

Roots of the Blues

Griots – West African Music

The griots functioned as musical storytellers for their communities singing about subjects like romance, family, famine, ruling governments, and struggles that are commonplace in blues music. They often used string instruments that bore some resemblance to the ones used in blues music.

Work Songs and Field Hollers

These were sung as American slaves worked or endured their punishment. One of the many responses to their oppressive environment resulted in the field holler. The field holler gave rise to the spiritual, and the blues, "notable among all human works of art for their profound despair . . . They gave voice to the mood of alienation and anomie that prevailed in the construction camps of the South," for it was 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 call-and-response quality of some blues music (and much Gospel) may have derived from such singing. Following the Civil War (according to Rolling Stone), the blues arose as "a distillate of the African music brought over by slaves. 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."

Gospel Influence

Gospel music afforded the African-American community opportunities to sing with committed fervor.

The Word 'Blues'

The word 'blue' has been associated with the idea of melancholia or depression since the Elizabethan era. The American writer, Washington Irving is credited with coining the term 'the blues,' as it is now defined, in 1807.) The earlier (almost entirely Negro) history of the blues musical tradition is traced through oral tradition as far back as the 1860s.

W.C. Handy

W.C. Handy 'discovered' the blues. He recalled hearing something resembling the blues as early as 1892. Another incident that was blues discovery - Handy was waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi in 1903. He recalled listening to a guitarist that began to play: "The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. ..." The singer was simply singing as he waited.

W.C. Handy is considered the "Father of the Blues" even though he didn't invent them. He was a black band leader of a minstrel orchestra. He was responsible for popularizing the blues by copyrighting and publishing blues compositions. "Memphis Blues" published in 1912 was the first, and, "St Louis Blues", which followed in 1914, was his most successful. Handy published and wrote "Yellow Dog Blues" and "Beale Street Blues".

The First Blues Record

The first blues record was "Crazy Blues" published in 1920 by Mamie Smith. Initial blues recordings were done by female performers.

Jug Bands

Jug Band recordings were done in the 1920s and 1930s (mainly from Memphis). The emphasis was on good-time entertainment. There is a homemade improvised nature to the instruments used. There were kazoos, washboards, washtubs, spoons, and percussions produced by work tools, playthings, jugs, pipes, pans, etc. Even instruments like fiddles and guitars were sometimes made from scrap materials like cigar boxes. Jug Band leader Gus Cannon made a banjo out of a bread pan and broom handle.

Main Performers:

Gus Cannon (most influential).

Noah Lewis

Will Shade

Memphis Jug Band

Delta Blues (Mississippi Delta)

The Delta refers to the northwestern part of the state, where the fertile soil gave rise to many plantations. These plantations were owned by Whites and worked mostly by Blacks, who often harvested the land as sharecroppers. Backbreaking labor and low wages were the norm, as well as racial intolerance and segregation. Mainly this was a bluesman and an acoustic guitar (solo guitar). Delta blues was one of the first forms of the music (if not the first) to emphasize the guitar. The music has apparent simplicity-basic verse forms, little or no harmonic content, and melodies with as few as three principal pitches. There is also straightforward rhythmic drive. The music's origin is a turn-of-the-century innovation, accommodating the vocal traditions of work songs and field hollers with the guitar. Older Black ballads and dance songs, preaching and Church singing, the rhythms of folk drumming, and the ring shout of "holy dance:" fed into the music as well. Much of the activity in this scene centered around the plantation of 'Will Dockery'.

Main Performers:

Charlie Patton - He is recognized as the first exponent of the Delta blues. He was the first to record it in 1929. (He didn't invent the blues).

Tommy Johnson – Learned much from Patton (also one of the most important)

Ishman Bracey - (an associate of Tommy Johnson)

Son House

Skip James – most individual and eccentric.

Robert Johnson

Bukka White

Muddy Waters

John Lee Hooker

Howlin' Wolf

Elmore James

Mississippi Fred McDowell

Willie Brown, Tommy McClennan, Mississippi John Hurt, Johnny Shines, Eddie Taylor, Robert Nighthawk

Note: Skip James, Son House, Bukka White, and Mississippi Fred McDowell were later rediscovered.

Piedmont Blues

The Piedmont was the southeastern area of the United States stretching from Richmond, VA to Atlanta, GA. It encompasses music made in the Appalachian foothills and big cities. Atlanta blues is sometimes associated with the Piedmont style, sometimes not, and sometimes grouped with southeastern regional sounds as a whole. The Piedmont guitar style employs a complex fingerpicking style in which a regular, alternating-thumb bass pattern supports a melody on treble strings. It's excellent party music with a full rock-solid sound.

Main Performers

Blind Willie McTell – most famous (master of 12-string guitar, wrote 'Statesboro Blues')

Blind Blake

Blind Boy Fuller

Brownie McGhee

Reverend Gary Davis

Barbecue Bob

Early Chicago Blues

Lester Melrose was the producer and A&R director in the 1930s and 1940s of this blues music. He assembled Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Memphis Minnie, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, Big Joe Williams, Bukka White, Washboard Sam, and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup.

Classic Women Blues Singers

The first blues stars were women. Women dominated the recorded blues field in the 1920s.

Main Performers:

Mamie Smith – recorded the first blues record in 1920 – "Crazy Blues".

Bessie Smith – one of the best

Ma Rainey – one of the best

Ida Cox

Sippie Wallace

Victoria Spivey

Lucille Bogan

Alberta Hunter

Ethel Waters

Dinah Washington

Billie Holiday

Bonnie Raitt

Tracy Nelson

Janis Joplin

Jump Blues

Jump Blues is the cross-breeding of jazz and blues that thrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It has rhythmic swing, boisterous vocals, and light-hearted songs. There is a boogie-woogie-derived structure of much of jump blues that lends itself well with pianists.

Honkers - honking saxophones

Shouters – hard-driving vocalists

Big Joe Turner - was responsible for founding the “shouting” school of R&B singing.

Louis Jordan & His Tympani Five – most innovative and successful jump blues combo of all time.

Louisiana Blues

New Orleans Blues

A jazz-oriented style that had more to do with Texas and Kansas City music than Delta music.

Main Performers:

Guitar Slim – most significant New Orleans blues player who recorded in 1953, 1954

Smiley Lewis

Professor Longhair

James Booker

Earl King

Swap Blues (Excello Swap Blues)

This is a unique blues sound and style characterized by lazy beats, relaxed vocals, doom-laden reverberant production, trebly guitar work, odd percussion effects, and wailing harmonica.

Produced in Louisiana by Baton Rouge artists:

Slim Harpo (greatest of the Swap Blues performers)

Lightnin' Slim

Silas Hogan

Lonsesome Sundown

Lazy Lester

Jimmy Anderson (not from Baton Rouge?)

Katie Webster (not from Baton Rouge?)

Country Blues

Main Performers:

Robert Pete Williams

Snooks Eaglin

Zydeco

Main Performers:

Clifton Chenier

Boozoo Chavis

Rockin' Dopsie

Harmonica Blues

Main Performers

Little Walter (Walter Jacobs) – the top virtuoso of the blues harmonica.

Big Walter Horton – the most beautiful of all harp players.

Junior Wells – outstanding funky blues.

George ‘Bullet’ Williams - one of the first harmonica players to be recorded in the 1920s.

Deford Bailey – extremely popular harmonica virtuoso in the 1920s and 1930s

Sonny Terry – most notable country blues harmonica player.

John Lee ‘Sonny Boy’ Williamson I – did the most in popularizing the instrument.

Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) – original blues giant with a unique sound.

Jimmy Reed

Memphis Blues

Beale Street in Memphis was known as “the Main Street of Negro Music”.

Some artists in the late 1940s and early 1950s:

B.B. King

Rufus Thomas

Joe Hill Louis

Walter Horton

Howlin’ Wolf

Bobby Blue Bland

Junior Parker

Willie Johnson

Little Milton

Hot Shot Love, Jimmy De Berry, Pat Hare, Johnny Ace, Sammy Lewis

West Coast Blues

Has a distinct jazzy jump blues feel.

Main Performers:

T-Bone Walker – main figure of West Coast blues, originally from Texas and popularized the type that became West Coast Blues.

Pee Wee Crayton – guitarist who modeled T-Bone Walker’s style.

Charles Brown

Lowell Fulson

Joe Houston

Amos Milburn

Johnny “Guitar” Watson

Jimmy McCracklin

Big Mama Thornton

Canned Heat

Rod Piazza

Joe Lewis Walker

Ted Hawkins

Chicago Blues

Chicago is where the blues became amplified and had the big beat put to it. It's the music that sounds most like '50s rhythm and blues/rock n' roll. It's the sound of amplified harmonicas, electric slide guitars, big boogie piano, and a rhythm section that just won't quit, with fierce declamatory vocals booming over the top of it.

Main performers:

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| Muddy Waters | Otis Rush |
| Howlin' Wolf | Magic Sam |
| Elmore James | Buddy Guy |
| Little Walter | Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson |
| John Hound Dog Taylor (boogie) | Big Bill Broonzy |
| John Brim | Tampa Red |
| Jimmy Reed | Bo Diddley |
| Joe Carter | Earl Hooker |
| Robert Nighthawk | Junior Wells |
| Big John Wrencher | |

Texas Electric Blues

A country feel is detectible in Texas blues, and its more open to outside R&B influences. Its usually played with dazzling single-string virtuosity of the guitar.

Main Performers:

Blind Lemon Jefferson – most famous and first to record (1925, 1926)

T-Bone Walker – First Texas bluesman to play amplified 'Stormy Monday'.
(most responsible for electrifying the blues).

Lightnin' Hopkins – played both electric and acoustic

Pee Wee Crayton

Amos Milburn

Gatemouth Brown

Clarence Garlow

Percy Mayfield

Johnny Copeland

Albert Collins

Freddie King

Hop Wilson

Johnny Winter

Jimmie Vaughan

Stevie Ray Vaughan

Billie Gibbons

Anson Funderburgh

Blues Slide Guitar

Main Performers:

Blind Lemon Jefferson
Leadbelly
Son House
Charlie Patton
Bukka White
Robert Johnson
Tampa Red
Big Joe Williams

Robert Nighthawk
Mississippi Fred McDowell
Bonie Raitt
Muddy Waters
Elmore James
Hound Dog Taylor
Johnny Littlejohn
Earl Hooker

Acoustic Blues

Main Performers:

Blind Lemon Jefferson
Leadbelly
Charlie Patton
Son House
Robert Johnson
Robert Pete Williams
John Lee Hooker

Doctor Ross
Lightnin' Hopkins
J.B. Lenoir
Brownie McGhee
Sonny Terry
Mississippi Fred McDowell
Jesse Fuller

Modern Electric Blues

Main Performers:

B.B. King
Albert King
Freddie King
Magic Sam
Buddy Guy
Junior Wells
Bobby Bland
John Lee Hooker

Albert Collins
Robert Cray
Stevie Ray Vaughan
Jimmie Vaughan
Eric Clapton
Bonnie Raitt