

**Spirituals to Jazz and the Blues ....** Spirituals are the work, and plantation songs that evolved into the blues and gospel songs for worship. In the 19th century, the word 'Spirituals' referred to essentially folk songs. Although they were often rooted in biblical stories, they also showed us the hardships of people who were the slaves from the 17th century onwards. Many of the new music genres including what we now call the blues emerged from spirituals but, as we shall see, the blues existed, in a different form even before the spirituals, and in fact were an element of the Spirituals, only the format we're familiar with was different.

Thank you for talking to the time to read through this thesis on the emergence of the blues. I hope as you read you'll also refer to our web page and play the recordings we have included.



Initially, we found this incredible lady, Mammy Prater. Mammy, her real name was Annie, but she preferred Mammy. She was born a slave in 1805. She was our inspiration to research and to discover the spirituals, why they were so important and their connection to the emergence of Jazz and the blues.

Prior to the end of the Civil War and emancipation, spirituals were originally a tradition passed from one slave generation to the next. Biblical stories were literally memorised then transposed into songs, although not necessarily a song as we would describe a song today. Chants, groans, speech and even shouts were the elementary content.

Early recording studios, such as they were, were at first only recording white musicians, those performing the spirituals, and their derivatives. Starting in the 1920s, the commercial recording industry increased the audience for the spirituals, the blues music as we know it today that emerged from them. In his autobiography, W C Handy tells us how he heard these songs, memorised them and transposed them into blues, although 'Blues' at that time was just a descriptive word, played in his case by what virtually amounted, to a brass band – Indeed, blues and the derivative of jazz does take many forms and are played by many instruments or even none at all.





For example: ... Artists such as Louisa 'Blue Lu' Barker (November 13, 1913– May 7, 1998) She was a jazz and blues singer. Her better-known recordings include *Don't you feel my leg* (1938), which she wrote with her husband and *Look what baby's got for you*.

She was usually accompanied by her husband, but can be heard sing the blues without any accompaniment at all, a plaintive voice of the blues if you will. Can anyone say for certain, without being too dogmatic, a particular format/genre is the blues while another one isn't?

While the spirituals were often created by slavery communities, it is important to note that even before the spirituals; people would express their sorrow, deprivation and misery in song, it was unlawful for slaves to learn to read and write so their 'song' would be as a chant or 'groan' almost a monologue to express their emotions – (Mississippi groans may be described as loosely linked to these early expressions) – Simply, the blues with a

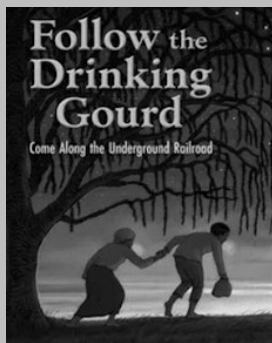


different name, just an expression of sadness. So even though we discuss the spiritual link to the blues, if we go back further than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can still discover evidence of – what we now call the blues.

Slave songs or in a sense Spirituals tell stories which are essentially sung tones, often little more than a loud, long and deep, breathing of prayer. People filled with an anguish, and misery, beyond our comprehension. Every word or phrase a testimony against slavery, and a prayer for deliverance.

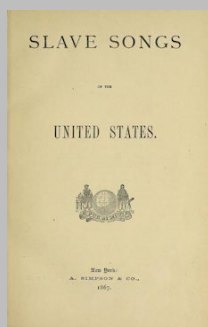
**Recording:** *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...* Is a traditional spiritual, dated from around 1870 it is now available in many styles, recorded by many artists as a folk song. Listen to the song on our web page, and grasp the sadness in the song, blues?

Spirituals such as **Recording:** *Steal away* were often coded songs that would announce a clandestine meeting. Listen carefully to the words as the singer invokes the need to gather to share their despair and to worship. In prayer, they seek to ask that their burden be lifted, but more than that, a means of what was unlawful communication. '*Steal away to Jesus*' simply means, to escape, albeit briefly from their torment.



Another coded example: **Recording:** *Follow the Drinking Gourd* - Follow the Drinking Gourd is an obscure African-American folk song relating to a legend of the Underground Railroad, the lyrics contain coded instructions for escaping slaves to find the North Star. The drinking gourd is a nickname for the Big Dipper constellation, which points to the North Star, a guide for freedom in the Northern states. It is intriguing that so many of these songs, chants and even the words of a monologue could well have a hidden meaning that only the congregation or even a part of a congregation could understand.

If we listen to a Mississippi groan for example, we can clearly hear that misery, pain and deprivation in the song, but if we take, **Recording:** *I'll be glad when the sun goes down* a sour example, we're hearing 'Call and Response' – both derived from a spiritual structure, but with a different, as it were, application, or shall we say purpose. The workers / slaves often worked from Dawn to Dusk and so, 'I'll be glad when the sun goes down' is an obvious plea for relief from their toil. You can hear the same cry in the Prison song '*Go down old Hannah*' is a derivative of a spiritual the convicts adopted, they called the sun 'Old Hannah' the meaning is the same.



Spirituals were originally just oral, but by 1867 the first songbook, entitled 'A Slave Songbook' appeared containing 136 plantation songs. This 1867 publication includes spirituals that were well-known and regularly sung in churches, derivatives of the originals that are still sung today.

These songs had their origins in the plantations, reprehensively, to date they have not been readily acknowledged as such. It is quite impossible to convey the spirituals in print because the voices that sang them originally had their own intonations and variations. The singers of today could not and would not have the sense of misery and despair being expressed. Consequently, the 'meaning and depth is lost. It's quite simply a case of singing the words, but without their true meaning.

To explain, Two songs: '*I can't stay behind, my Lord*', or '*Turn, sinner, turn*' the origin of these songs has long since disappeared, church history in the US instructs us they have a 'shout' or visual expression where there are no singing parts, singers / congregation would sing the same song but with their

own words to express their emotions. The caller starts the words of each verse, and the others come in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are readily known, where they aren't known – the people just express themselves.

So now we seek to understand how the blues emerged from a myriad of sources. The blues did indeed emerge from the spirituals, the stories and legends from to a large extent the 18<sup>th</sup> / 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Spiritual influence may be described as much more plaintive in the 1800s in the Deep South states that were most dependent on the slave labour plantations. These by their nature held the largest number of enslaved people. It may be fair to suggest that these states and the slave labour plantations were the origin of the blues.



Remember, the blues prior to the era we're exploring would have been perhaps a single person expressing his or her misery, whilst the spirituals would have been more of a 'congregational' meeting but with that 'Blues' feeling. So to simplify, just transpose the word misery to Blues.

So the blues form was collectively developed by generations and communities of the Enslaved African Americans, starting as unaccompanied work-songs (Call and Response) of the plantation culture. At this point we may recall that these same songs were also occasionally accompanied by the most rudimentary instruments and although primarily for work they also formed a basis of entertainment and worship.

The historical roots of the blues have then been traced even farther back to West Africa and to the responsive caller / responder form. Finally, the blues, evolving collectively through spirituals, describing unimaginable fear, misery and poverty, with this single influence they became the blues — Without this background, dare I say, the blues would not exist,



Now, as we play their music as a feature in our 'Backtracking' production from well over 100, even 200 years ago, we perhaps reflect that artists of today play and sing ABOUT a label that is used – The blues, we're not really listening to the 'Blues' anymore, the music has changed out of all recognition from these earliest songs, even their meaning of expression has faded. The earliest artists were talking about their lives or the people who had gone before; they KNEW and had EXPERIENCED the blues.

Their voices tell us of pain, we hear of poverty, and deprivation, their fear, sorrow, the cruelty people suffered with only their songs for comfort, even despair quite beyond our imagination – Simply, they express their blues. How can we ever let their stories die? Friends, there really is nothing new under the sun.

David R Howard

PD Productions...Sept 2025.

