

Spirituals, The Blues Connection ... 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 new music genres including what we now call the blues emerged from spirituals but, as we shall see, the blues existed even before the spirituals, and in fact were an element of the Spirituals, only the format we're familiar with was different.

Initially, we found this 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 and their connection with 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 performing the spirituals and their derivatives. Starting in the 1920s, the commercial recording industry increased the audience for the spirituals and the blues music that emerged from them. In his autobiography, W C Handy tells us he heard these songs, memorised them and transposed them into blues, played by what virtually amounted to a brass band – Indeed, blues do take many forms and are played by many instruments or none at all. Can anyone say for certain, without being 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, albeit, as a chant or 'groan' – (Mississippi groans may be loosely linked) – Simply, the blues with a different name. So even though we discuss the spiritual link to the blues, if we go back further than the 19th century, we can still discover evidence of - the blues.

Slave songs or if you will Spirituals tell stories which are essentially sung tones, a loud, long and deep, breathing of prayer. People filled with an anguish, and misery, beyond our comprehension. Every word or phrase is a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance. For example...

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child ... Is a traditional spiritual, dated from around 1870 it is now recorded by many artists as a folk song.

Spirituals such as **Steal away** were often coded songs that would announce a 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. Steal away to Jesus, simply means, to escape, albeit briefly from their torment.

Another coded example: **Follow the Drinking Gourd** According to folklore, this song was a series of directions and pointers which led runaway slaves north to freedom.

In church, the spiritual was a gospel song. In the fields, plantations etc, the call and response became evident and became a derivative of the blues.

So let's look a little closer. 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, **'I'll be glad when the sun goes down'** as our example, we're hearing 'Call and Response' – both derived from a spiritual structure, but with a different, as it were, application, shall we say purpose.

Spirituals were originally 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 that are still sung today. These songs had their origins in the plantations, reprehensively, 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.

May I try to explain? Two songs: '**I can't stay behind, my Lord**', or '**Turn, sinner, turn**' these songs have a shout where there are no singing parts, and no two singers seem to be singing the same song. 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.

So now we seek to understand the link to the emerging blues. The blues form emerging from the spirituals. Spirituals, with the influence of a much more plaintive, blues background originated in the 1860s in the Deep South, states that were most dependent on the slave labour on the plantations and that held the largest number of enslaved people. 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 'congregation' meeting but with that 'Blues' feeling. Just transpose the word misery to Blues. E.g. Mississippi Misery.



The form was collectively developed by generations and communities of enslaved African Americans starting as unaccompanied work-songs (Call and Response) of the plantation culture. At this point we 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 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, they became the most extensively recorded of all traditional music type, since the early 1960s, —the most important single influence on the development of Western popular music.

Now, as we play their music from well over 100, even 200 years ago, we perhaps reflect that artists of today play and sing ABOUT the blues. The 'Blues' have changed out of all recognition from these earliest songs, even their meaning has faded. These people were talking about their lives; they KNEW and EXPERIENCED the blues. Their voices talk to us of their pain, we hear of their poverty, and their deprivation, fear, sorrow, even despair. How we can ever let their stories die. Friends, there really is nothing new under the sun.

David R Howard

PD Productions ... Sept 2022.