Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis 2010-03-02 Barnie's "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues"

FOLK AND FINA 113



THE QUESTION

- Blues songs often sound "similar" but not identical to each other
- A particular blues player sometimes has a seemingly endless repertoire
- The same player's "compositions" can vary greatly from performance to performance
- What's up with that?

SUGGESTION: ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY

- (As discussed last class briefly)
- * Has its origins in studies of epic poetry
- That question: how did bards remember 10-20,000 line poems?
 - + Ethnographic studies of contemporary bards in Yugoslavia / Macedonia
 - + Descendents of Homeric bards

ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY

- Verse is not "remembered" so much as "recomposed"
 - + "Spontaneous composition"
- Bards have a large repertoire of "formulas"
 - + Formula a fixed string of words expressing one idea in so many syllables (or pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables)
- * This repertoire is finite
 - + One formula per idea per syllable cluster

ORAL FORMULAIC THEORY (CONT.)

- Verse is a structured form:
 - + A fixed number of beats in a line
 - + (A fixed number of lines in a stanza)
 - May also have rhyme / rhyme scheme
- The form of the verse itself is "traditional," irrespective of the plot the bard that might be performing
 - + Again, demonstrates a conservative (unchanging) / dynamic (adapting) tension

BLUES

- Barnie suggests the basic unit of the blues is not the stanza but the half-line
- Basic blues: AAB (12-bar)
 - + | [half-line] | [half-line]
 - + IV [half-line] | I [half-line] (which is a repetition, more or less, of the line prior)
 - + V [half-line] | IV→I [half-line]
 - Each half-line is two bars long
 - + Other variations include ABB, ABA, AAR (where R is a refrain, a line repeated from stanza to stanza)
- 16-bar: AAAB, AABB, ABAB, AABR, etc.

HALF-LINE THUS THE PLACE FOR FORMULAS

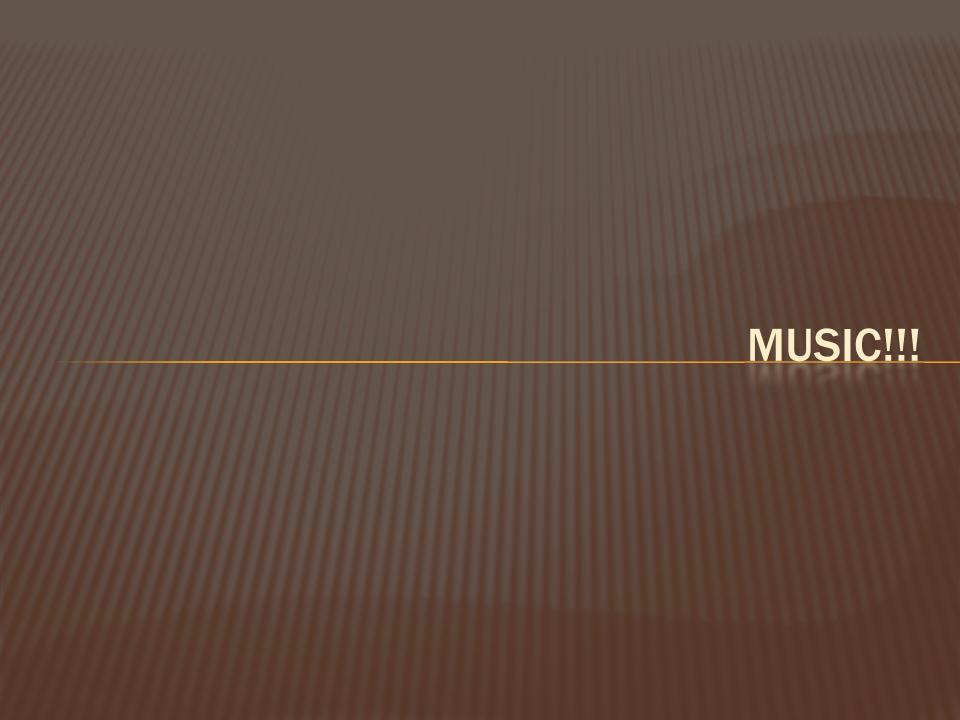
- × 20 examples from Michael Taft
 - + "human have the blues"
 - + "human come to some place"
 - + "human go way from some place"
 - + "human got/have +human"
 - + "human leave/quit +human"
 - + "human love +human"
 - + "human speak to +human"

MORE EXAMPLES

- + "human treat +human in some manner"
- + "some thing worry +human"
- + "+human have the blues"
- + "+human cry"
- + "human do unspecified action"
- + "human go someplace"
- + "human gone"
- + "human come home"

MORE EXAMPLES

- + "time won't be long"
- + "human have something on human's mind"
- + "human treat +human right"
- + "human wake up"
- + "human leave town"
- * A tradition of themes



QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Is there a song that, among your peers, functions like Toelken's definition of a "folksong"?

GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

Read "Strategy in Counting Out" by Goldstein, from the Reader