

Blue note

Gerhard Kubik

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2234425>

Published in print: 26 November 2013

Published online: 11 February 2013

A concept used by jazz critics and musicians from the early decades of the 20th century onwards to theorize African American music, notably in Blues and Jazz, to characterize pitch values perceived as deviating from the western diatonic scale.

It was already observed in the 1920s that blues and jazz singers, as well as instrumentalists, tend to present the 3rd and 7th, sometimes also the 5th degree in a diatonic framework by pitch values a semitone lower, often with microtonal fluctuations. Although its origin is unknown, by 1925 the term “blue note” was established in the literature (Niles, 1925–6). In contrast to this western perspective, blues singers in the Deep South speak of “worrying” or “bending” the notes. Against the background of a strong central tonality, blues singers develop themes and melodic variations largely independent of the guitar chords used in the accompaniment. The intonation, often with glides and considerable melisma, sometimes deviates by microtonal values from the standard tunings of the guitar or the piano.

From a western viewpoint, blue notes have been described in terms such as “deviations,” “inflections” and “lowering”, taking the western tonal system as a yardstick. In search of underlying ideas, musicologists have systematized some of these deviations, proposing “blues scales” with ever-increasing numbers of notes; others suggest that blues musicians proceed from an awareness of “flexible pitch areas”. Tonemic analysis of blues singers’ concepts and behavior, in which all possible intonations together constitute the same toneme, has reconciled present-day ethnomusicological views with statements by blues singers (Kubik, 1999). If blue notes are considered intra-systemic as part of a non-western tonal system, they vanish as separate entities and become those points where the deviations between western and non-western systems of pitch are greatest. Thus, a non-Western analysis of the characteristic pitch-values prevalent in blues and jazz, described as “blue notes” in the literature, leads to results that diverge sharply from those obtained by any approach based on classical European music theory.

Despite many years of misunderstanding about its origins, reinterpretation of the blue note within the western tonal system has become a prominent feature of much western popular music, as well as some art music, such as *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin. Jazz harmony has largely placed the concept of blue notes within its own western-oriented theoretical framework. Bebop harmony has incorporated elements of blues tonality as well as structural elements of harmonic parallelism in narrow intervals inherited from African tunings. Likewise, many of today’s budding blues and jazz musicians continue to learn about “blue notes” and “blues scales” in relationship to the western diatonic system.

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