

The Blues: More Than a Feeling

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The Blues: More Than a Feeling



Written by Sherry Sterling

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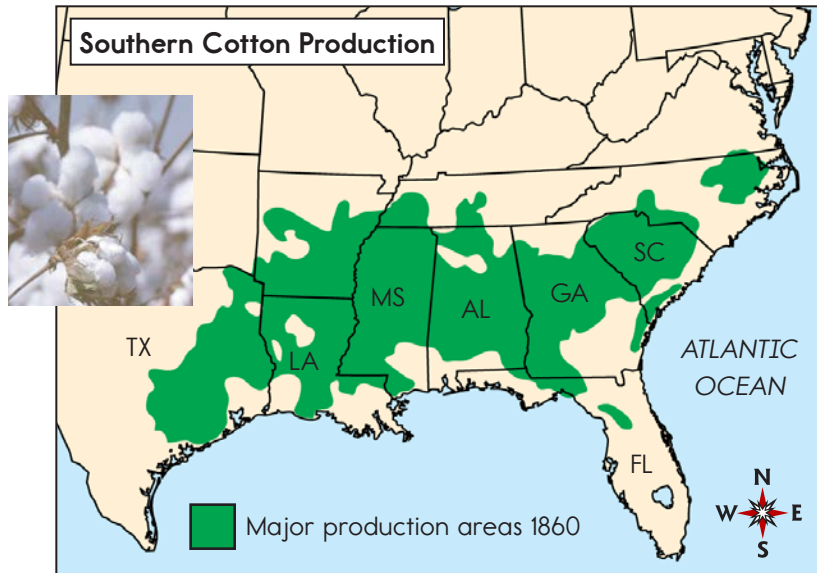
What Are the Blues?

What are the **blues**, and how do you know if you've had them or heard them? Let's start with the feeling. Have you ever felt down or sad? If so, then you've had the blues. The blues are a feeling that things just aren't going your way, and everybody gets this feeling from time to time. What's different is how people choose to deal with the blues—some people cry, others eat, some talk to friends or paint a picture, and still others sing.

People have always used music as one way to express their feelings, and often they feel better after they have sung or played music. Music that expresses feelings of sadness through the words or the melody has become known as the blues. The blues is a form of music that came out of the American South. It is one of the few types of music to originate in the United States.



Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, is known for blues music.



Where Did the Blues Come From?

In the 1700s, the southern states now known as Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas were planting fields of cotton to try to meet the clothing needs of a growing nation. More cotton was being grown than there were people to work the fields.

Slaves were brought by force from their homelands to help plant and harvest the cotton. Slaves were people who were considered property, so they worked without being paid and often received little food or personal comforts.



Many of the slaves in the southern United States created songs to pass the time as they worked in the fields or when they had time off. Many of these songs expressed their longing for their homelands, their beliefs, or their feelings about the poor conditions in which they lived and worked. From these songs of sadness grew the music known as the blues.

The only way to hear music in the 1700s and through the mid-1800s was to hear a live **performance**, so blues music stayed largely in the South. Then, in the 1870s, came the invention of the **phonograph**. The phonograph brought blues from the back porches and fields of a few people into the living rooms of many.

With the invention of the phonograph, blues music spread. Record companies discovered that people would pay money to buy blues music for their phonographs. The record companies started searching for more blues musicians. More people heard blues music and liked it. As the music became popular, more people learned how to play and to sing the blues.



The phonograph, or record player, helped make blues music popular.



The guitar became an important blues instrument.

Elements of Blues

How do you know if you've heard the blues? Blues music contains three key elements: beat, voice, and instruments. The beat keeps a strong **rhythm** that is driven by a guitar, not by the drums as in most rock 'n' roll. When you hear blues music, you can easily tap your toe or clap along with the beat. The voices singing the blues are more about the **emotion** of the song than hitting specific **notes**.

Early blues music consisted of a singer playing a guitar or piano and, sometimes, a harmonica. People added whatever instruments they had or could make, such as drums, washboards, jugs, and kazoos. As blues music became more popular, people added horns and woodwinds, such as trumpets, trombones, saxophones, and clarinets.



Many bands have used washboards and jugs like the ones used here.

Call and Response

The most distinctive element of early blues is its style of **call and response**, a kind of song that repeats, like an echo. This call-and-response style came from work songs sung by slaves. A lead singer would sing, or call, a line; then the group would give a response by repeating the line.

In most blues music today, the singer sings one line, repeats it (usually word for word), and then comments about it in the third line. For example:

*"I woke up this morning, feeling oh so bad . . .
I woke up this morning, feeling oh so bad . . .
Thinking about my homework made me oh so sad."*

It's not only the words involved in this call-and-response style—it's the music itself. The instruments in the blues get almost as much attention in the songs as the voices. Often the instruments become like voices, answering the singer by repeating the singer's notes and sometimes adding more of their own.



**Instruments Used
in Blues Music**

African Roots

The slaves who influenced early blues music brought their work songs from West Africa—what are now the nations of Senegal and Gambia.



Drums are an important element of much African music.

Because many were **plantation** farmers before being brought west as slaves, they had developed songs specific to their work on the farm:

*“After the planting,
if the gods bring rain,
My family, my
ancestors, be rich as
they are beautiful.”*

Much African music was tied to the details of daily life. Africans had a song for when children lost their first tooth and other songs and dances that told their history. These songs were important since they were a way to pass on traditions. Every event—from births and deaths to plantings and harvests—was celebrated with call-and-response singing, drumming, and clapping. Gradually, the words of many songs changed to reflect their new and difficult lives as slaves.



Music in Language

Africans held special meetings to pass on traditions from elder to younger tribal members. They called one another to these meetings with drums. West African language was (and still is) a “pitch-tone” language, with words that change meaning depending on whether they are spoken with a high, middle, or low sound. West Africans developed drumming to imitate their language so they could clearly communicate with each other over long distances. One drum called; another responded. Later, blues music picked up this call-and-response drumming and used it with other instruments, such as horns and saxophones.

Queens of the Blues

The roots of the blues started with African slaves of every age and gender, but the roots of recorded blues started with women. Called “Queens of the Blues,” these singers tried to appeal to all kinds of people, and their music became known as classic blues. These women started as entertainers in **vaudeville**, a type of stage entertainment, or in traveling tent shows. With voices so vibrant that they didn’t need a microphone to be heard, blues queens developed a style that excited everyone.



Ma Rainey and her Georgia Jazz Band recorded blues music in 1923.



Mamie Smith recorded *Crazy Blues* with Willie “The Lion” Smith on piano and her Jazz Hounds in 1920.

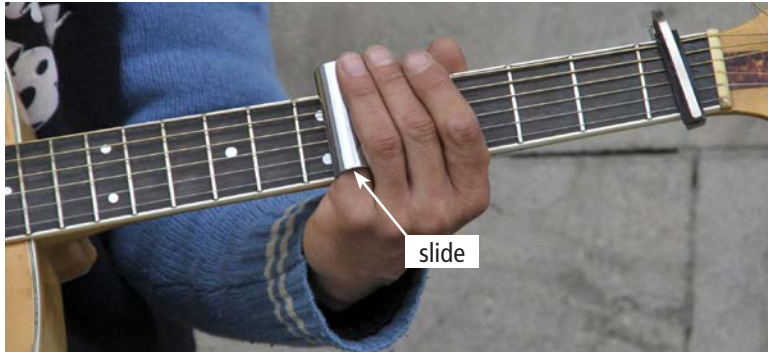
Two people in particular were responsible for helping to get blues music recorded. These two people were W. C. Handy, called the “father of the blues” because he wrote down and publicized the blues, and Perry Bradford, a blues **composer** eager for fame. Bradford convinced a studio, called *Okeh*, to record two of his tunes sung by Mamie Smith. *Okeh* sold every copy of the recording within weeks, with almost no advertising. *Okeh* eagerly rushed to record Mamie Smith singing one of Bradford’s other songs, “*Crazy Blues*.” Its off-the-chart sales started a nationwide craze for female blues singers. The blues boom had begun.

In the late 1910s, record executives recognized that women blues singers, such as Mamie Smith, backed by jazz bands could make a lot of money for their record companies, so they went looking for more. Within a year of Mamie Smith’s recording of “*Crazy Blues*,” the market was flooded with singers. Two of the most famous, in addition to Mamie Smith, were Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was called the “mother of the blues”; having performed in tent shows for 25 years before being recorded, she already had a large following. In the 1920s, Bessie Smith, “empress of the blues,” became the highest paid black performer in the world, earning \$2,000 a week.



Think About It

\$2,000 a week—what did it mean to make that much in the 1920s? The average cost of a car back then was about \$265. Bessie could have bought seven cars each week. Nearly 80 years later, the average weekly pay in the United States is \$650. The average cost of a car is about \$27,000.



Slides used by blues musicians became popular with guitar players of other kinds of music, too.

Delta Blues

Eager to find the next blues star, record companies searched throughout the South, primarily in the Mississippi Delta countryside, for talent. Rather than women singers, they found men who played in the “downhome” or “country” blues tradition. Their music, also known as primitive blues, was an expression of black people’s individuality. These musicians sang and played on the guitar or piano, with no backup musicians.

They made use of the slide (a knife, broken bottleneck, brass ring, or polished bone) to slide over guitar strings, imitating a voice moving between notes. To get a similar sound from a piano, they preferred out-of-tune pianos, and sometimes created their own by putting newspapers behind the inside moving parts of an in-tune piano.



Lead Belly was a very popular Delta blues performer

One of the first known Delta blues performers was Son House. Like many male blues singers, he was also a preacher, and he sang spiritual music to pay for his “misbehavior” of playing the blues. He said, “The blues is when you play just one note and it grabs you.”

Son House taught Robert Johnson,

who became well-known for his unusual talent at playing guitar.

Charlie Patton, the first great star of the Delta style, recorded blues under his own name and religious music under the **pseudonym**, or false name, of “Elder J. J. Hadley.” He was afraid people wouldn’t buy his religious music if they knew he recorded blues music, too. The popularity of these Delta kings ended the era of classic female blues.

Blues Move North and Beyond

The United States suffered what became known as the **Great Depression** in the late 1920s and into the '30s. During the Great Depression, most people did not have enough money. Jobs were scarce, and people stood in lines just to get a bowl of soup to eat. Although music was sung to ease the pain, record sales fell.



After the Great Depression in the 1930s and with the beginning of World War II in the 1940s, many African Americans moved north to cities. Opportunities for work and school were much better in the North than in the South. Generally, a worker made more money in one week in northern cities than a worker made in three months in the South. The record companies wanted those northern workers to use their cash to buy records, and they did. As more southerners moved north, blues music grew in popularity. It began to be mixed with other musical styles.



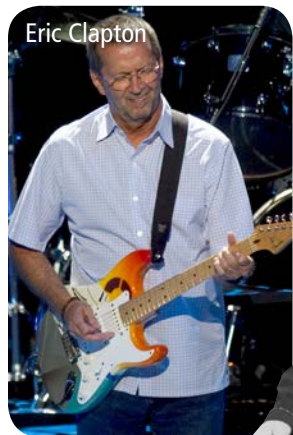
Muddy Waters continued to play music into the 1980s.

Muddy Waters, a true blues legend and the “Boss of Chicago” blues, left the Delta and moved north for work and a better life. He drove a truck during the day in Chicago and played the blues at night. His music helped bridge a gap between Delta blues and rock ‘n’

roll. Muddy Waters was strongly influenced by Delta musicians Son House and Robert Johnson. Chicago crowds loved his raw Delta sound.

Muddy is known as the first blues player to plug in and play an electric guitar. His uncle had given him an electric guitar when Muddy first arrived in Chicago, feeling that the noise of the city needed a bolder sound than the acoustic guitar. By 1950, Muddy was making records with his band, The Headhunters.

Muddy Waters created urban blues and influenced rock 'n' roll bands, especially the "British invasion" groups, such as The Beatles, that became popular in the 1960s. The band The Rolling Stones and a music magazine took their name from one of Muddy Waters's songs, called "Rollin' Stone." Other musicians who were influenced by Muddy include Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton.



Eric Clapton



Elvis Presley



The Beatles



Jimi Hendrix



The Rolling Stones



Joe Bonamassa, a modern blues musician, started playing guitar at age four and performed with blues great B. B. King at age twelve.

Blues Influence on Today's Music

Blues has strongly influenced most modern-day music, not just a handful of musicians. It's amazing what has come from work songs in West Africa! The type of music that is directly linked to blues is rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll is blues music with an even bigger beat. It came directly from blues music—in fact, without the blues there would be no rock 'n' roll. Next to rock 'n' roll, the biggest music to come out of blues is called rhythm and blues, or R&B. It gets its big beat from the blues, too. The beat makes R&B music easy to dance to.

The next time you have a bad case of the blues, what will you do? Put your troubles to words, and sing with feeling! Belt out a song about waiting too long, feeling sick, or missing your best friend. Go ahead and sing about clothes that don't fit or chores your parents make you do. Or listen to someone else who sings about these things. When you are done singing your blues song, you'll probably feel much better.



Kids sing the blues.



Muddy Waters

Check It Out

For a sampling of blues music just for kids, listen to:

Even Kids Get the Blues
by LP Camozzi

Even Kids Get the Blues
by The Re-Bops

To hear the legends, listen to:

The Complete Recordings
by Robert Johnson

The Bessie Smith Collection
by Bessie Smith

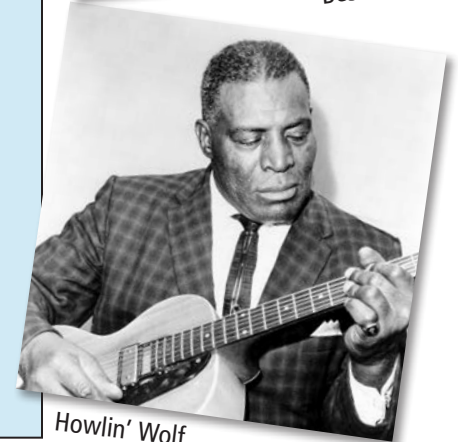
His Best
by Little Walter

His Best, 1947 to 1955
by Muddy Waters

His Best
by Howlin' Wolf



Bessie Smith



Howlin' Wolf

Glossary

blues	a type of music with a strong beat that developed from African American folk songs that often tell of sadness using words, voice, and instruments (p. 4)
call and response	a type of song that repeats words and music, like an echo (p. 8)
composer	somebody who writes music (p. 13)
emotion	a strong feeling (p. 7)
express	to make feelings and thoughts known using words, music, or any form of communication (p. 4)
Great Depression	an economic crisis in the United States that started in 1929 and lasted through the 1930s (p. 17)
notes	symbols used in written music to show the type and length of sound to be played (p. 7)
performance	a show of playing, singing, or acting in front of an audience (p. 6)
phonograph	a record player (p. 6)
plantation	a large farm on which crops are grown (p. 10)
pseudonym	a false name someone uses (p. 16)

rhythm	the regular pattern of beats in music (p. 7)
slaves	people who are forced to work, are not paid, and are regarded as being property (p. 5)
vaudeville	stage entertainment of slapstick comedy, singing, dancing, and juggling performances (p. 12)

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