



Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs

By David Grazian

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Blue Chicago takes us inside the world of contemporary urban blues clubs to uncover how iconic—yet empty—images of the blues are manufactured and sold to music fans and audiences. Drawing on countless nights in dozens of blues clubs throughout Chicago, David Grazian shows how this quest for authenticity has transformed the very shape of the blues experience. He explores the ways in which professional and amateur musicians, club owners, and city boosters define authenticity and dish it out to tourists and bar regulars. He also tracks the changing relations between race and the blues over the past several decades, including the increasing frustrations of black musicians forced to slog through the same set of overplayed blues standards for mainly white audiences night after night. In the end, Grazian finds that authenticity lies in the eye of the beholder: a nocturnal fantasy to some, an essential way of life to others, and a frustrating burden to the rest.

"Chicago has given the world distinctive forms of urban blues and urban sociology. . . . In *Blue Chicago*, David Grazian's lucid and bracingly unpious study of the blues scene, the two homegrown traditions meet with satisfying results."—Carlo Rotella, *Chicago Tribune*

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- Rank: #1212115 in Books
- Published on: 2005-11-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .80" w x 6.00" l, 1.14 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 328 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Chicago's famous blues scene is a world of grungy bars set in upscale neighborhoods, where affluent white tourists bask in the musical tradition of the black working class. According to Grazian's fascinating study, this fertile stew of contradictions makes for a cultural Rosetta Stone that helps us decipher the relations between art, business and postmodernity's quixotic search for the real. The ironies go on forever. As fans flock to blues venues in search of authentic black culture, they are served up a commodified and caricatured "minstrel show" of endlessly repeated blues standards punctuated by off-color jokes; inevitably, a backlash sets in amongst aficionados, who set off to ever smaller bars in ever poorer neighborhoods where the truly authentic blues are said to reside. Sociologist Grazian is less interested in finding authenticity than in understanding the "symbolic economy of authenticity" by which we accrue social status and seek out an "idealized reality" that "might render our lives more meaningful." If that theory sounds stuffily academic, be assured that Grazian's approach is anything but. Much of his research methodology consists of hanging out in blues joints, drinking beer, striking up conversations, occasionally sitting in with the band on the sax. The result is a elegantly written exploration, both skeptical and sympathetic, journalistic and erudite, of the many diverse subcultures, both black and white-tourists, regulars, bartenders, impresarios, musicians-that stake a claim to the blues. Photos.

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Review

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From the Inside Flap

The club is run-down and dimly lit. Onstage, a black singer croons and weeps of heartbreak, fighting back the tears. Wisps of smoke curl through the beam of a single spotlight illuminating the performer.

For any music lover, that image captures the essence of an authentic experience of the blues. In *Blue Chicago*, David Grazian takes us inside the world of contemporary urban blues clubs to uncover how such images are manufactured and sold to music fans and audiences. Drawing on countless nights in dozens of blues clubs throughout Chicago, Grazian shows how this quest for authenticity has transformed the very shape of the blues experience. He explores the ways in which professional and amateur musicians, club owners, and city boosters define authenticity and dish it out to tourists and bar regulars. He also tracks the changing relations between race and the blues over the past several decades, including the increased frustrations of black musicians forced to slog through the same set of overplayed blues standards for mainly white audiences night after night. In the end, Grazian finds that authenticity lies in the eye of the beholder: a nocturnal fantasy to some, an essential way of life to others, and a frustrating burden to the rest.

From B.L.U.E.S. and the Checkerboard Lounge to the Chicago Blues Festival itself, Grazian's gritty and often sobering tour in *Blue Chicago* shows us not what the blues is all about, but why we care so much about that question.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nellie Ferguson:

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