History of the Blues

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A Crossroads between Music and Culture

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by
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When & Where

• The blues is one of America’s greatest musical treasures. A roots music form that evolved out of African-American work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and country string ballads more than a century ago. The blues is the foundation of virtually every major American music form born in the 20th century, including jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop.

In the Beginning….

• The African people and their descendants have been a part of the story of the America’s since the late 1400’s. As scouts, interpreters, navigators, and military men, blacks were among those who first encountered Native American Indians. Beginning in the colonial period (1607 – 1776), African Americans provided most of the labor from which European settlement developed. After the countries European wars, many diseases decimated the Native Americans.

• African workers had extensive experience in cultivating rice, cotton, and sugar. Their skills became the basis of the flourishing plantation economy. Africans were also skilled at ironworking, music and musical instruments, the decorative arts, and architecture. Their work, which still marks the landscape today, helped shape American cultural styles. They brought with them African words, religious beliefs, styles of worship, aesthetic values, musical forms and rhythms. All of these elements were important from the beginning in the shaping of our American culture.

Trade Routes

• The following world maps trace the trading routes of people, supplies and food, which began as early as the 1400’s.
America Trade Map 1

[Link to America Trade Map 1](www.andrew.cmu.edu/course/79-326/slave02.htm)

World Travel Trade Map 2

[Link to World Travel Trade Map 2](www.slaveryinamerica.org/geography/slave_trade.htm)
Roots of the Blues

• Blues has African roots

• African tribes such as the Arada, Dahomey and Fulani sang music in their daily rituals and ceremonies before they were brought to the new world as slaves.

• Music is about tradition and personal expression.

• Music is experienced & used by the family & society, young and old.

(Photo, Blades James)

Music in Africa was a social experience that was practiced daily.

Early Development Included these seven (7) elements:

* African music was passed down orally, generation to generation *

1. African spirituals and worksongs

2. Adapting to a Euro-American culture

3. Music borrowed from Scottish ballads, Methodist and Baptist hymns & Western traditions of instrumental accompaniments
4. Antiphonal choirs or small ensemble singing
   (similar to "Call and response" singing)

4. Emphasizing rhythm over harmony

5. Afro-melismas, lyric improvisation, vocal rhythmization

6. Vocal effects: guttural effects, interpolated vocality, falsetto and blue notes

7. Improvisation (Also used in jazz and classical music)

Planting the seeds

- By weaving these diverse elements into the fabric of surviving African vocal and musical traditions over the course of many generations, African Americans fashioned a distinctly new music that would eventually be given the name "blues."
Giving Birth

- The birth of today's blues began in 1903 when W.C. Handy, a African American leader of a dance orchestra waited for a train….
- While sitting at the station he heard a ragged black man singing "Where the Southern Crosses the Dawg" while sliding a knife against the strings of his guitar.
- W.C. Handy later said it was "the weirdest music I had ever heard."

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Line, affectionately known as the "Yellow Dawg" or simply the "Dawg,"
(www.deltablues.net/dawg.html)
Emergence of Places & Forms

- Texas
- Louisiana
- The Piedmont region
- The Mississippi Delta

- Its roots were in various forms of African American slave songs such as work songs, spirituals, country string ballads and field hollers, which was a type of unaccompanied vocal song associated with slaves in early America.

- Music captured the suffering, anguish-and hopes-of 300 years of slavery
Styles of Blues

Delta or Country Blues

- The earliest blues, known as country or delta blues, were a product of the 19th-century Southern rural experience (1865 – 1900+)

- Important early musicians include Charlie Patton, Son House, Elmore James and Robert Johnson who developed the bottleneck slide technique

- Singers accompanied themselves on guitars, banjos, harmonicas, or homemade instruments including axes and hammers

"bottleneck slide" style of guitar playing: which consists of scraping a knife or glass bottleneck up the guitar fingerboard to simulate vocal moans and slides.

An example of this style would be the recording of Robert Johnson’s “Walkin Blues”
The Delta Blues Region & Style

- In the 1840s planters moved with their slaves into the **Delta**, a region that stretches from Vicksburg, Mississippi in the south to Memphis Tennessee in the north and from central Mississippi in the east to the Ozark plateau of Arkansas in the west. After the Civil War when slavery was abolished, African-Americans continued to work in the region on the plantations.

- The early **Delta blues** was very similar to works songs and field hollers. The workers would sing to pass the time. With the introduction of musical instruments, blues moved from the fields to recreational gatherings. The rhythms of blues made for easy dancing and the style became popular at parties. The music was usually performed by a solo guitarist because it was easier and less expensive to travel alone.

- **Delta blues style** is recognized by the gritty intensity of the vocals and by the *slide guitar* technique employed. The guitarist uses a knife or bottleneck on the strings of the guitar to make the instrument "talk" in speech like inflections. Most of the early Delta blues performers were part time musicians who worked in the fields during the day. As their popularity grew, many performers were able to record their songs and leave their farm work to become full time musicians. Charlie Patton was the first Delta blues man to make a recording. As conditions in the South deteriorated in the 1920s, many of these musicians migrated north.

- Although many musicians left the region, the Delta is considered to be the origin of the blues.
Son House was a major innovator of the Delta style, bottleneck slide. 
*Recording: Death Letter*

Robert Johnson 
King of the Delta Blues

Muddy Waters

Big Bill Broonzy 
Recorded: Worried Life Blues

Charlie Patton

Elmore James
Highway 61 is also known as the **Blues Highway** because it runs through the Mississippi Delta country which was an important source of blues music. Son Thomas ("Highway 61"), Mississippi Fred McDowell ("61 Highway") and Jay Farrar of Son Volt ("Afterglow 61") all wrote songs about it, and many Mississippians, such as Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley took the blues to Chicago along the route.

The junction of Highway 61 and Highway 49 in Clarksdale, Mississippi is designated as the famous crossroads where according to legend, Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for mastery of the blues. However, there is no proof it is the site. Several miles north is another junction where the two highways diverge again; between the junctions the two highways share the route. It has never been confirmed as the place Johnson meant. If the crossroads in the song was ever anything other than a metaphor, it could have been any intersection in that part of Mississippi, or the world.
The East Texas Blues Region & Style

• Slaves were moved into the area rimmed by Houston, Austin and Dallas and cut by the Trinity and Brazos rivers to avoid the Emancipation proclamation. After the war many stayed to work on the plantations or were part of the prison farm system and were leased to white landowners.

• East Texas blues is heavily influenced by works songs. The vocals are breathy and usually accompanied by a guitar or piano played percussively. Since Texas was isolated from the entertainment industry there were few commercial influences on early East Texas blues. The first recording of Texas Blues was in 1925 by Blind Lemon Jefferson. In the 1940s T-Bone Walker is believed to have been the first bluesman to use an amplified acoustic guitar.

Blind Lemon Jefferson

*Recorded sample: Black Snake Moan*

T-Bone Walker, first to use amplified acoustic guitar.

*Recorded Sample: Hear in the Dark*
The East Coast Piedmont Blues Region & Style

- The blues did not develop in the area that stretches from Atlanta, Georgia to Richmond, Virginia, bordered by the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic coast until quite late. The area had been one of the first regions to be cultivated for cotton and tobacco. When the soil became depleted there was a move toward industrialization. The folk music tradition was very strong in the area impeding the development of blues. When blues did arise it was influenced heavily by folk music. Folk traditions were merged with other newer musical styles from nearby regions in the north such as ragtime. The banjo techniques were transferred to the guitar, where musicians would use their thumb to strum down low while finger-picking the melody high on the neck of the guitar.

- When the blues began to change with the introduction of the electric guitar and the urbanization of music as more musicians migrated north to big cities, the East Coast Piedmont blues died out since it could not be easily adapted to these new styles.

What generally distinguishes the Piedmont blues sound from the Delta blues or Texas blues?

- The Piedmont blues sound incorporated ragtime piano rhythms and chord changes in guitar playing. The left hand piano rhythm was reproduced with the thumb and the right hand piano melody with the forefingers. This is often called "finger-picking style." This type of playing has been described by some critics as being more "melodic" than other blues, with an alternating thumb bass pattern supporting the melody on treble strings.

Elizabeth "Libba" Cotton was a self-taught, left-handed guitarist who developed her own style that became known as "Cotten picking". She was one of the most recorded and popular musicians of this style.

**Nicknames she Recorded Under:**
Libba, Elizabeth Cotten

**Born:** January 1892, Chapel Hill, NC

**Died:** June 29, 1987 In Syracuse, NY
Transition of Classic Blues
(1870-1890+)

Classic Blues

• During the following two decades, the blues began to be formalized into the 12-bar, three-line, repetitive stanza structure now recognized as the "classic" blues ‘form’. (see page #21)

• As rural African Americans migrated to urban areas such as Memphis and New Orleans in search of work, blues gradually became more of an urban phenomenon. Classic or urban blues featured a male or female singer usually accompanied by a piano or whole jazz combo with a horn section.

• Out of this era, it was the woman vocalist who emerged to move the blues toward professionalism. In contrast to the male country blues singers, women made up virtually all of the performers who created the Classic Blues. For African American women, singing the blues in public became a professional way of earning a living, not a way of easing labor or a means of personal expression.
Race Records
(1920 – 1940)

• A New York vaudeville singer named Mamie Smith recorded "Crazy Blues" in 1920 launching the “Race Recording” industry.

• The label targeted blues and jazz music while directly targeting African American audiences. Eventually, Race Records became popular with a larger public.

The Earliest Race Record Artists’:

• Bessie Smith, "Empress of the Blues," Jelly Roll Morton, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Big Bill Broonzy and Louis Armstrong dominated the musical landscape
THE WOMEN of CLASSIC BLUES

• 1907-1930+ some of the women who sang the blues included: Ma Rainey ~ Bessie Smith ~ Mamie Smith ~ Ida Cox ~ Alberta Hunter

Ma Rainey was the first woman to incorporate blues into an act.
The Business of Blues began with it’s Founder
William Christopher Handy (Nov. 16, 1873 – Mar. 28, 1958)

• Considered: “Father of the Blues”. W.C. Handy heard a ragged black man singing “Where the Southern Crosses the Dawg” in 1903, while sliding a knife against the strings of his guitar.

• Urban Blues music becomes big business for publishers and record labels.

• The music industry began publishing and marketing arrangements for blues compositions.

• Publishers added the word blues to song titles that were not blues to ensure their popularity.

• William Christopher Handy recorded one of his biggest hits: "St. Louis Blues" in 1914.
Electric Blues

- The center of blues activity moved to cities such as Chicago after World War II where musicians such as Muddy Waters, Riley "B. B." King, and Buddy Guy intensified the sound by amplifying their guitars and adding more emphasis drums.

- During the 1950’s, this style was adapted by white musicians as well. Rhythm and blues hits were often rerecorded by white musicians such as Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, transforming rhythm and blues into rock and roll.

- A decade later British musicians such as the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Eric Clapton returned to the blues roots as the source for their heavily amplified hard rock style by making cover songs.

- Throughout the 1970’s until his untimely death in 1990, Stevie Ray Vaughan performed his own style of blues including emulating Elmore James.
Blues Cover Song Example

The Sky Is Crying

Also recorded by:

* Luther Allison
* Eric Clapton
* John Hammond,
* George Thorogood &
  The Destroyers
* Stevie Ray Vaughan
* Double Trouble John Martyn

Elmore James
Jan. 27, 1918 - May 24, 1963

Stevie Ray Vaughan

Originally written by Elmore James and Recorded in 1959.
Considered by many to be the King of the Slide Guitar, Elmore James helped shape the rural sounds of the Mississippi Delta Blues into a wrenching raw music that eventually bled its course to Rock ‘n’ Roll
(http://www.mudcat.org/elmo.cfm)

Recorded 1991, “The Sky Is Crying” was originally cut by Elmore James, but Vaughan's lead guitar owes its stylistic debt to the bluesman who had a most profound influence on his playing, Albert King.
Editorial Reviews:
(www.Amazon.com)
Gray-out

• Alan Lomax worked, as his father John Lomax before him had, to record and collect blues songs for the Library of Congress. They traveled throughout the South more than seven times beginning in 1933 through 1985. They also traveled throughout Europe to document folk music, including the blues.

• During his research, Alan Lomax observed and commented on the ways in which the mass media worked to homogenize sound, and thereby erase, the distinctive, regional early musical cultures and styles in the United States. This trend continues today as many early or ethnic ensembles use similar (modern) instrumentation which creates similar timbres, everything sounds the same with little distinction as to the culture or style it once was.

• Lomax called this phenomenon "gray-out".
Progression of the 12-Bar Blues Pattern

- The musical form of the blues developed over time and by the 1920s, the blues style had acquired its distinguishing Characteristics of text, harmonic structure, and melodic shape. Blues lyrics contain a number of three-line rhythm stanzas in which each stanza consists of a line of verse which is repeated and then concluded with a final line. Harmony is based on a repeating blues chord progression, with a 12-bar pattern using the three major chords of a scale (Handy W. C., 39). Each stanza of text is set to one 12-bar chorus, with the typical blues ranging from four to eight stanzas in length. A 12-bar blues is known as an AAB pattern.

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Here is the 12 bar Blues progression with 4 beats in each bar.
Word Glossary

- **Ballads**: A song that tells a story.
- **Call and Response**: Comes from song leaders and choirs in West Africa. Song leader calls out a phrase and choir responds with a musical phrase. Can also occur between a singer and instruments.
- **Classic/Chicago blues**: simple structure, electricity, amplification, bass-drums-guitar-harmonica instrumentation, "raw" sounding.
- **Delta blues**: Unamplified guitar, rhythmic and spoken vocals, drones, moans, "bottleneck" slide techniques, and a generally "heavy" texture.
- **Field Holler**: A musical verse sung over and over, often used during work.
- **Gray-out**: A phenomenon observed by Alan Lomax in which the mass media homogenize and erase the distinctive, regional musical cultures of the United States.
- **Groit**: Western African social cast of singers and musicians. Traveled from village to village singing the oral history of the people. Often accompanied by an instrument that closely resembles the banjo.
- **Minstrel Show**: Starting early in the nineteenth century, white men with burnt cork smeared on their faces to make them look black performed song, dance and comedy routines loosely based on plantation life. Although most of the minstrel's songs and skits make fun of the slaves, they did spread a version of black music to a white audience that had previously been completely ignorant of it.
- **Ngoma**: Traditional African music or culture.
- **Powwow**: A north American Indian gathering to affirm and celebrate tribal values through drumming, singing, dancing and feasting.
- **Spirituals**: African American religious folk music that contributed to blues.
- **Songster**: Traveling musician of the late nineteenth and early twenty centuries whose repertoire included blues, ballads, spirituals and popular tunes. Also a pocket-sized book of song lyrics.
- **Work Song**: Field songs of slaves on plantations.
- **Cover Songs**: A “cover version” or simply the word “cover” is a new rendition of a previously recorded song.
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