JUKE JOINTS

“Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as the blues, and on blues has been founded jazz. The singing and playing in the true Negro style is called ‘jooking.’”

-Zora Neale Hurston

Juke joints, also known as barrelhouses, sprang up all over the south especially in areas of the Mississippi Delta and Louisiana. These places of business emerged during the Reconstruction period, and were some of the first places that blues music was played for entertainment. These local establishments were dance halls, bars, and places for illegal activities such as gambling and prostitution. Although these juke joints could be dangerous they also served an extremely valuable purpose to the black community and to blues music in general.

Juke supposedly originated from an African word meaning “wicked or disorderly” in Bambara, which is a language that is spoken in parts of the Congo. Some believe the word took its meaning from the word dzugu meaning to misconduct oneself, and jugu, which means bad, or rowdy. It was meant to describe a sinful pleasure. Juke was then absorbed into the English language through Gullah, which is the language that is spoken by blacks that live in the Georgia Islands (Davis, 47). However, another source contends that the origin of the word can be traced back to a 15th century Scottish dialect term that refers to different types of motion. It is said to deal with shifting the body, springing from side to side, and bending and contorting that could logically be associated with dance (Calt, 138).

No matter what the exact origin of the word may be, these roadside taverns began popping up in the southeastern United States to provide the working class agricultural laborers with a place to drink and socialize free from Jim Crow laws. They were often called jook joints, barrelhouses, or chock-houses, and were open on the weekends for locals to come drink, smoke, dance, and gamble. They were one of the first private places for socializing that blacks established following slavery, and in some cases became almost like a headquarters of self-expression for the community.
Following the emancipation, African Americans experienced a transition period that restored certain amounts of power and control over their own lives. During slavery African Americans had learned to form a close communal bond. They had limited resources and were required to share in order to survive. The slave quarters became the center for many cultural activities especially dancing. Once emancipation occurred single family units became responsible for their own upkeep, and the larger community was dissolved into smaller factions.

However, African Americans were still not allowed full control over their lives. Jim Crow laws helped to police black people and enforce legal segregation. African Americans needed new areas to congregate and come together in their communities that were safe and secure. One of the early institutions that offered a place to gather was the church, but people needed secular cultural organizations as well.

During the time period following Reconstruction the nation was plagued by racial supremacy, hate, bigotry, and violence. African Americans needed communal spaces that weren’t under white control. Prior to emancipation the slave quarters served as one of the main places African Americans gathered together. Once the larger group was disbanded into singular family units that each lived in their separate homes they lost sight of the larger community around them. One of the responses to filling this void was the juke joint.

Juke houses were founded on basic principles that had emerged during slavery such as loyalty, sharing limited goods, respecting each other, and around the importance of dance and music. They provided a place to relax amongst other African Americans away from whites and the judgments of Jim Crow America. Members of the black community took it upon themselves to create a space where others could come, congregate in the safety of their own kind, and socialize. By opening these businesses they were serving a need of the greater community.

Often the physical location was in a building that originally served another purpose like a warehouse or home, which makes it difficult to pinpoint exact similarities in the buildings’ layouts. However a bar and dance area tend to be pretty typical since these are the two main activities one can expect to find at a juke. Typically owners purchased a license from their town hall, and bought beer by the case at local stores or warehouses and then sold it by the can. It was also acceptable for patrons to bring their own liquor. During the prohibition era juke joints
were increasingly common and proprietors often sold and made their own liquor for patrons to enjoy.

Early on, these places tended to serve a lower, working class of African Americans in the rural south so the establishments tended to be a little rough around the edges. In Barry Lee Pearson’s *Jook Right On*, he quotes Mamie Davis saying,

“A jook house or a jook joint is unlike the clubs. It’s just a joint. It might be a big old building, and they got some homemade chairs and some tables in there and they got old raggedy shades. It’s not sophisticated like at all, but it’s where people go and they just have fun. They are places that when you go in you wouldn’t suppose that it was a beautiful place because it’s not; but once you are in there, you have a beautiful time. So you forget about what it looks like.” (46)

The juke joints were a homey place where people could go to express themselves, drink, and dance the night away. The owners often did not make a lot of profit off their establishments. Usually they made enough money to pay the rent and purchase more alcohol to keep the good times rolling. Some owners continued to keep fulltime jobs and operated the juke in their spare time (Komara, 843).

A huge part of juke joints was the privacy and anonymity they offered. Many of them had no signs or advertisements alerting the public of their operations. Juke joints originally tried to reach poor sharecroppers who were also illiterate. Signs and posters would have been of little use. Instead, patrons used the power of word of mouth to spread the news about the activities that went on there. For example, Poor Monkey’s Lounge in Merigold, Mississippi is open when its owner turns on a single strip of Christmas lights, or the Do Drop Inn in Shelby, Mississippi is open if the owner’s pickup truck is parked out front (Komara, 844). Also since so many juke joints were smaller establishments that could only house a select number of individuals, advertisements were costly and unnecessary.

Insider knowledge was required to understand where these nightclubs were located and when they were open for business. Many were located so far off of main roads that it would be nearly impossible for an outsider to find its location. These businesses relied on clientele to spread the word amongst themselves and to bring others into the circle.

The rules and codes of conduct were dealt with in a similar fashion. Instead of their being a formal ordinance posted, people were more or less given an oral understanding of what was
allowed and what was not. As more people became literate, the owner might take the time to write down a brief list and post it somewhere so newcomers were aware of the protocol.

Just like the blues, juke joints were a unique kind of escape. People could get lost from the rest of the world in this smaller community where everyone knew each other. Just like the blues could transport the listener through an extremely personal experience to become more universal, or how it could remind someone that they were not alone. The juke joint became a socially accepting place that was there to support, strengthen, and nurture the black soul in need of an escape.

The most important thing was the interactions between the people within that space. There was a certain level of freedom to do as one pleased. There was a local intimacy where owners mingled amongst their people and recognized the regulars. It became a very personal social experience that allowed for its patrons to seek refuge within a larger group that had a certain level of anonymity to outsiders.

Music, like the blues, played a large role in the socializing. Small stages, raised platforms, or empty spaces allowed bands or musicians to play their instruments for some booze, a hot meal, or a small fee. It was an influential avenue for artists to share their music and play without having to enter through back doors reserved for colored musicians or be threatened by angry whites. The main instruments were guitar, or if the establishment was lucky a piano. Later on phonographs and radios also could be found in these places.

It didn’t take long for juke joints to spread, grow, and transform. Soon they were recognized as a lucrative business and commoditized. White jooks began to open and by the 1930s they had caught the attention of the middle and upper classes (Carr, 66). They had even become popular amongst white college students. They branched off into more urban centers and adopted new characteristics and names such as after-hours joints, honky tonks, rent parties, Chitlin’ struts, and Blue Monday affairs.

Honky-tonks were essentially a more urban form of juke joints. The music was a more stepped up type of blues and tended to have a more sophisticated sound. It was not uncommon to hear early ragtime and jazz music. There were also more instruments being played and a different crowd. Instead of agricultural workers there was more wage laborers. Honky-tonks were seen more as a place to make money off of gambling and prostitution.
More recent branches off of the juke were rent parties, which were a temporary sort of establishment that sprang up to raise money for the proprietor. They would pop up in order to help a person raise some cash and then disappear again (Hazzard-Gordon, 76).

Juke joints have left a lasting mark on American culture today, undoubtedly on blues music and on African Americans specifically. Some of these establishments are still operating, and they have yet to be fully explored, recorded historically, and recognized for their true significance. These gathering houses were likely the first places for private social get-togethers for blacks following slavery. They allowed artists to play their music and spread it throughout the rural south to new audiences, and for blacks to fight the Jim Crow system. It brought patrons together in a common location and lead to the solidification of new forms of music and dancing.

This space became one the first avenues for African Americans to experiment with their newly discovered social freedoms and artistic talents. Just like how blues music became a release for the listener and turned the specific into the universal, the juke joint made the participant find a sense of belonging in a new kind of community.
NOTES

The Encyclopedia of the Blues, Volume 1 was a very helpful overview to help me get started on my research. It had a very clear outlined section on the topic that was easy to navigate and understand. It also listed a very useful bibliography of information that provided me with some other books to start my research. It was an excellent reference but not a very in depth source on the topic.

Jook Right On was an interesting collection of short stories and first person accounts of blues experiences. Pearson did an excellent job capturing the blues essence of a juke joint through short snippets of recollections and thoughts from musicians and people who visited juke joints. It was extremely easy to read and had clever titles. This book gave me a lot of interesting quotes and valuable ideas to think about but not a lot of hard facts.

Barrelhouse Words was interesting simply because it acted as a blues dictionary. Any time I stumbled across a difficult term it was interesting to look it up in this book. It is set up in alphabetical order and easy to flip through, locate, and define terms. It also gave me conflicting information about the term juke, which I found interesting.

Jookin’ by Katrina Hazzard-Gordon was an exceptional source. It had a large section with several subheadings all devoted to topics that were pertaining to my research. It was clearly laid out and easy to discover what I was looking for. She focused a little more heavily on the types of dance and the dance related aspects than my concentration on juke joints specifically, but the reading was very easy to understand and learn from.
Works Cited:


