



A Brief History of Blues ... 'Blues, is a music genre and musical form which was originated in the Deep South of the United States around the 1870s by African Americans from roots in African Musical Traditions, African-American work songs, and spirituals. Blues incorporated spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts, chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads. The blues form, ubiquitous in jazz, rhythm and blues and rock and roll, is characterized by the call-and-

response pattern, the blues scale and specific chord progressions, of which the twelve-bar blues is the most common. Blue notes (or "worried notes"), usually thirds, fifths or sevenths flattened in pitch are also an essential part of the sound. Blues shuffles or walking bass reinforce the trance-like rhythm and form a repetitive effect known as the groove.

Blues as a genre is also characterized by its lyrics, bass lines, and instrumentation. Early traditional blues verses consisted of a single line repeated four times. It was only in the first decades of the 20th century that the most common current structure became standard, the AAB pattern, consisting of a line sung over the four first bars, its repetition over the next four, and then a longer concluding line over the last bars. Early blues frequently took the form of a loose narrative, often relating the racial discrimination, Deprivation, Poverty and other challenges experienced by African-Americans.

Many elements, such as the call-and-response format and the use of blue notes, can be traced back to the music of Africa. The origins of the blues are also closely related to the religious music of the Afro-American community, the spirituals. The first appearance of the blues is often dated to after the ending of slavery and, later, the development of juke joints. It is associated with the newly acquired freedom of the former slaves. Chroniclers began to report about blues music at the dawn of the 20th century. The first recorded publication of blues sheet music was in 1908. Blues has since evolved from unaccompanied vocal music and oral traditions of slaves into a wide variety of styles and subgenres.

Blues subgenres include Country blues, such as Delta blues and Piedmont blues, as well as urban blues styles such as Chicago blues and West Coast blues. World War II marked the transition from acoustic to electric blues and the progressive opening of blues music to a wider audience, especially white

listeners. In the 1960s and 1970s, a hybrid form called blues rock developed, which blended blues styles with rock music.

The first publication of blues sheet music may have been 'I Got the Blues', published by New Orleans musician Antonio Maggio in 1908 and described as the earliest published composition known to link the condition of having the blues to the musical form that would become popularly known as 'the blues'. Hart Wand's 'Dallas Blues' was published in 1912; W.C. Handy's 'The Memphis Blues' followed in the same year. The first recording by an African American singer was Mamie Smith's 1920 rendition of Perry Bradford's 'Crazy Blues'. But the origins of the blues were some decades earlier, probably around 1890. This music is poorly documented, partly because of racial discrimination in U.S. society, including academic circles, and partly because of the low rate of literacy among rural African Americans at the time.

Reports of blues music in Southern Texas and the Deep South were written at the dawn of the 20th century. Charles Peabody mentioned the appearance of blues music at Clarksdale, Mississippi, and Gate Thomas reported similar songs in Southern Texas around 1901/02. These observations coincide more or less with the recollections of Jelly Roll Morton, who said he first heard blues music in New Orleans in 1902; Ma Rainey, who remembered first hearing the blues in the same year in Missouri; and W.C. Handy, who first heard the blues in Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1903. The first extensive research in the field was performed by Howard W. Odum, who published an anthology of folk songs from Lafayette County, Mississippi, and Newton County, Georgia, between 1905 and 1908. The first noncommercial recordings of blues music, termed proto-blues by Paul Oliver, were made by Odum for research purposes at the very beginning of the 20th century.

Other recordings that are still available were made in 1924 by Lawrence Gellert. Later, several recordings were made by Robert W. Gordon, who became head of the Archive of American Folk Songs of the Library of Congress. Gordon's successor at the library was John Lomax. In the 1930s, Lomax and his son Alan made a large number of non-commercial blues recordings that testify to the huge variety of proto-blues styles, such as field hollers and ring shouts. A record of blues music as it existed before 1920 can also be found in the recordings of artists such as Lead Belly and Henry Thomas. All these sources show the existence of many different structures distinct from twelve, eight- or sixteen-bar.

The social and economic reasons for the appearance of the blues are not fully known. The first appearance of the blues is usually dated after the Emancipation Act of 1863, between 1870 and 1900, a period that

coincides with post-emancipation and later, the establishment of juke joints as places where Negro people went to listen to music, dance, or gamble after a hard day's work. This period corresponds to the transition from slavery to sharecropping, small-scale agricultural production, and the expansion of railways in the Southern United States. Several characterise the development of blues music in the early 1900s as a move from group performance to individualized performance. They argue that the development of the blues is associated with the newly acquired freedom of the enslaved people.

According to Lawrence Levine, there was a direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington's teachings, and the rise of the blues, Levine stated that psychologically, socially, and economically, African-Americans were being acculturated in a way that would have been impossible during slavery, and it is hardly surprising that their secular music reflected this as much as their religious music did.

There are few characteristics common to all blues music, because the genre took its shape from the idiosyncrasies of individual performers. However, there are some characteristics that were present long before the creation of the modern blues. Call-and-response shouts were an early form of blues-like music; they were a 'functional expression' style without accompaniment or harmony and unbounded by the formality of any particular musical structure. A form of these pre-blues was heard in slave ring shouts and field hollers, expanded into simple solo songs laden with emotional content.

Blues has evolved from the unaccompanied vocal music and oral traditions of slaves imported from West Africa and rural Negroes into a wide variety of styles and subgenres, with regional variations across the United States. Although blues can be seen as a musical style based on both European harmonic structure and the African call-and-response tradition that transformed into interplay of voice and guitar, the blues form itself bears no resemblance to the melodic styles of the West African griots, the influences are faint and tenuous. Additionally, there are theories that the four-beats-per-measure structure of the blues might have its origins in the Native American tradition of pow-wow drumming.

No specific African musical form can be identified as the single direct ancestor of the blues. However the call-and-response format can be traced back to the music of Africa the blue notes predate their use in blues and have an African origin is attested to by "A Negro Love Song", by the English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, from his African Suite for Piano, written in 1898, which contains blue third and seventh notes.

The Diddley bow and the banjo are African-derived instruments that may have helped in the transfer of African performance techniques into the early blues instrumental vocabulary. The banjo seems to be directly imported from West African music. It is similar to the musical instrument that griots and other Africans such as the Igbo played by African peoples such as the Wolof, Fula and Mandinka. However, in the 1920s, when country blues began to be recorded, the use of the banjo in blues music was quite marginal and limited to individuals such as Papa Charlie Jackson and later Gus Cannon.

Blues music also adopted elements from the 'Ethiopian airs', minstrel shows and Negro spirituals, including instrumental and harmonic accompaniment. The style also was closely related to ragtime, which developed at about the same time, though the blues better preserved the original melodic patterns of African music.

The musical forms and styles that are now considered the blues as well as modern country music arose in the same regions of the Southern United States during the 19th century. Recorded blues and country music can be found as far back as the 1920s, when the record industry created the marketing categories of Race and Hillbilly music to sell music by Negroes for Negroes and by whites for whites, respectively. At the time, there was no clear musical division between 'Blues' and 'Country', except for the ethnicity of the performer, and even that was sometimes documented incorrectly by record companies.

Though musicologists can now attempt to define the blues narrowly in terms of certain chord structures and lyric forms thought to have originated in West Africa, audiences originally heard the music in a far more general way. It was simply the music of the rural south, notably the Mississippi Delta. Negro and white musicians shared the same repertoire and thought of themselves as 'songsters' rather than blues musicians. The notion of blues as a separate genre arose during the Negro migration from the countryside to urban areas in the 1920s and the simultaneous development of the recording industry. Blues became a code word for a record designed to sell to Negro listeners.

The origins of the blues are closely related to the religious music of Afro-American community, the spirituals. The origins of spirituals go back much further than the blues, usually dating back to the middle of the 18th century, when the slaves were Christianised and began to sing and play Christian hymns, in particular those of Isaac Watts, which were popular. Before the blues gained its formal definition in terms of chord progressions, it was defined as the secular counterpart of spirituals. It was the low-down music played by rural Negroes.

Depending on the religious community a musician belonged to, it was more or less considered a sin to play this low-down music; blues was the devil's music. Musicians were therefore segregated into two categories, gospel singers and blues singers, guitar preachers and songsters. However, when rural black music began to be recorded in the 1920s, both categories of musicians used similar techniques back to the call-and-response patterns, blue notes, and slide guitars. Gospel music was nevertheless using musical forms that were compatible with Christian hymns and therefore less marked by the blues form than its secular counterpart.

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