

## **The Blues: From the Delta to the South Side of Chicago**

### **Reading the Blues**

If you'd like your students to gain an appreciation of the richness, complexity, depth, and pervasiveness of African-American culture in relation to the broader American culture, listen to music. Music offers an entryway into the world of ordinary African-American men and women in the United States from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. The blues, even though its beginnings are somewhat obscure, are an expression - even a chronicle - of the lives of people who had at one time been slaves.

Music, of course, is only one of many African American contributions to American society. But it is an important contribution—one that can shed light on the ideas, values, and emotions of many otherwise silent African Americans.

A history class isn't a music class. It's not a course in music history. Nevertheless, music can contribute to our understanding of history. A study of the blues can serve as a window on the black experience in post Civil War America up to the present.

As we will see, the view through that window changed as failures of post-Civil War reconstruction in the South led black Americans to leave the cotton fields for the cities and eventually northward.

### **The History of the Blues**

The best guess is that the blues first came into being as a recognizable music form sometime around the 1890s, long after the end of slavery, but deep into slavery's successor servitude of sharecropping, Jim Crow laws and other oppressions.

Blues lyrics, as they developed in the Delta regions of Mississippi, frequently made reference to escaping the hard and unforgiving life of the cotton fields in search of a better life.

Frequently the blues had "hidden transcripts," messages confined to the communities where blacks joined each other for a culture wholly different from what was seen and heard by the white community.

The blues took very different forms in different locales. Musicologists divide the blues into the Delta blues - generally thought to be the source of the form – and the Piedmont blues, from the areas east from Georgia into the Carolinas and the Texas blues.

You might want to focus is on the transition of the blues from the rural South into the larger cities and into the industrial North, predominantly Chicago.

The blues slowly changed from expressions of personal hardship to a greater emphasis on male-female relationships, and the need for commercial success in the large cities.

The blues are much more than entertaining songs. They offer a chronicle of the lives African Americans over the past century.

### **What are the Blues?**

There are a number of different ideas as to what the blues really are: a scale structure, a note out of tune or out of key, a chord structure; a philosophy?

The blues weren't sung according to the European ideas of even tempered pitch, but with a much freer use of bent pitches and otherwise emotionally inflected vocal sounds. These 'bent' pitches are known as 'blue notes'.

The 'blue notes' or blue tonalities are one of the defining characteristics of the blues.

### **The Emergence of the Blues**

The blues emerged from two earlier forms of slave songs, field hollers and ballads. Field hollers were work songs, generally extemporized and unaccompanied, that evolved out of the call-and-response work songs that had set the pace for gang labor on antebellum slave plantations.

The slave hollers and ballads were filled with words telling of their extreme suffering and privation.

The blues were notable for their profound despair. They gave voice to the mood of alienation and anomie that prevailed in the construction camps of the South. In the Mississippi Delta that blacks were often forcibly conscripted to work on the levee and land-clearing crews, where they were often abused and then tossed aside or worked to death.

The Southern prisons also contributed considerably to the blues tradition through work songs and the songs of death row and murder, prostitutes, the warden, the hot sun, and a hundred other privations.

Field hollers, ballads, church music and rhythmic dance tunes called jump-ups evolved into a music for a singer who would engage in call-and-response with his guitar. He would sing a line, and the guitar would answer it.

Some 'bluesologists' claim (rather dubiously), that the first blues song that was ever written down was 'Dallas Blues,' published in 1912 by Hart Wand, a white violinist from Oklahoma City. (Tanner 40) The blues form was first popularized about 1911-14 by the black composer W.C. Handy (1873-1958). However, the poetic and musical form of the blues first crystallized around 1910 and gained popularity through the publication of

Handy's "Memphis Blues" (1912) and "St. Louis Blues" (1914). (Kamien 518)  
Instrumental blues had been recorded as early as 1913. Mamie Smith recorded the first vocal blues song, 'Crazy Blues' in 1920.

## **Blues Lyrics**

The blues is not simply a music of sadness; it encompasses a wide range of emotions, including humor, sometimes salacious and sometimes ironic.

Blues lyrics contain some of the most fantastically penetrating autobiographical and revealing statements in the Western musical tradition. For instance, the complexity of ideas implicit in Robert Johnson's 'Come In My Kitchen,' such as a barely concealed desire, loneliness, and tenderness, and much more:

You better come in my kitchen, It's gonna be rainin' outdoors.

Blues lyrics are often intensely personal, frequently contain sexual references and often deal with the pain of betrayal, desertion, and unrequited love or with unhappy situations such as being jobless, hungry, broke, away from home, lonely, or downhearted because of an unfaithful lover.

The early blues were very irregular rhythmically and usually followed speech patterns, as can be heard in the recordings made in the twenties and thirties by the legendary bluesmen Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson and Lightnin' Hopkins among others.

Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues" described the destruction of a 1927 Mississippi River flood, and Charley Patton's " '34 Blues" addressed the hard times brought on by the Great Depression. Five days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Big Bill Broonzy gave voice to black hopes of joining America's then-segregated air force in his "In the Army Now" (1941):

I got a letter this mornin' from a dear old uncle ["Uncle Sam"] of mine, I got a letter this mornin' from a dear old uncle of mine, Now, boys, I was walkin' today, but tomorrow I may be flyin'.

In effect, blues musicians were informal chroniclers of African American history, and the blues had an organic relationship to black life. Whether a specific blues spoke strictly in personal terms or broached larger social issues, the genre gave voice to black aspirations and experiences.

## **Three Regions of the Blues**

The blues emerged in three relatively isolated regions heavily populated by African Americans — the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont, and East Texas. Guitarists Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, and Son House exemplified the Delta blues style. The Delta style

featured slide guitar playing, in which the musician made use of a hard, smooth object such as a closed pocketknife or long glass bottleneck worn on a finger of the left (chord-playing) hand. By sliding the knife or bottleneck up and down the strings, the guitarist could bend notes and create distinctive, singing phrases.

In the Piedmont, the hilly upland extending from Virginia through the Carolinas all the way to Georgia, blues musicians such as Josh White (1908-1969) developed a sophisticated finger-picking technique that allowed them to play light and lyrical guitar accompaniments to blues vocals.

East Texas blues, which also included parts of Louisiana, was rhythmic and driving, as seen in the playing of guitarists Leadbelly and Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. But New Orleans did not develop into an important blues center until much later, perhaps due to its tradition of marching bands, riverboat bands, and — among the Creole population — formal schooling in music.

The blues also exerted relatively little influence on early New Orleans jazz, which was more a product of ragtime, minstrel music, and circus and marching bands.

There was also a strong piano tradition in the blues, emerging during the early 20th century out of the pine-country timber camps of Georgia and the Carolinas; from countless jook joints scattered across Florida, Mississippi, and Texas; and from the rent parties and honky-tonks of Chicago. This style of playing, with its repetitive, rolling bass patterns, was popularized in the 1930s as boogie-woogie, but its origins were considerably older.

### The Great Migration and the Blues

Traveling bluesmen spread the blues throughout the black South, but for many years the blues remained little known to the rest of the nation. All that changed in the 1910s and 1920s with the rise of the recording industry and the start of the Great Migration. In the Great Migration, massive numbers of African Americans left the South for the cities of the North and the West Coast. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, the movement rose to a flood.

In making the move, African Americans carried the blues along, and generally speaking, the musical movement followed regional lines. Piedmont blues musicians generally headed up the eastern seaboard with many, like Josh White, ending up in Harlem.

East Texas-style players moved west.

The so-called blues shouters, Jimmy Rushing and Big Joe Turner (1911-1985), helped create a distinctly blues-rooted jazz style in 1930s Kansas City.

But the most important line of movement was that from the Delta to Chicago, a route taken by such musicians as Broonzy and guitarist Muddy Waters.

During the 1920s the recording industry became an important mode of disseminating blues music. Recording companies established "race records" subsidiaries to produce music specifically for an African American audience, often including recordings of rural bluesmen. The recording industry also promoted a new musical tradition of what has been dubbed the classic blues singers.

Unlike their country blues counterparts, who were almost exclusively male, classic blues singers were generally women. A large number of these singers — including Mamie Smith and Alberta Hunter— came out of vaudeville rather than from the blues tradition. But Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, the most important classic blues singers, had performed the blues extensively throughout the South.

The classic blues era also featured larger ensembles. Rural blues generally involved individual guitarist-singers or very small groups, mainly using the guitar and the harmonica. Classic blues featured full ensembles and included such early jazz musicians as trumpeter Louis Armstrong and clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet. Over the years, however, jazz gradually moved away from the blues. When big-bands gained national popularity during the swing era of the 1930s, they mainly played dance music and pop tunes rather than the blues, although Count Basie's big-band was one notable exception to this trend.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Chicago blues musicians were largely transplants from Mississippi, but they modernized the Delta blues sound by exchanging their acoustic guitars for electrically amplified ones. In Chicago blues, a small combo — consisting of one or two electric guitars, an electric bass, drums, and a piano or organ — replaced the solo performer. Sometimes the group included a small horn section — for example, a trumpet and one or more saxophones.

Through the playing of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, Chicago blues had a shaping influence on 1950s rock 'n' roll.

### **Decoding a Photograph**

A photograph, a painting, or a sketch is an artifact that can help us to understand the past. Unlike the traditional letter, memorandum, old newspaper article, or other textual form, we tend to look at, but not to "read," these historical sources. Nonetheless, we do need to train ourselves to read images and pictures.

In order "read" a picture, we need to understand the overt and covert biases contained in the actual creation of the image. For example, Dorothea Lange, a famous American photographer, took the following photograph of the planter and farm laborers. She took the photograph while working for a government agency, the Farm Security Administration, in the 1930s.

Living through the tragedy and turmoil of the Great Depression, Dorothea Lange possessed a strong social consciousness and wanted her pictures to change people's attitudes to the plight of the poor. Hence, she obviously selected and framed her images toward that end. She wanted her viewers to react to the images that she took. And, hopefully, to consider the plight of the less fortunate. Indeed, like all people, all photographers have some perspective, some set of values, or some biases that shape how they perceive the world.

Also, we should remember that the Farm Security Administration was a governmental agency created to aid farmers who suffered the economic misfortunes of the Great Depression. It hired many extremely talented and creative photographers to take pictures of rural America. It wanted to use these images to demonstrate how the FSA improved the lives of ordinary men and women.

In both instances, the photographs serve a special purpose or end. But-- these do not negate the value of the images, for they can tell us a lot about the past. In order to evaluate the images we do need to know the open and hidden perspectives or biases that led to their creation. With this knowledge, we can learn much from the pictures and much about our past.