"Paul Garon’s study of the blues represents a new and important approach to the analysis of the blues as a psychopoetic phenomenon." —Samuel Floyd

"Absolutely the best book on the blues." —Robin D.G. Kelley

An excerpt from *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*

The principal thesis of Blues and the Poetic Spirit is that the blues is a music that signifies the rebellion of the spirit, a body of song that achieves poetry by its insistent revolt and demand for liberation. Had it not been created through the genius of an oppressed people, its language and speech would not have contained the same demands. Before the blues revival of the 1960s, it was taken for granted that blues contained an eloquent protest, but during the blues revival, professional pessimists, hailing themselves as realists, declared that such protest could not be detected in blues lyrics. This, after decades of scholarship had uncovered the hidden meanings and the rebelliousness "coded" in spirituals, and decades after these findings were totally accepted!

Why not the blues? Why was its content not subject to the same analysis and the same revelations? For many academics, resistance to psychoanalysis was the big problem. These blues fans worked and studied in various university departments: anthropology, American studies, music, etc. Folklore departments were few and far between. One notion held in common was a hostility to psychoanalytic thinking and a distrust of any form of interpretation that claimed to assess unconscious meanings and their symbolic expression.

Trained in a fierce and dogged literalism, where imagination played an exceedingly minor role compared to persistence and discipline, it was difficult for them to believe that blues singers might be singing about something other than the obvious. Thus, academic observers were destined—to miss any hidden meanings the blues had to offer.

There are other, more important reasons, however, and some of them are unpleasant to behold. Blues research during the revival years was carried on in an atmosphere of cordiality and cooperation, in the minds of the field workers. Yet 98% of these field workers were white. Perhaps it was pride that made it impossible for them to admit to themselves that their black compatriots were holding something back and held deep secrets that were still beyond sharing with whites. For modern researchers to ignore the possibility of protest in blues also allowed them to think of blues as a music of accommodation, a more comfortable thought than the notion that it might be a music of resistance and that they might be working with singers who considered them the enemy! Let us speak openly. Often the whites were in positions of power: agents, A and R men, label owners, magazine editors and writers. Did they really expect black artists to speak to them honestly about their feelings for whites in general and for them in particular?