records in 1926, and got access to the catalog of Mamie Smith. According to Santelli, Smith "was the first vocalist to record a blues song" and she "cut the path that other female blues vocalists such as Bessie Smith (no relation) would follow in the 1920s" (429).

Columbia Gramophone and other companies merged in the 1930s to form EMI. The American stock of EMI was sold to the American Record Corporation, which CBS bought in 1938. The buyout was not Sony's first business deal with CBS records, however. In 1968 the two companies signed a deal that brought CBS recordings to Japan, Macao, and Hong Kong ("Legacy Recordings"). By 1988, some of the key labels associated with CBS records included Columbia, Epic, Epic Associated, and Legacy.

Legacy Recordings is a reissue label for Epic and Columbia recordings. It serves a similar function as UME's Hip-O records, above. Okeh, which *The Blues* radio documentary host Keb' Mo' records under, is part of Legacy's catalog. The division's description page celebrates the depth of the catalog and the appeal to fans, but it also notes that the catalog has "been hugely successful and each year generates millions of dollar in net income" ("Legacy Recordings"). Including blues among its offerings, the division offers the works of Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith.

According to *Billboard* writer Chris Morris, both UME and Sony "are performing their civic duty" in stepping up and making these catalogs available and distributing these CDs to the

public (7). He links that "civic duty" to the Year of the Blues decree, in that these companies are performing a public service with their grand gesture, yet his article quotes executives who want to reach audiences and boost blues music sales similar to how Ken Burns' *Jazz* series had bolstered that genre just two years previous. Looking more into music industry practices surrounding catalogs, box sets, and soundtracks reveals the extent of this supposed altruism.

Libraries long have been shown to be valuable assets for film and television companies. Early television made arrangements with the major studios to show older films. In attempts to stay afloat, production companies also sold their film libraries to bring in some money. Even Ted Turner built his Turner Classic Movies network with purchasing MGM/UA's film library. While he attempted to restore and preserve several films, he also used them to grow his media empire.

Catalogs offer a similar function for the music industry. Music in these catalogs proves valuable because the production and promotional costs already have been recovered. According to industry veteran Danny Goldberg, "Catalogues of hits make very high margins and generate money for decades through reissues, compilations, licensing for soundtracks" (15). Though many think of catalogs as having much older materials, the industry general assumes that songs older than 15 months past their release date qualify as a "catalog product" (173-174). This catalog usually refers to a single artist with an extensive career with multiple hits and a fan following. The artist's previous works get packaged together, sometimes with some unreleased tracks on multiple discs and extensive liner notes with essays, interviews, and biographies (Hull 174). In the second edition of *The Recording Industry*, Geoffrey Hull explains further:

Because catalog usually has a lower retail and wholesale price than current front line product, this would indicate that in terms of units purchased, catalog product

probably accounts for more than half of all recordings sold. If an artist continues to have success, the catalog sales of earlier albums inevitably picks up with subsequent hits (174).

These greatest hits compilations sometimes get released to coincide with an artist's newest album. Fans might purchase both, while those curious about the artist or those seeking a convenient package with their favorite songs might purchase only the greatest hits compilation.

Unlike greatest hits collections, soundtracks for films feature songs from 10 artists or more. The soundtracks often promote new artists and their new singles. Christina Aguilera sang "Reflection" for her first single for Disney's *Mulan* movie soundtrack, for example. The soundtracks and the single get released four to six weeks ahead of the film's big-screen debut, in attempt to build hype for all parties involved (Hull 249-250).

Not all soundtracks feature new music, however. Some soundtracks, such as the one for *The Big Chill*, include only classic songs from decades previous. In these cases, the soundtracks offer similar benefits to the greatest hits compilations drawn from catalogs: With the developmental costs already recovered, the money coming in is almost pure gravy.

Two types of copyright occur in music. One copyright belongs to the publisher and refers to notes and lyrics. Another copyright belongs to the record company and refers to a particular recording of those notes and lyrics. These two types of copyright result in two types of licenses, a synchronization license and a master use license. The synchronization license requires negotiation with the publisher, while the master use license requires negotiation with the record company (Smith 2). The Volkswagen spot airing with the series on the PBS broadcast provides an example here. For the different people singing, humming, or whistling the lyrics to Willie



Dixon's "Spoonful," the makers needed a synchronization license. For the recording of the song blasting from the car's stereo, the makers needed a master use license. The former license offers more flexibility than the latter one.

Overall, though, since record companies own the copyrights to the songs in their catalogs, then soundtracks and other collections allow an inexpensive opportunity for them to earn money on their current resources without investing further funds into their development. *The Blues* offered an opportunity to showcase a potentially dormant part of their catalogs. It also offered an immense publicity opportunity in the exposure that not only the series received, but also the music itself received through the Congressional decree. The raising of awareness might draw curious audiences into purchasing not only the series CDs, but also other related blues CDs.

*The Blues* series CDs offer a combination of both film soundtracks and "best of" compilations. Consistent with the notion of using tie-in and/or soundtrack music releases as advance publicity for a movie/television program, most of these CDs were released in early September 2003, a month before the initial airing of the series. The seven soundtracks offer a combination of archival recordings and contemporary covers of blues classics, thus serving as direct sales and promotion for both older catalog material and new releases/artists. The soundtrack for *The Soul of a Man*, for example, features several of the blues songs covered by Bonnie Raitt, Lou Reed, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Cassandra Wilson, and Shemekia Copeland. It also features J.B. Lenoir, Blind Willie Johnson, and Skip James. The contemporary versions appear throughout the series. The *Feel Like Going Home* soundtrack, for another example, features original album versions of some recordings by Robert Johnson, Johnny Shines, Son House, and Leadbelly.

The series also features two "best of" collections. Unlike the "greatest hits" collections usually used in the industry, these collections feature broader representations of artists and songs. Both collections attempt a representative chronology of blues music. The single "best of" collection offers 21 songs, while the five-CD box set offers more than 120 songs.

The individual artist collections offer the most eclectic contributions to the series CD collection. The individual artists range from contemporary to classic artists. The dozen include The Allman Brothers, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, J.B. Lenoir, Muddy Waters, Son House, Robert Johnson, Taj Mahal, Keb' Mo', Bessie Smith, and Steve Ray Vaughan. All of these collections featured previously released material representative of blues influences on the more contemporary musicians such as The Allman Brothers and the blues origins of the more classic artists such as Robert Johnson and Son House. People looking for overall greatest hits from the contemporary artists would be better off seeking other collections, but those looking for blues influences would be in the right place.

Table One shows the eight different labels on the series CDs: Sony, UME, Columbia / Legacy, Chess, Island / Mercury, MCA, Hip-O, and Polydor / UMGd. Among those, Chess represents the most direct connection to the blues industry of yesterday. Island / Mercury both at one time represented independent labels. On closer inspection, though, all of the labels listed fall under either Sony or UME.

Despite the big labels' dominant representation, some independent labels were included on the albums. Shemekia Copeland, for example, represents the venerable blues label Alligator Records. (Alligator regularly distributes through "independent" distributor RED, which is co-owned by Sony). Featured performer in *Road to Memphis*, Bobby Rush appears multiple times

throughout the soundtracks, through arrangement with Rush Records. For several years prior to the series, Rush bounced from label to label, and in the end he formed his own label. The presence of some indie labels, although perhaps a symbolic victory, may not have had the economic impact with the promotional, tie-in backing provided by the majors. The representation of independent labels on the CDs gets overshadowed by the Sony and UME archives. Even though some associated artists appeared on the CDs, Alligator Records' Bruce Iglauer had not "noticed any increase in the number of bookings for his artists" (Hadley 14). Further, by showcasing these company's archives and not more contemporary practitioners such as Hamilton Loomis, the North Mississippi Allstars, Son of Dave, or William Elliot Whitmore, these CDs reinforce the history of the genre, and not its flourishing and evolving present.

And there are important absences. Missing from the collection is Robert Cray, whose label Fat Possum Records refused to participate in the series. Cray represents the post-Civil Rights generation of bluesmen, just short of when the episodes stop in their chronologies. He seems an important omission to a series and a box set attempting to honor and educate about the blues. Interestingly enough, Cray gets mention in *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Blues*:

[Cray] performs and composes an "integrated" type of blues that doesn't seem aimed at any particular radical audience. Yet in a stylistic sense it is solidly based on the soul blues developed in the ghettos and on the chitlin' circuit some decades earlier like B.B King and Albert Collins. Cray is his own man, however, as a vocalist, lead guitarist, and songwriter (Evans 214).

Also excluded is David "Honeyboy" Edwards, the subject of Taradash's excerpted documentary during the WPSX broadcast. At 94, Edwards is a living embodiment of the Delta bluesmen, yet

his music, nor his label Earwig, appears nowhere on these compilations.

*Downbeat* writer Frank-John Hadley offers some insight into Fat Possums Records not participating on the compilations. Hadley describes the label's head Matthew Johnson as "steaming over the paltry \$500 fee the series offered Mississippi guitarist Robert Belfour for use of one of his songs in an episode" (14). The "paltry \$500 fee" raises another important issue overlooked in just considering these CDs in terms of major labels and independent ones. It overlooks the identity of the artists and their places within the music industry. In his book *Black Music, White Business: Illuminating the History and Political Economy of Jazz*, Frank Kofsky makes an impassioned argument about the exploitation of African American artists at the hands of white record executives. These artists make their music, but fail to receive proper royalties and other industry support for it. In such cases, many critics view the music askance, hesitate to offer critical support for it. Overall, the music, while belonging to African American culture, gets appropriated by white artists and enjoyed by white audiences. Figgis' *Red, White, and Blues* mostly directly makes that connection.

In his "Notes on the Political Economy of Black Music," Norman Kelley calls this industry and culture in which this appropriation occurs "the structure of stealing" (13). Kelley situates black music within these corporate structures as benefiting white executives and white shareholders. He claims, "In the case of music, black artists have rarely received the just benefits of their work, especially in comparison to their white counterparts and those who control the music industry" (Kelley 7).

Blues music history reveals some of this mistreatment. A famous example comes from Chess composer and artist Willie Dixon in the early 1970s. Rock band Led Zeppelin borrowed

components of three of Dixon's songs -- "You Shook Me," "I Can't Quit You Baby," and "You Need Love" -- on its album and offered Dixon no credit. Dixon sued and won due to copyright, "but other songs in the Zeppelin catalog are comprised of lyrical themes, melodies and riffs culled from blues artists in a manner that is not as blatantly derivative, but in a way that significantly appropriated nonetheless" (McLeod 245).

Another example refers to the exploitation of the artists. Blues-influenced The Rolling Stones had a deep respect for Chess artist Muddy Waters. The group even took its name from one of his songs titled, "Rollin' Stone." They contacted Chess, seeking the opportunity to record in the Chicago studio. The band met Waters in 1964, and they found him painting the ceiling of the Chess studios, even though Waters had scored several hits for the label already (Bockris 81).

To be fair, *The Blues* acknowledges such exploitation. In addition to Figgis's discussion, another example gets reenacted at length within *The Soul of a Man*. In Wenders' film, Skip James travels to Grafton, Wisconsin, to Paramount Studios to cut a record after catching the attention of a scout in the south. He gets through the session, and he is offered a choice of flat fee or royalties. He takes the fee, but since Paramount Records went bankrupt not long afterward, the songs never were released in their time and James never got credit for his recordings.

These are but three examples of the "structure of stealing," and blues music has been an industry, a business, since Handy's "discovery" of it in 1903. It did not take long for the white industry to find out that blues can gain audiences among both white and black listeners (Springer 34). The African American artists fail to receive their proper recognition, respect, and royalties. Artists in the Sony and UME catalogs gain exposure, but do they -- or, more likely, their estates -- gain financial returns from their inclusion? And how much more profit do these major

corporations make at the expense of these artists? If \$500 is the licensing fee for a song's use in the series and since the albums from the series topped the genre's charts for some time, we can guess that the financial disparity is significant.

These large music companies also go one step further in order to retain their copyright over the music in these catalogs. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, copyright extended for 28 years with one opportunity for renewal (Springer 34). After that period, the music became part of the public domain. According to Bishop, "copyright law was originally intended to discourage *perpetual* monopolies over 'literary, artistic, or musical works' by granting *limited term* monopolies" (444). Since 1962, however, extensions on copyrights have occurred again and again, now leading to a situation where "the majority of copyrights can last well over a century" (Bishop 454-455). This lengthy period ensures that big media companies can profit from their catalogs without fear of losing their assets to the public domain for a long, long time. Imagine how different this box set might be if the original copyright rules had remained. PBS possibly could have afforded those fees as part of the production costs.

PBS gained an immense asset to boost the series offerings through this deal with Sony and UME. The CDs are extensive in their depth of material related to the songs and artists represented in the series, not to mention in their quantity and selection. Further, the "best of" CDs in particular provide the chronological history unavailable in the series episodes, providing a nice complement to the content there. PBS publicized the availability of the CDs during the broadcast through PBS Home Video. It further featured more information about the CDs on the series Web site, and from there it contained links to buying them in the PBS Shop. They also could have been used in pledge drives and as rewards for members. As noted in Chapter Five,

even Volkswagen found a way to take advantage of the CDs. Volkswagen drivers could call an 800 number and receive their choice of the "best of" CD or the series book.

Overall, PBS would not have been able to assemble and to afford such an extensive collection without Sony and UME offering their catalogs and their distribution efforts. So what happens? While PBS gets another set of promotional materials to go with the series, arguably Sony and UME get the lion's share of the financial benefits from this arrangement. They use their copyrighted catalog material and their distribution arms to make these CDs available to the public. They gain publicity through the Year of the Blues decree, and they gain prestige through Martin Scorsese's name branded on each one and through the PBS connection. Further, the marketing is already set by the series, so they need not find a way to repackage these songs and resell them to a weary public. With all the publicity surrounding the genre in 2003, the curious public might have sought out the music themselves. While the sales of blues music still remain low, the company still saw profits from its endeavor, at least more than if the music had just sat in the vault and waited a while.

Both of these music companies and Volkswagen earn profits in the billions each year. Their profits far exceed the entire budgets for public broadcasting in a given year. For Sony and UME, instead of using their own film divisions to make soundtrack CDs, they found another way through this PBS series. In many ways, the process is similar in that the documentary series offers the "blockbuster" foundation for the extensive collection, and in that both corporations get to exploit their own assets and pocket the profits. PBS temporarily becomes a conduit through which these two companies package and promote the products to the public.

While the extensiveness of the deal is without precedent, PBS still works with big media

on promotional and distribution deals. Almost all of the long-form documentary series feature some degree of multimedia companion pieces; the ones about music offer considerably more opportunity for the CD options as shown with *The Blues* with 25 and *Jazz* with 11. But these merchandising/licensing agreements move beyond the usual series offerings, and many of the compromises relate to the children's shows. For example, sponsors of the show *Arthur* have three-month licensing deals where the sponsor can use Arthur's likeness in some way (Behrens "Underwriting Deal"). Currently, the cartoon aardvark's face appears on paper plates (Behrens "Underwriting Deal"). In 2005 some of the children's programming became part of PBS Sprout, a cable and satellite channel with programming for young children. The channel, which features PBS shows and commercials, is a venture with Sesame Workshop, HIT Entertainment, and Comcast.

Other deals move beyond media connections. In 2006 PBS made a deal with Green Mountain Coffee Roasters of Vermont for a line of organic, free-trade coffee called "PBS Blend." The blend is grown in Mexico and sold through the merchant's and PBS' Web sites (Aspan "A Caffeine Jolt"). Green Mountain's Web site notes, "When you purchase PBS blend you are helping to provide a delicious new way for the public to support this important cause" ("Fair Trade Organic"). One customer even comments with a comparison, "Good Coffee Just like the harvard blend (missing capital letter in the original; "Fair Trade Organic")"

Another agreement that expanded the business possibilities for PBS is the knowledge stores connected to the larger affiliates such as WGBH and even WTTW, which has three stores in the Chicago area. The WGBH store opened in October 1991 in Chestnut Hill Mall in Newton, Massachusetts. *The New York Times* business writer Glenn Rifkin calls the mall "affluent" ("PBS



Station"). The Chicago sites appear downtown and in Oak Brook, one of the more prosperous suburbs (Rifkin "PBS Station"). In 2002 PBS made a business arrangement with Mills Corporation, a mall-development company. Under this arrangement, a PBS Kids store would open in Nashville's Opry Mills Mall and appeal to young children through PBS shows such as Arthur (Kaufman "PBS Is Expanding"). Kaufman notes how Mills is motivated by money more so than altruism ("PBS Is Expanding"). Both Disney and Warner Brothers have stores with merchandise related to their entertainment lines.

The Carnegie Corporation wanted public broadcasting free from the programming restraints imposed by the nature of commercial advertising. Without a stable form of public income, though, PBS was forced to develop other income sources for their operating revenue. With each sponsorship and licensing deal, the service brings in much-needed money to the coffers, but at the same time it opens itself up for exploitation and influence from these corporate partnerships. While PBS gets money and maybe brand recognition, the music distributors for The Blues series arguably gain even more money and recognition at the expense of PBS and even more so at the expense of the blues artists. It is understandable that the service needs money in times of economic downturns and Congressional waffling on budgets, but the more deal like these that PBS makes, the more other companies benefit and the more tenuous PBS' position get compromised.

### ***The Blues Blockbuster Web Site***

Interactive Web sites increasingly are becoming staple features of Hollywood blockbusters. These "official" Web sites offer a combination of information, promotion, and

entertainment. They offer flexible and functional long-term options for promoting a particular franchise. These sites create excitement about a film's pending release with behind-the-scenes information and movie trailers. During the theatrical release, the site can capsule reviews, foster fan discussion, and help potential audiences find tickets and local theaters showing the film. After the theatrical run ends, the site can promote the DVD's release and sale. All throughout the cycle, the site promotes other available merchandise, such as T-shirts, tie-in books, soundtracks, and video games.

Interaction with these sites is key. Viewers usually find a multitude of activities, such as viewing clips, reading interviews and seeing "behind the scenes" features, playing related games, and chatting with other fans. They get redirected to related sites selling items or telling more about the studio and its other releases. These sites also encourage peer sharing, which has become a viable promotional tool (Morrissey 9). According to Telotte, these sites "try to be fun and to encourage visitors to share the fun by viewing sites and then, naturally, seeing the films" (34).

As much as the sites encourage freedom of exploration, they also exhibit a degree of control. These sites allow studios to maintain control of the film and its image by shaping the desired discourses around a film. They also suggest ways to "read" the text, such as through generic traditions, the directors' other works, or larger franchises. For example, a site may explain where the film fits in long-running narratives, such as the chronological location of the 2006 *Superman* movie in light of Superman's death in the comic series. Telotte further explains how these Web sites "*guide* our experience by situating their films in the context of the film industry and pointing to the entertainment power of the movies, particularly their special ability

-- one implicitly unmatched by the Internet -- to transport us into another realm" (34, emphasis in original). Overall, the film remains the central experience and the Web site remains secondary, but their degrees of integration contribute to the quality of the user experience, the control of the image, and the degree of promotion.

According to Owczarski, "Like much of the blockbuster fare produced by the new Hollywood studio system, the texts themselves become hooks to varying levels of consumer interaction" (13). Her study of the now-defunct BMW Films and Telotte's study of *The Blair Witch Project* acknowledge the lacking amount of research on companion Web sites. However, they both overlook questions of ownership across Web sites as well. With its merger with AOL, Time Warner certainly possesses the opportunity to take advantage of the AOL brand or related ones to promote its products, as does News Corp.'s ownership of myspace.com, and NBC Universal's ownership of the fan site televisionwithoutpity.com. Many of these sites build the company names in addition to the product names.

PBS Web sites are some of the most informative and well-developed sites on the Internet. Most shows and series feature an extensive companion site with a variety of components to them. Despite the expanse of these sites, their mentions in scholarship usually centers on their quality as a reference or as an educational tool for various disciplines. For example, *The Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* highlights the PBS site for children's science exploration show DragonflyTV ("TV Science Shows" 173). For another example, *The Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* directs readers to [www.pbs.org/journeytotheplanetearth](http://www.pbs.org/journeytotheplanetearth), where they can find "educational resources for students, teachers, and community groups" ("PBS Series" 31A). *Teacher Librarian* also makes regular mention of PBS Web sites.

*The Blues* features an extensive Web site promoted during the series broadcast. It gets a unique URL, [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues), and its own design separate from the service's other pages. It features varying levels of information, promotion, and entertainment, but in different proportions and motivations than Hollywood blockbuster Web site. It attempts to address a broader audience than just the potential movie-goer. Of all the components of the series, this one seems the most "PBS," even with the multiple corporate and not-for-profit interests involved.

For comparison purposes, I would like to start with a brief description of a Hollywood blockbuster Web site. *Batman Begins* (2005) has been available on DVD since October 2005, four months after its theatrical release. The site, <http://www2.warnerbros.com/batmanbegins>, is driven by Adobe company's Flash programming, which creates animated flames and characters in the site's background and allows viewing of movie excerpts and other materials. The site requires Flash, which in turn requires a higher bandwidth connection for proper viewing. In this case, the site privileges control of viewers' experience and of the content over access.

The site is divided into several sections, including About the DVD, Posters, Photo Gallery, Downloads, Trailer, Interviews, Mobile, Comics, Soundtrack, and Production Notes. The sections offer background information about the film's production, about the story's development in the comics, and about the film's affiliated products. At the bottom of the page appears the film's MPAA rating, along with the brief content description. Further, the site offers ways to experience the content through other venues, particularly through the downloads and the "Mobile" section. Either way, everything on the site relates creating to the "film" experience, carrying that experience to other media, and sharing that experience with others. Even the connections to the Batman comics attempt to further the franchise's promotion in the guise of

broadening the fan's experience.

Many new movie Web sites feature custom URLs that facilitate recall and promotion. For this film, the original URL was [batmanbegins.com](http://batmanbegins.com). That URL redirects to the [warnerbros.com](http://warnerbros.com) site, which now features an ad for the "world's largest film library" for 20 percent off at [warnervideo.com](http://warnervideo.com). Readers must click the ad in order to continue to the site, which opens with a promotion for the new DVD box set of the film. At the top of the page is a navigation bar for Warner Bros. Studios. The bar features sections that access the studios' main sites: Home, Movies, Television, DVD Shop, Videogames, Kids' WB, WB Playground, and On Demand. The navigation bar remains with the *Batman Begins* information, but it disappears with the clicking on the main site links. These ads and the navigation bar not only affirm the brand connection between Warner Bros. and the Batman franchise, but they also encourage exploration and interaction with the studio's other media divisions in television, movies, home video, and video games as well. Overall, the links and connections reinforce the dominance of the *Batman Begins* site and the Warner Bros. site as promotional vehicles.

While the *Batman Begins* site emphasizes promotion, the The Blues web site for PBS emphasizes information, though both promotional components and entertainment components appear as well. Sections of the site offer more information about blues music and the series than about buying the related products. The sections divide this way: About the Series, The Songs & The Artists, Blues Road Trip, Blues Classroom, and Partners & Resources. In general, the types of material include blues music background and educational information, production and personnel information, and sponsorship and selling information.

The information divides into three different types: episode information, blues music

history, and classroom resources. The episode related-information includes series overview, episode summaries, director interviews, director biographies, and film credits. The blues music history offers biographies of the artists featured in the series. The "Blues Road Trip" pinpoints the blues to various locations on a map, and with each location viewers learn more about that location's history, blues style, and related artists. Other interactive features include previews of the episodes.

The classroom resources section is part of the Blues National Outreach Campaign. These resources were available on three media: a CD with print guide and the Web site. The CD version contains the songs, while the Web site version contains clips. The CD version, along with a print teacher's guide, went to high schools around the country, with Volkswagen sponsorship accompanying it. The Blues Classroom offers background essays defining the blues and explaining 12-bar blues; lessons for defining the blues and understanding it; viewing guide for using clips from the episodes; clips for hearing parts of the songs; a bibliography of print, audio, and online sources; and a glossary of terms. The audio resources offers a list of blues CD compilations from Sony and UME, as well as Alligator, Arhoolie, Blind Pig, Rhino, and Vanguard. With the exception of the episode clips guide, much of this information relies on blues history but not on the episodes themselves. No other sponsorship information appears on the Blues Classroom pages.

Sponsorship and selling information also appear on the Web site. The series home pages shows the Volkswagen logo, its "Drivers wanted" tagline, Vulcan Productions logo, Road Movies logo, WGBH logo, PBS logo, and the CPB logo. Only on the Partners pages, which provide brief descriptions of each sponsor, do the logos appear again. At the bottom of the home page appear

links for the PBS Program Club Pick (advertised during the broadcast), a pledge plea, and a link to the online PBS Shop which tells us, "Bring home the music of The Blues." Links to the shop appear at the bottom of each page as well. Throughout the site links appear to the Blues Shop, which showcases all of the series' affiliated products.

The PBS brand and its goals become a key feature for framing this site. Similar to the Warner Bros. navigation strip, a PBS one appears at the top. The sections include PBS Home, Programs A-Z, TV Schedules, Watch Video, Support PBS, Shop PBS, and Search PBS. If a viewer specifies a home or local station, such as WPSU or WTTW, the logo for that station appears to the left of the navigation bar along with the PBS logo. Click Home takes viewers to service's overall home page and shows its other brands, such as PBS Kids, PBS Kids GO!, PBS Parents, PBS Kids Play, PBS Teachers. The main pages are copyright by the Public Broadcasting Service. Pages about television programs and television schedules in particular connect to local affiliates. The programs listing is dependent on WPSU's scheduling but viewers remain within the PBS site. TV Schedules redirects viewers to the WPSU pages, which are copyright by Penn State Public Broadcasting.

The Blues pages, however, are copyrighted by Vulcan Productions Inc. Vulcan's name appears throughout the series materials and the series broadcast. Some of the educational materials, in particular the Blues Classroom, were created by the Experience Music Project. A not-for-profit corporation, EMP features a music museum in Seattle centered on the education about and history of music in the United States. The EMP is connected to Vulcan Productions through Paul G. Allen, who founded both organizations. Vulcan's holding the copyright on the PBS pages ensures the copyright for EMP.

This situation is not unusual for PBS sites. Several subpages list copyright notices for organizations and institutions other than U.S. public broadcasting. For example, WGBH holds copyrights for the programs that it produces. *Bill Moyers Journal* is copyrighted by Public Affairs Television. *Nature* is copyrighted by the Educational Broadcasting Corporation.

The Blues web site is similar to Hollywood blockbuster sites in some ways. First, although it offers more information about the series, these can be seen as promotional attempts to draw people's interest in the films through their summaries and through the directors' visions for them. The site promotes the series' related materials and it offers links to its own online store, thus mixing online marketing with e-commerce. The site falls within a larger media institution, with the PBS main site navigation framing The Blues site. In both cases, visual icons from the licensed properties appear as "wallpaper" or as featured visuals throughout the sites.

The differences are salient as well, however. First, the PBS site offers a greater degree of access than the *Batman Begins* site, in that it is not loaded with Flash animation. Part of this difference might lie in the two-year gap and the budget difference in the two projects, but the static PBS site is more accessible in navigation and readability and to slower browsing speeds. It offers greater depth of history in the documentaries' subject, providing a handy guide in addition to the series information. Further, the educational initiatives of the Blues classroom, and the contributions of blues-related, not-for-profit organizations, move the site away from a purely promotional tool toward a more educational one. While promotion sometimes gets mixed in through such obvious ways as the "buy" or "shop" links, it also gets subtly connected to through links offering more information. Arguably, the series itself and the blues music information take priority over the promotional value of the site. Further, The Blues lesson plans become part of



the general teacher's resources offered on the Web site through the service.

## Conclusions

Jarvik's reference to documentary series such as *The Blues* as blockbuster ones was intended to imply derogatorily the increasingly commercial nature of not-for-profit public broadcasting. For him, the corporate partnerships and multimedia offerings represented steps toward commercialism that the service should not take because it violates its status as a not-for-profit institution and its founding principles. If the service is already taking these steps, then why should it receive protections and budgets from Congress?

On the surface *The Blues* looks similar to a blockbuster with its hyped productions, its multimedia offerings, and its extensive Web site. A key difference among all these extensions is that unlike Warner's *Batman Returns*, not one company makes and distributes all the different components through its various arms. In this case, public broadcasting serves as focal point, but it's not the epicenter for the profits or for the recognition. The educational missions of the service prevail, particularly through the use of *documentary* as part of its blockbusters and through the largely informative Web site that extends the information behind the series. The collaborations with not-for-profit foundations help bring the series into the conversations about the Year of the Blues efforts as well.

Yet while public broadcasting manages to conform to its limitations and missions with this series, it also provides an opportunity for big media's exploitation. In particular, Sony and UME again used the service's programming to take advantage of their catalogs and maybe garner some profits with the new attention to a sales-stagnant genre. Granted, PBS gains access to an

amazing array of marketable materials, but the profits from the DVD and CDs sales go back to Sony and UME, whose profits already number in the billions while PBS struggles to meet a budget of millions. If the service had had adequate funding in the first place, it would not need to make these partnership deals wherein it loses and big media gain. The blockbuster formula to which PBS subscribes situates the service -- in a way similar to its scheduling, DVD merchandising and sponsorship techniques -- in a series of deals and compromises that allow survivability in the short-run, but may have long-run consequences for the unique contribution and identity of public television.

**Table One: Series CDs, Their Types, and Their Labels**

<b>Series CDs, Their Types, and Their Labels</b>			
<i>Title</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Release Date</i>
"Best Of" (single CD)	Compilation	UME	August 26, 2003
"Best Of" (box set)	Compilation	Hip-O	September 9, 2009
<i>Feel Like Going Home</i>	Soundtrack	Sony	September 9, 2003
<i>Soul of a Man</i>	Soundtrack	Columbia / Legacy	September 9, 2003
<i>The Road to Memphis</i>	Soundtrack	Hip-O	September 9, 2003
<i>Warming the Devil's Fire</i>	Soundtrack	Sony	September 9, 2003
<i>Godfathers and Sons</i>	Soundtrack	Hip-O	September 9, 2003
<i>Red, White, and Blues</i>	Soundtrack	Hip-O	September 9, 2003
<i>Piano Blues</i>	Soundtrack	Sony	September 9, 2003
The Allman Brothers	Compilation	Island / Mercury	September 9, 2003
Eric Clapton	Compilation	Polydor / UMgd	September 9, 2003
Jimi Hendrix	Compilation	MCA	September 9, 2003
B.B. King	Compilation	MCA	September 9, 2003
J.B. Lenoir	Compilation	MCA	September 9, 2003
Muddy Waters	Compilation	Chess	September 9, 2003
Son House	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003
Robert Johnson	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003
Taj Mahal	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003
Keb' Mo'	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003
Bessie Smith	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003
Stevie Ray Vaughan	Compilation	Sony	September 9, 2003

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### Conclusions

#### Ideals and Realities

The Carnegie Commission's conception for public broadcasting included a strong call for its financial independence by some means. The Commission suggested a tax on television sets. This independence was to allow public broadcasting the freedom to create diverse programming and appeal to a wider range of audiences. The Public Broadcasting Act and subsequent presidential sabotages to the system prevented this ideal from ever happening.

But, like most ideals, this one was never possible. Even though multiple interest groups and even hobbyists found ways to provide "something different" on early radio airwaves, the organized efforts of major corporations found ways to convince regulators that they best could serve the public's interests. The result was radio and television filled with programming that entertained with humor and drama and advertising that hailed the viewers for their attentions and money. Though educational programming continued and struggled independently, the big media companies had 40 years to grow, flourish, and dominate the airwaves before the formalization of public broadcasting even began. The debates about its merits began long before its formalization and the voices have gotten louder with each passing decade since.

Nor was this ideal well defined. The cultural uplift and democratic enabling proved nice rhetoric, but could public broadcasting achieve these goals? Can television programming achieve them? No guarantees existed to ensure that just because the opportunity was there that people would partake of it.

But the reality is, public broadcasting is an ideal that never played out. It never had a chance to play out. Instead, it was dropped in the water and hoped it would learn to float and even swim. Like most institutions, it looked to the practices of more financially successful institutions in order to generate the revenue it needed to survive. It also developed its own revenue lines with the pledge drives and memberships, along with cultivating other practices while remaining in accordance with FCC regulations and other federal laws.

### **Was *The Blues* Good Business?**

*The Blues* presented the opportunity for public broadcasting to enact and even expand its own operating practices. While the practices might resemble big media ones, public broadcasting used them to their own purposes -- with some mixed results. As we saw in Chapter Three, the series put forth the idea that the episodes were each "personal visions" of their respective directors. The "personal vision" idea draws on auteurs in Hollywood as being the creative geniuses or visionaries behind their works. With an auteur's personal vision, the quality of the film is implied to be higher. These directors bring their visions of blues music to the screen through these documentaries, but the director interviews, the biographies, and other texts reveal varying degrees of "visions" and even knowledge of blues music. As a result, no coherent discourse emerges affirming these directors' visions.

What this series did do, though, was demonstrate the viability of bringing in directors from other industries, particularly Hollywood. Just two years later Scorsese had another documentary focusing on Bob Dylan and featuring extra footage from D.A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* broadcast on the service. Former PBS President Pat Mitchell brought on in 2000 even

mentioned making Hollywood connections part of her tenure (see Frutkin and Burgi).

But is bringing Hollywood and big media directors to the service a good thing? On the one hand, these directors bring with them names and prestige from a familiar, dominant industry. This prestige might help bring in more audiences, and potentially more diverse audiences. Further, it might attract more interest for corporate sponsorship. On the other hand, do directors in the big media need more outlets for their programming? Would their moving in to PBS shut out the independent producers already competing to get their works on the limited schedule as it is? Would what they offer be that different from what they would do in commercial venues?

Chapter Four looks at the counterprogramming practices performed by the service and how those practices attempt to fit the awkwardly shaped series into a rounded broadcasting slot. With its different structure created by not requiring specific lengths and the service agreeing to program them anyway, the service used multiple layers and extra programs to assert the series as a PBS one and to fill the time slot. For all its assertions for brand identity, the series very easily transitions to other broadcast venues not connected with PBS. The series did get broadcast overseas, exhibited in foreign movies, and shown during various film festivals around the United States. Wenders' *The Soul of a Man* even won the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

Does programming on public broadcasting need to maintain such a degree of conformity that it should only be broadcast on the service? Does showing programming that exhibits smoothly into other venues create problems for the service? Should PBS program series already created and packaged like this one was? *The Blues* forced them to adjust their broadcast schedule radically to accommodate it. With each of the service's affiliates operating separately, it forced not only the usual decisions of what to broadcast and when, but also added the dilemma of how

to fill the extra time leftover from short episodes.

Further, the series got picked up for international distribution by Road Movies. This flexibility for international distribution is not an uncommon feature in today's global media. Discovery Networks also creates documentary programming that adjusts easily to international broadcasts. These documentary formats require minor changes in shots and voiceovers, but otherwise they flow smoothly from one country to another. Other PBS series are not so exclusive to the service anymore, either. Even Ken Burns' work, the hallmark of PBS programming, has been shown on the History Channel. Without the PBS markers, *The Blues* became a series or seven single films about American music. Without the involvement of PBS in the initial production agreements, PBS loses out on an opportunity for global distribution, recognition and possibly revenues. Instead, these opportunities and monies go to Road Movies.

As we discussed in Chapter Five, this series had Volkswagen as its exclusive national sponsor. The VW spots for the series pushed them even closer toward looking like network commercials, and some of the boundaries pushed there became adopted for later spots for premium sponsors, such as people interacting with the product and music soundtracks. But the Volkswagen sponsorship moves well beyond the broadcast context and the Web site into music and film festivals. It allowed Volkswagen the opportunity to use series-related items in its efforts to appeal to its own customers.

The success of the campaign -- if a billion impressions can be called is "success" -- became a case study for future potential partnerships between public broadcasting and corporate sponsors. The Sponsorship Group for Public Television features the Volkswagen-*The Blues* pairing as the most successful relationship in PBS history. For a service that is theoretically not-

for-profit, the case study's advertising-oriented and benefits-oriented language raises some strong questions about crossing commercial lines. In the case study the PBS audience and the PBS broadcast become just another commodity for sale. The public service and commercial alternative considerations that informed the service's founding get put to the wayside.

All of these efforts attempt to attract further corporate sponsors. The SGPTV uses commercial broadcasting's techniques and language, and even goes much further beyond them, in order to attract more corporate sponsors. Granted, the Year of the Blues Congressional decree creates a rather unique and extensive sponsorship opportunity, but still, PBS managed to find a sponsor and get that sponsor's logo and slogan, not to mention products, in numerous locations.

While this arrangement brings in a needed sponsorship for a series for PBS, Volkswagen comes out ahead. The amount of impressions, the unprecedented access to their target demographic, and a lower cost than a usual campaign all bring more intangible benefits than an extensive network campaign. The service also makes multiple arrangements for making sure the sponsorship agreements are carried out, easing the work for the corporate sponsor. And this situation is supposed to draw in more corporate sponsors, who might also look for another extensive campaign similar to *The Blues*. But what kind of sponsorship precedent does this set? Basically, an unrealistic one. *The Blues'* timing allows the greatly expanded sponsorship opportunity. To expect the same from other PBS series is unrealistic. In pursuing these high-profile sponsorships, though, the service only adds a Band-aid to a larger problem and raises more questions about its corporate emulations.

The blockbuster nature of the series also raises questions about the service's appropriations of this model. In many ways the blockbuster represents the excesses to which



Hollywood can and will go with its films. The documentary components and the extensive Web site offer the most PBS of markers, but the multiple CD options appear to move toward commercial profit-making. In fact, it is, but not for PBS. A closer look at the companies creating the CDs reveals recording industry practices that allow greater profits for less investment for Sony and UME. Further, it shows how some blues music gets shut out because independent labels cannot or refuse to participate. It further suggests the struggles African American artists have in the music industry.

For the corporations, then, this series becomes a golden marketing opportunity to boost sales and profits. For PBS, it becomes a multimedia offering, a nice addition to the series. But the music labels stand to gain the most here, and they take advantage of the service to ensure that gain occurs. Their offers are not out of altruism, no matter what the publicity says.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The expansiveness of this series and the under-representation of scholarship on public broadcasting allow for multiple possibilities for further research. In terms of public broadcasting generally, scholarly attention to the ever-changing contexts, pressures to privatize, and the degree to which programming trends, business arrangements and ancillary activities are influenced by such contexts is warranted and important.

One of the most difficult undertakings would involve further textual analysis of *The Blues* series episodes. Multiple documentaries about blues music exist, though this series' prominence overshadows them. Placing this series in context and conversation with these other blues documentaries and with blues history would reveal its ideologies about the music and the

gaps in its representations.

Another strong aspect worthy of exploration involves the white culture's appropriation of African American music. Suggestions of this appropriation appear throughout the episodes, such as in *The Soul of a Man* and the performers such as Nick Cave, Bonnie Raitt, and Beck covering the songs. Mike Figgis' *Red, White, and Blues* makes this appropriation most explicit. This analysis would contribute to the discourses of authenticity that surround "real" blues music.

Some of the episodes made mention of blues women, and some showed women playing and singing the blues. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* offers the strongest commentary on women and their contributions, particularly with its mentioning and showing archival footage of great women blues musicians. Angela Y. Davis's book about Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Billie Holiday offers analysis of their contributions, and her analysis provides a starting place. According to Wald, Ma Rainey discovered and named blues music even before W.C. Handy did, in 1902 and in Missouri. She supposedly adopted the form in her own performances. Another potential starting place includes *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, by Daphne Duval Harrison.

Another potential exploration involves cultural geography and the movements among various places. Blues music possesses strongly regional connections that influence lyrics, instruments, and in general overall style. Cities, regions, and even entire states claim a unique blues sound, in places as expected as the Mississippi Delta to ones as unexpected as the state of Iowa. Places also refer to performance spaces, such as porches, juke joints, and studios. A closer look at these would reveal aspects of identity, history, and even ideology surrounding blues music. These are just four offerings for textual analysis. Given the richness and structure of the series, even more possibilities exist for an in-depth exploration.

Moving away from the series texts offers even more possibilities for further study. For example, the series features extensive course materials made available to schools around the country and made available online. One study might look at the contents of these lessons and examine how they present overall ideas about blues music, culture, and history. Another study might look at how teachers incorporated these lessons into their classrooms and the reactions they received. A third study might consider the Volkswagen sponsorship's reach into schools and the current climate of corporations partnering with secondary schools.

Since public broadcasting carries an official mandate for public education, an analysis of *The Blues* Web site as an extension of this mandate might prove useful. The Web site offers one avenue through its various lesson plans and essays, but another layer of this analysis would require looking at the PBS teachers resources available at [www.pbs.org/teachers](http://www.pbs.org/teachers). The latter provides a search function for lessons based on topics. A search for blues music turns up lessons from not only the series, but also other music series available on the service.

A final, though certainly not the last, possibility would involve further exploration of the involvement of the Experience Music Project, the Blues Foundation, and the Year of the Blues Congressional decree. The Congressional decree came after intense lobbying from EMP and the Blues Foundation, both not-for-profit organizations. *The Blues* series represents a visible connection to that celebration, even though it was inspired by Eric Clapton's performances of classic blues pieces and not commemoration of the 100th anniversary of W.C. Handy's supposed discovery. Yet so much of that decree enabled those organizations' activities attempts at educational outreach that an analysis of how they conducted these activities, what these activities were about, and whom they were intended for would provide a much broader understanding for

the series' connections to it.

### **Final Thoughts**

In all, *The Blues* is a fascinating series not only for its content and format, but also for its place on public broadcasting. It demonstrates the extent to which public broadcasting will go to accommodate a "documentary blockbuster" and its sponsorship. It also shows how the service uses the Web sites to extend its educational initiatives. The series further demonstrates the multiple inroads that corporations can take in order to make a profit from PBS and its offerings. In order to survive in a struggling economy, in the face of a Republican administration, or in the threat of further budget cuts, the service must make these connections. Yet these connections make the service even more vulnerable to accusations of just being commercial anyway or failing to fulfill its intended mission.

This is not the situation envisioned for the service in 1967. The Carnegie commission had some clear ideas about what the service should do and what it would need to get started, yet the Johnson administration crippled the service from the beginning. The current situation finds the service working with less and less government funding and relying more and more on outside sources. PBS does not remain free from the commercial influences of advertising and for-profit institutions. Without that source of permanent, independent funding, it becomes more vulnerable to succumbing to them. *The Blues* just shows one extreme extent of that vulnerability.

Overall, *The Blues* was calculated to design a new kind of ideological and institutional brand for PBS and the television documentary, a brand that is responding to the changing environment of not only public broadcasting specifically, but also television and visual media

generally. The service demonstrated the viability of particular types of documentary for drawing corporate sponsors and for establishing a degree of prestige, which premium cable channels such as HBO and Showtime have found ways to capitalize on. Despite the service's founding principles, in many ways it also upholds the long-standing commercial intentions and interests driving television in the United States through its uses of these kinds of documentary programming. Further, it shows how television documentary need not remain on public television or even commercial U.S. television, but appear in multiple venues, from film festivals to movie theaters, domestic and worldwide. As much as PBS remains a U.S. media institution, it, too, must think globally to remain viable and visible in contemporary broadcasting.

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Academic Background

- 2009 Ph.D., Mass Communications, The Pennsylvania State University  
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Teaching

- 2008-2010 Visiting Assistant Professor, Communication, Northern Illinois University  
Courses Taught: News Writing (JOUR 200A), Digital Media Production (COMS 359), Media Writing (COMS 355), Business and Professional Communication (COMS 361), Communication and Gender (COMS 410), Political Communications in America (COMS 419), The Documentary Tradition (COMS 457), Television Theory and Criticism (COMS 460), Narrative Scriptwriting (COMS 466), Women and Documentary (COMS 496M), The Documentary Tradition (COMS 557)
- 2004-2008 Instructor, College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University  
Courses Taught: The Art of the Cinema (COMM 150), Film History and Theory (COMM 250), News Writing (COMM 260W), Advanced Film Theory and Criticism (COMM 455)

Publications

- The Poetics of Interviews in Errol Morris's *Vernon, Florida* and *Gates of Heaven*. Errol Morris, ed. Lou Thompson. (Forthcoming)
- Music Video Forerunners in Early Television Programming: A Look at WCPO- TV's Innovations and Contributions in the 1950s, *Popular Music and Society* 27.3 (2004): 259-272.

Conference Papers

- The Dystopian Futures of England in *Children of Men* and *V for Vendetta*, Film and History League, Chicago, IL, October 2 - November 30, 2008.
- Representing and Imagining Boston in *The Departed* and *The Boondock Saints*, Midwest Popular Culture Association, Cincinnati, OH, October 3-5, 2008.
- The Personal and the Political in Iraq War Documentaries, Media, War, and Conflict Resolution, Bowling Green, OH, September 17-19, 2008.
- The Ethics of Archival Materials in Social Documentary, Fourth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, IL, May 14-17, 2008.
- Revaluing Reenactments as Evidence of Truths in Documentary, Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, IL, May 2-5, 2007.
- Documenting the Roles of Music in the Iraq War, Media, War and Conflict Conference, Milwaukee, WI, April 19-20, 2007.