

Blues

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A secular music with roots in African American folk forms, which arose in the Southern United States and became internationally popular in the 20th century. It has formed an integral part of jazz, R&B, rock, and to a lesser extent country music. The content and definitions of blues have changed to fit shifts in musical fashions, technologies, performance styles, and audiences, but it has maintained its own identity and evolutionary history. With its deep roots and broad influence, blues is widely regarded as the foundation for nearly all later American popular forms. (See African American music; Blues rock; Country music; Jazz; Pop; Popular music; Rhythm-and-blues; Rock and roll; Soul music.)

1. Definition.

The most limited definition of blues is as a specific sequence of chords, the “12-bar blues,” which consists of four measures of the tonic (I), two measures of the subdominant (IV), two of the tonic, one of the dominant seventh (V7), one of the subdominant, and two of the tonic (see Blues progression). There are also 8- and 16-bar blues forms, which may have preceded the 12-bar pattern historically, and many blues songs follow none of these patterns. But the 12-bar form is what musicians mean if they simply agree to “play a blues.”

A looser definition is based on mood: before the word was attached to a musical style, to have the blues or to feel blue designated a state of sadness or melancholy. This usage was widespread in the United States by the mid-1800s, and it continues to be part of many people’s definition of the musical genre. It is not clear when or where the word became associated with certain kinds of songs or instrumental pieces, but the first 12-bar blues published as sheet music, in New Orleans in 1908, connected the music to the emotional state in its title: “I Got the Blues.” Many blues songs and performances are upbeat and cheerful, but slow songs, whether mournful, soulful, or sexy, have continued to be considered the deepest, most representative form of blues.

A further definition involves West African tonal and rhythmic practices, which were retained with modifications by African American musicians. These include frequent use of slides between notes and microtones, especially hovering around the flatted third and seventh notes of the European major scale—the so-called “blue notes” (see Blue note). These tonal particularities have often been described as giving the music a mournful sound, and hence at times overlap the emotional definition. Jazz musicians in all periods have been judged by their ability to convey a “blues feel,” meaning both to comfortably execute these subtle tonal shadings and play “behind the beat” in a relaxed relationship to a song’s rhythm, and also to give their listeners a powerful emotional experience. This ability has been connected by many musicians and scholars to an African American ethnic or cultural heritage, to the point that there have

been acrimonious debates about the degree to which people who are not African American can convey a true blues feeling. The word has also been extended to non-musical forms, such as poetry or novels with a profound linguistic or cultural connection to African American traditions.

The final definition is the least satisfying to musicologists, but also by far the most widespread, and encompasses aspects of all the others. It is simply: whatever listeners, performers, and marketers have understood to be part of the genre. This definition has changed over the years, as styles and artists have been added to or dropped from the canon, and there is little agreement on exactly what music it comprises in any period. Conceptions of a typical blues performer have ranged from a black woman with a deep, rich voice, singing in front of a small jazz group to an old black man with an acoustic guitar growling rough lyrics on a dusty Southern street corner to a young white man playing a searing electric guitar solo in a rowdy Texas bar. Nonetheless, many historians now choose to use this cultural definition rather than insisting on precise musical qualities, and consider blues to be whatever a substantial audience understood the word to mean in any particular period or region.

2. Origins.

Although there is no evidence that the word “blues” was applied to a musical style before the first decade of the 20th century, by the late 1800s there were songs being played throughout the Southern United States that most current historians would consider varieties of blues. Sometimes called pre-blues or proto-blues, these were adapted from earlier African American styles, including group work songs and the so-called moans or field hollers (*see* Work songs and Field holler). Work songs frequently used the “call-and-response” approach common in many African traditions, whereby one person sings a line and a group of singers respond, either echoing the same line or with a repetitive chorus. Though such singing became less common in secular contexts as machines replaced work gangs, call-and-response remained a staple of African American religious singing, which has always overlapped and influenced secular styles. In blues, the vocal call-and-response was reshaped into an interchange between a singer and an instrument, played either by the singer or by an accompanist. Bessie Smith’s 1925 recording of “St. Louis Blues,” accompanied by Louis Armstrong, is an example of how the standard 12-bar form and the most common blues lyric pattern (a line repeated twice and answered by a rhyming third line) are divided into three call-and-response phrases, each taking up four bars. Smith starts: “I hate to see the evening sun go down”; Armstrong plays a relaxed melodic response. Smith repeats, “I hate to see the evening sun go down”; Armstrong plays a series of slow, drawn-out notes. Smith completes the thought: “It makes me think I’m on my last go ’round”; Armstrong plays a final passage leading into the next verse.

The moans or hollers gave blues much of its tonal, timbral, and dynamic flavor. Sung a cappella and generally by a single singer, they were slow, free-form vocal improvisations without fixed melodies or measures, and often without words. Making frequent use of melisma and microtonal slides, hollers influenced both blues singing and instrumental performance. As a result most of the common blues instruments either do not have fixed pitches (“slide guitar,” played by sliding a metal or glass bar along the strings) or allow an adept performer to bend notes (trumpet, saxophone, harmonica, guitar), capturing this vocal flavor, and blues pianists frequently use grace notes and “crunch” adjoining keys to create the illusion of slides and microtones.

Vocal styles were the strongest influence on blues, but African and European stringed instrument traditions also played a significant role. African slaves in the United States were generally forbidden to play drums, leading to the disappearance or dilution of the African drumming traditions, but slave owners permitted and even encouraged the playing of stringed instruments. West Africa has widespread stringed instrument traditions, including professional musicians such as the *jelli* or *griots*, who act as historians and social commentators in the more centralized societies, and herdsman and village amateurs playing to amuse themselves or their friends. Slaves made banjos and fiddles based on models played in Africa, and also adapted African playing techniques to the European violin and later the guitar. Black musicians performed not only for their compatriots but also for European Americans—virtually all the music played for dances on southern plantations was played by slaves—and assimilated a wide repertoire of European instrumental music.

With the rise of minstrel shows in the 1840s, African American “plantation melodies” and banjo and fiddle techniques entered the popular music mainstream. Minstrel songs and styles developed by professional composers and entertainers, both Euro- and Afro-American, were also recycled back into black rural tradition, beginning a process of cultural and musical interchange that would continue into the early blues era and beyond.

Vernacular and rural music was rarely recorded before the 1920s, and folklorists were more interested in lyrics than in melodies, so much of the prehistory of blues is based on conjecture. Some historians consider it simplistic to view blues as a purely African American style, since the southern fiddle repertoire shows an intimate intermixing of tunes and techniques from Africa and the British Isles, and British ballads and early blues songs were widely sung by white and black southerners alike. However, African American vocal and instrumental performance retained distinctive characteristics that came to new prominence with the popularity of blues, and in the early 20th century blues songs and styles were universally viewed as coming from African American tradition.

The songs most commonly recalled as early or proto-blues included versions of “Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor,” “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad,” “Alabama Bound,” and “Hesitation Blues.” Only the last of these was a 12-bar blues, and such songs were not yet regarded as part of a separate musical genre. They were performed by singers, pianists, dance bands, guitarists, and fiddlers throughout the South, and depending on the setting might be thought of as ragtime, hoedowns, dancehall tunes, or simply uncategorized songs and instrumental pieces. In retrospect, some historians have attempted to distinguish between “songsters” such as Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas and Mississippi John Hurt, who sang blues alongside a wide range of other material, and blues musicians (see *Songster*). In practice, virtually all musicians until at least the 1940s played a variety of styles at live performances and this distinction may owe more to what survives on record than to broader patterns of musical performance.

3. Early blues: publishing and recording.

In the fall of 1912 the publication of “Dallas Blues,” “Baby Seals Blues,” and “The Memphis Blues” brought the style to the attention of a broad national audience. The first two songs were already being performed in vaudeville shows (the latter by an African American song and dance man named Baby Seals),

while “Memphis Blues” was the first publication by W.C. Handy, a Memphis bandleader. “Memphis Blues” became a major hit, in part due to its adoption by America’s most famous dance instructors, Vernon and Irene Castle, who made it the accompaniment to their version of the foxtrot. Handy went on to write many blues hits, including “St. Louis Blues,” and opened a publishing office in New York that specialized in blues numbers.

From 1913 to 1920 over four hundred songs were published that had “blues” in their titles, and many more were associated with the blues style and performed by singers and bands in dance halls, vaudeville theaters, and cabarets. Interest increased in the later teens with the rise of jazz. The first article on jazz as a musical style, published by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1915, was titled “Blues Is Jazz and Jazz Is Blues,” and the national jazz craze was sparked by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s 1917 recording of “Livery Stable Blues,” an instrumental using the 12-bar chord progression.

Much of the material published as blues in the teens could as easily be classified as ragtime, depending on the performance: the same song may be considered ragtime if played as a perky foxtrot by a northern dance band, but blues if sung by an artist like Bessie Smith. Since the only recordings of blues from this period were made by urban dance bands and white vaudeville singers, it is thus hard to get a clear sense of what proportion of blues before the 1920s would meet modern definitions of the genre.

The first significant blues record by an African American singer was Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” made for the Okeh company in August, 1920. Smith was a vaudeville performer who had not previously been associated with blues and she recorded the song at the behest of Perry Bradford, Handy’s main rival as a blues composer and publisher. Its success inspired record manufacturers to present separate lines of material targeted at African American consumers, which became known as Race records. For the next five years the overwhelming majority of these records featured female singers, often known as “blues queens.” They were generally accompanied by a pianist or a small jazz group, and their style is sometimes known as “classic blues” in an analogy to European concert music, or as “vaudeville blues.”



Ma Rainey Georgia Jazz Band, c. 1924-25.

JazzSign/Lebrecht Music & Arts

The first wave of blues queens included Ethel Waters, Lucille Hegamin, Alberta Hunter, and Edith Wilson. Although Waters was already known in black vaudeville for her blues work, these singers were versatile artists who were popular with northern audiences and recorded blues because that was what the record companies wanted. This focus shifted with the appearance of Bessie Smith's "Down Hearted Blues" in 1923. Smith was from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and her voice had the timbre and accent of the Deep South. She could sing other pop styles, but blues was her specialty, and she opened the door for a wave of southerners who shared her moaning, soulful sound, including Clara Smith (known as "the Queen of the Moaners," and no relation to Mamie or Bessie), Ida Cox, Sippie Wallace, and Ma Rainey. Rainey, known as "the Mother of the Blues," was the oldest of these singers, and claimed to have named the style in the first decade of the century. Both her musical approach and her material at times reflected rural sources, with banjo or guitar accompaniment and titles like "*Bo-weevil Blues*." In general, though, she performed in the mainstream vaudeville style, wearing elegant costumes and backed by jazz musicians. Indeed, the blues queens were the first major jazz singers, and influenced not only later vocalists but also brass and reed players.

4. Down home blues.

In 1924 a New Orleans-born six-string banjo player named Papa Charlie Jackson became the first male singer successfully to challenge the recording monopoly of the blues queens. However, his records had a novelty, minstrel-show flavor, and self-accompanied men would not make a serious impact on the national blues market until Blind Lemon Jefferson began recording in 1926. Jefferson was a Dallas street singer with a huge voice and a quirkily virtuosic guitar technique. His repertoire consisted largely of 12-bar blues that mixed original lines with “floating verses” adapted and recycled by multiple singers, along with hollers, spirituals, and ragtime dance pieces. By vaudeville standards he sounded raw and unprofessional, but to a lot of listeners that rawness was an asset. His records were advertised with the rubric “down home,” as the sound of the rural South, and set off a wave of what has come to be known as “country blues.”

Jefferson’s success surprised race record marketers, and for the next few years they combed the South for other unlikely stars, preserving a more varied and idiosyncratic range of artists than in any other period of blues. Most were singers accompanied by their own guitars, with sometimes an additional harmonica or fiddle. Though often classified as country blues artists, many were based in urban centers such as Dallas, Atlanta, and Memphis, and were professional entertainers, working as street musicians, at picnics and rural “juke joints,” or with touring medicine shows. Their repertoires ranged from old rural songs to recent pop hits, but the record company scouts concentrated on their blues material and urged them to compose new pieces that fit the current blues trends. Later historians have tended to divide these artists into three regional categories: the Piedmont (the Carolinas, Georgia, East Tennessee, and Virginia), Mississippi (specifically the Delta region between Jackson and Memphis), and Texas.

The Piedmont was home to the South’s oldest African American communities, and its players continued to perform a lot of pre-blues material and brought a ragtime flavor to their blues work. Popular Piedmont artists included Peg Leg Howell, who often worked with the fiddler Eddie Anthony; Barbecue Bob; and in the 1930s Josh White and Blind Boy Fuller. Blind Blake, reportedly born in Jacksonville, Florida, and based in Chicago, was the most influential Piedmont player, with a light, conversational singing voice and intricate guitar style related to ragtime piano, showcased on records such as 1927’s “Wabash Rag.” Atlanta’s Blind Willie McTell recorded for multiple companies under various pseudonyms, preserving a varied repertoire including comic monologues, ragtime, gospel, and blues, with 12-string guitar accompaniments that ranged from infectious dance rhythms to haunting, holler-inflected slide lines.

Texas was largely populated by relatively recent immigrants from across the South, and as a result had no single unifying style, though many of its guitarists relied on a monotonic bass rather than the alternating bass notes favored by Piedmont players. Aside from Jefferson, the most prominent singer was Texas Alexander, who did not play an instrument and retained an exceptional degree of field holler phrasing, especially on free-form improvisations such as “Levee Camp Moan.” Another prominent Texan, Blind Willie Johnson, sang only gospel music, but his records sold widely and his exceptionally fluid, voice-like slide style influenced blues guitarists across the South.

In Mississippi, Charlie Patton was the central figure of a group of distinctive players based in the central Delta region. Locally famed for his showy live performances, Patton sang in a gruff, dramatic voice and his guitar arrangements on recordings such as 1929's "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues" demonstrated an unsurpassed rhythmic control and complexity. Patton's partners and followers included Tommy Johnson, noted for his warm voice and swooping falsetto yodel; Son House, an awesome singer and the region's finest slide guitarist; and later players including Booker (Bukka) White, Robert Johnson, Tommy McClennan and Muddy Waters. Although these players had relatively little impact on the early race record market, their work formed the foundation of the electric Chicago style of the 1950s and was thus exceptionally influential on later blues and rock. In the 1920s and early 1930s, though, the region's most successful artists were the Mississippi Sheiks, who combined blues guitar and singing with country fiddling, and Bo Carter (brother of the Sheiks' fiddler Lonnie Chatmon), who made a specialty of double-entendre "party blues."

Many down-home blues recordings were also made in Memphis. Older artists such as Frank Stokes and Jim Jackson mixed blues and pre-blues styles, while the Memphis Jug Band and Cannon's Jug Stompers specialized in rowdy, good-time music. Such jug or washboard bands, featuring guitars, harmonicas, and various home-made instruments, had a vogue in the late 1920s and early 1930s that inspired imitators as far away as Chicago and New York (see Jug band and Washboard band).

5. Pianists and urban blues.

Recordings are the best surviving guide to the music of the 1920s and 1930s, but they were less influential in this period than in later years and are not necessarily representative of what was being played in live venues. While the down-home recording trend favored guitarists, pianists were the most popular players in African American barrooms and honky-tonks throughout the South. Pianos were less common in rural areas than guitars and fiddles, so whereas guitarists generally mixed blues with older folk songs, pianists were more often influenced by urban ragtime and Tin Pan Alley styles.

With its loud volume, the piano was an ideal solo instrument for noisy barrooms or dances. The most rurally-identified blues piano style was known as "barrelhouse," a reference to the makeshift lumber-camp saloons of Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi where it thrived (see Barrelhouse). Barrelhouse players were not necessarily virtuosos, since their main function was to provide a powerful beat, but the best players combined intricate bass rhythms with bright treble riffs. Little Brother Montgomery and Roosevelt Sykes, who worked from New Orleans to Chicago and influenced many Mississippi pianists and guitarists, were known for pounding dance pieces and a distinctive slow blues arrangement that Montgomery recorded as "Vicksburg Blues" and Sykes as "44 Blues."

Among blues piano's most important contributions was its propulsive bass patterns. Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport's 1928 recording of "Cow Cow Blues" popularized a widespread barrelhouse theme that would be a key component of boogie-woogie, a style that seems to have acquired its name with the success of Pine Top Smith's 1929 record, "Pine Top's Boogie-Woogie" (see Boogie-woogie). This approach was refined and expanded by players in Chicago and elsewhere in the urban Midwest, including Jimmy Yancey,

Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson. Performing in speakeasies and at apartment “rent parties” where black urbanites circumvented the Prohibition-era liquor laws, they created distinctive, repetitive bass figures to back improvised right-hand riffs and melodies.

The period from the teens through the 1940s saw the “great migration” of African Americans out of the rural south, pushed by harsh conditions and the mechanization of agriculture and pulled by the promise of better jobs and a less racist social climate. Both hopeful emigrants in the South and new immigrants in the North turned increasingly to musical styles that reflected life in the black neighborhoods of northern cities. The trendsetting urban blues artist, Lonnie Johnson, was based in St. Louis and began recording in 1925, just before the wave of down-home singers. His sound was hip and urbane, featuring mellow, conversational vocals, guitar solos that earned him a reputation as the father of jazz guitar, and lyrics spiced with sexual double-entendres and references to gangsters and violence.

For a couple of years, Johnson had this style pretty much to himself, but in 1928 two records appeared that redefined the blues market. Leroy Carr’s “How Long—How Long Blues” and “It’s Tight Like That” by Tampa Red and Georgia Tom both featured light-voiced singers backed by piano and guitar, and defined the twin poles of the urban approach. Tampa Red was an innovative slide guitarist whose single-string leads were widely imitated, and Thomas “Georgia Tom” Dorsey had been Ma Rainey’s bandleader and pianist and would become the pioneering composer in modern gospel music. But what made “It’s Tight Like That” a hit was its slangy title, rollicking feel, and bawdy lyrics. Covered and copied by dozens of artists, it spawned a comic style known as “hokum,” favored by Chicago studio bands like the Hokum Boys and the Harlem Hamfats.

Carr played his share of hokum, but had his greatest success as the defining master of the late-night blues ballad. Sensitively accompanied by the guitarist Scrapper Blackwell, he was a blues equivalent of pop crooners like Bing Crosby, taking advantage of the new intimacy provided by electronic microphones and phonographs. He was also an exceptional lyricist, and his introspective “Midnight Hour Blues” and “When the Sun Goes Down” became blues standards. Carr was by far the most widely imitated male blues singer of the era, influencing artists as disparate as Robert Johnson, the Ink Spots, and the gospel pioneer R.H. Harris, and inspired later generations of R&B and soul balladeers.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression forced a drastic cut-back in recording. The race records market may have been less affected than mainstream pop, since it did not face similar competition from the virtually all-white programming available for free on radio, but both blues queens and down home players virtually ceased to be recorded. The new record stars were reliable studio performers in the hokum or ballad styles, mostly based in St. Louis and Chicago. The balladeers included Bumble Bee Slim, Walter Davis, and Peetie Wheatstraw, who was particularly appreciated for his rich voice and the raw lyrics that went with his nickname, “The Devil’s Son-In-Law.”

In Chicago, a shifting cast of musicians became studio regulars, backing one another and releasing the results under the name of whoever was singing. Big Bill Broonzy played guitar on hundreds of records, was equally comfortable singing hokum or ballads, and composed standards such as “Key to the Highway.” Kokomo Arnold played frantically fast slide guitar and punctuated his vocals with a biting falsetto yodel, notably on his much-covered 1934 hit, “Milk Cow Blues.” John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson created a

band-oriented harmonica style, playing horn-like riffs between his vocals on upbeat numbers like his 1937 debut, "Good Morning, Little School Girl." Casey Bill Weldon mixed blues slide guitar techniques with the shimmering vibrato of the Hawaiian style. Pianists Blind John Davis, Black Bob, and Memphis Slim created solid backgrounds, with the latter breaking out in the 1940s as an adept singer and composer. Though condemned by some rurally-oriented historians as overly commercial and formulaic, these artists shaped the blues combo approach that would form the foundation of later electric bands.

Though female singers no longer dominated the field, Memphis Minnie was one of the most successful Chicago artists, an excellent guitarist who brought sharp, nasal vocals and wryly hip humor to compositions like "Bumble Bee" and "Me and My Chauffeur." Lil Johnson and Georgia White also had success with hokum material.

The market for these artists expanded dramatically after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. Thousands of new bars installed jukeboxes, and by the end of the decade some estimates suggest that more than half the records sold in the United States went into public machines. The rowdy boogies and late-night whiskey ballads of the urban blues artists were ideally suited to this market. In particular, black and white patrons alike turned to blues for rowdy party lyrics they could not hear on the radio. A Louisiana pianist and singer named Speckled Red had set a new standard for bawdy blues in 1929 with "The Dirty Dozens," Roosevelt Sykes followed with "Dirty Mother Fuyer," and by the mid-1930s a huge proportion of the blues market was devoted to such themes.

6. The 1940s: swing, amplification, and jump blues.

Jazz and blues had drawn somewhat apart in the 1920s as dance orchestras expanded to suit the demands of the large Prohibition-era ballrooms and adopted a more arranged, classically-influenced approach. That changed in the 1930s, when a wave of swing bands turned to blues to reinvigorate the jazz repertoire. The most important figure in this renaissance was William "Count" Basie, whose Kansas City orchestra made its mark with 12-bar blues, including its riff-driven theme, "One O'Clock Jump," and slow numbers like "Goin' to Chicago Blues," featuring Jimmy Rushing's full-throated vocals. The Kansas City sound spread throughout the Midwest, then to both coasts, and the biggest blues hits of the later 1930s and 1940s tended to come from swing bands. Typical examples range from Earl Hines's "Jelly Jelly" with singer Jimmy Witherspoon and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson's "Cherry Red" with the Cootie Williams orchestra to Benny Goodman's "Why Don't You Do Right" with Peggy Lee and Tommy Dorsey's instrumental "Boogie Woogie."

The combination of blues singers with large orchestras was made possible by the new technology of electronic amplification. Though singers like Kansas City's Big Joe Turner were noted for their ability to shout over a full band, the microphone meant that anyone could make him- or herself heard, and many adopted the more intimate, lighter-voiced approaches pioneered by Ethel Waters and Leroy Carr. When Billie Holiday hit in 1939 with "Fine and Mellow," she inspired a new wave of blues queens including Dinah Washington, the most influential female blues stylist of the next two decades. Washington combined Holiday's intimacy and improvisational daring with a fuller, throatier vocal timbre developed as a teenaged church singer. Her first hits were hip swing numbers with Lionel Hampton's orchestra, but after

going solo she increasingly brought gospel melisma and phrasing into her blues work, shaping an approach that would be adapted by later R&B and soul singers such as Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, and Aretha Franklin.

Jukeboxes and amplification both made it easier for small groups to compete with big bands, whether on records or at live appearances. As a result, there was an increasing overlap between what was played by swing orchestras and blues combos. Louis Jordan, an alto saxophonist with Chick Webb's Savoy Ballroom orchestra, formed a tight combo called the Tympany Five in the late 1930s and updated the hokum approach with sax and trumpet solos and hipster jive lyrics. Though not limited to blues, Jordan got his biggest hits with 12-bar numbers including "Caldonia" (1945) and "Choo-Choo Ch'Boogie" (1946), and his style, which became known as "jump blues," evolved into the hard-driving rhythm and blues of the early 1950s.

As World War II brought a mass migration of young African Americans to the West Coast to work in the ship-building industry, Los Angeles became the center of a new urban blues movement. Nat "King" Cole and his trio set the pattern for the local style in 1941 with a 12-bar ballad, "That Ain't Right." Their combination of swinging piano, jazzily sophisticated electric guitar, and whispery vocals was picked up by Johnny Moore's Three Blazers, whose "Drifting Blues" in 1945 launched the career of the defining ballad singer of the rhythm-and-blues era, Charles Brown.

The West Coast artists tended to come from Texas and Oklahoma, and their urbane approach drew on a variety of southwestern influences, from the down home styles of the 1920s to Western Swing, the first music to regularly feature electrically amplified guitars. T-Bone Walker, a smooth singer in the Leroy Carr mode, shaped a new vocabulary of blues guitar by combining jazz harmonies and phrasing with a gritty down-home tone, and became a national star with records such as the enduringly popular "Call It Stormy Monday." Walker can be considered the father of modern lead guitar, and was soon joined by Pee Wee Crayton and Oakland's Lowell Fulson, who added gospel-flavored vocals. The Los Angeles scene also nurtured the upbeat jump combos of brothers Joe and Jimmy Liggins, and pianist-singers including the smooth balladeer Ivory Joe Hunter and Amos Milburn, noted for wry drinking songs like 1950's "Bad, Bad Whiskey." The West Coast sound dominated the blues market of the late 1940s, and as it was picked up and adapted by eastern artists such as B.B. King, shaped the mainstream of later blues.

7. Chicago, Memphis, and electric blues.

At the turn of the 1950s, popular music in the United States was in an unprecedented state of flux. The combined effects of wartime upheavals, a two-year recording strike by the American Federation of Musicians, the incursions of television, and the arrival of lighter, less breakable vinyl records encouraged entrepreneurs all over the country to start small "indie" record companies, challenging the dominance of the New York-based major labels. Many of the indies specialized in niche markets such as "hillbilly" and "race music," which in 1949 were given new genre labels by *Billboard* magazine: "country and western" and "rhythm-and-blues."

The small labels were looking for sounds that would give them an edge on the majors, and as a result were willing to take chances on artists who might otherwise have been considered too primitive or old-fashioned for the current blues market. The first to make a national impact were Lightnin' Hopkins in Houston and John Lee Hooker, a transplanted Mississippian living in Detroit, who were often accompanied only by their guitars, sang in deep southern accents, and kept "country time," expanding and contracting musical measures to fit the mood of the moment. In 1949, Hooker got a number one R&B hit with "Boogie Chillen," an unrhymed monologue spoken over a loping, repetitive guitar rhythm.

In Chicago, the Chess record label became a prime showcase for the new down home sound. Its defining star, Muddy Waters, transformed the rural Delta style of Son House by amplifying his slide guitar to ferocious volume, then added the innovative harmonica player Little Walter and a full rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums. Waters's work was distinguished by his deep, soulful voice, uncanny control of tone and rhythm, and sure taste in sidemen, but the fusion of older styles with electricity was picked up across the South. Though they soon moved to Chicago, Elmore James had his first hit in 1951 while still in Jackson, Mississippi, with a slide-powered reworking of Robert Johnson's "Dust My Broom," and Howlin' Wolf first recorded in Memphis. Wolf eventually became Waters's main rival, known for his gruff voice, awesome stage presence, and primal, one-chord compositions like 1956's "Smokestack Lightnin'."

Little Walter was a generation younger than Waters and Wolf, and his harmonica style owed as much to Louis Jordan's saxophone riffs as to rural traditions. His "Juke," a chart-topping instrumental in 1952, revolutionized perceptions of the instrument, which had previously been regarded as a toy or novelty. Using amplification to expand the range of tones and techniques, Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson (born Aleck Miller, and not to be confused with the John Lee Williamson who recorded in the 1940s) and Big Walter Horton reshaped the harmonica into one of the most evocative and familiar blues instruments.



B.B. King, 1986

Forum/Lebrecht Music & Arts

Though “Chicago blues” is often used as a generic term for the electric blues band style, the most influential artist in this format was B.B. King, a Mississippian based in Memphis. King mixed the grit and emotion of the down-home tradition with the melisma-heavy vocal style of the new gospel quartets, jump combo backing, and the jazz-inflected guitar innovations of the West Coast players, inspiring both Memphis-based peers like Bobby Bland, Albert King, and Little Milton and a younger generation of Chicagoans including Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, and Magic Sam. In 1965, King’s *Live at the Regal* album brought this sound to a broader audience of jazz and rock fans, earning him the title, “Ambassador of the Blues,” and his guitar approach has been echoed by virtually every major electric soloist since the 1960s.

8. Rock ’n’ roll, the blues revival, and blues-rock.

King and the down home players primarily served an audience of African American adults, but by the mid-1950s white teenage fans were discovering R&B under the new marketing term “rock ’n’ roll.” Fats Domino, a young pianist and singer from New Orleans, became the biggest-selling African American artist of the decade, Ruth Brown and Etta James updated Dinah Washington’s style with current dance rhythms, and the veteran Kansas City shouter Big Joe Turner hit in 1954 with “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” which was covered by a white hillbilly group from Pennsylvania, Bill Haley and the Comets. The transformation of “race music” into an interracial teen style was completed in 1956 with the television-fueled success of Elvis Presley. Rock ’n’ roll was hailed as a new sound, but many of its defining songs were 12-bar blues, including Presley’s “Hound Dog,” Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti,” Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode,” and the biggest dance hit of the early 1960s, “The Twist.”

In the South, there was a long history of European Americans performing and listening to blues. Jimmie Rodgers, “the father of country music,” built his reputation in the 1920s on blues songs punctuated with his trademark yodel. Both southeastern artists like the Delmore Brothers and westerners like Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys made blues a bedrock of their repertoires, and the most celebrated songwriter in the country genre, Hank Williams, learned guitar from an African American street musician and remained a dedicated blues stylist.

In the northeast, blues had generally reached white listeners in jazz or swing settings, but a few rural artists had also attracted limited attention. Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, a 12-string guitarist and singer from Louisiana, came to New York in 1935 with the folklorist John Lomax and remained on the local folk scene until his death in 1949. In 1938 the jazz enthusiast John Hammond presented a concert titled “From Spirituals to Swing” at Carnegie Hall that contrasted the blues styles of Big Bill Broonzy, the North Carolina harmonica player Sonny Terry, and a trio of boogie-woogie pianists with Sidney Bechet’s New Orleans jazz group and the Count Basie Orchestra. And in the 1940s Josh White combined the blues repertoire that had made him a popular Piedmont recording artist with British ballads and a sophisticated nightclub style and won a devoted audience of white cabaret-goers and college students.

A small group of New Yorkers also began to collect and study the race records of the 1920s, and in 1959 Samuel Charters's book and companion LP, both titled *The Country Blues*, sparked a new interest in the early down home artists. Over the next few years, enthusiasts sought out long-forgotten players and presented them at festivals, clubs, and concert halls, in what came to be known as the "blues revival." Like the broader "folk revival," this movement favored country-sounding artists over performers whose work reflected urban pop trends. As a result, some previously underappreciated performers came to be seen as major figures. Mississippi John Hurt was valued for his gentle charm, varied repertoire, and flowing guitar arrangements. Skip James, a Mississippian who played uniquely idiosyncratic accompaniments on both guitar and piano, mesmerized young listeners with original compositions like "Devil Got My Woman," performed in a haunting falsetto.

Robert Johnson, whose early reputation had been limited to his Mississippi peers, became the most celebrated of all pre-war blues artists after Columbia records issued an LP of his work in 1961 as *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Johnson recorded only 29 songs before his death in 1938, but his blend of the Delta style of Son House with the urban innovations of Leroy Carr and Peetie Wheatstraw and his superlative poetic skills provided a uniquely powerful summation of the early down home style. In the 1960s his lyrical imagery inspired Bob Dylan and his guitar arrangements were studied by Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and a generation of players in Europe, the United States, and beyond.

On the folk scene of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dave Van Ronk in New York and Eric Von Schmidt in Cambridge, Massachusetts, led a wave of young urban blues performers. A few, like John Koerner in Minneapolis, developed distinctively personal styles, but most tried to recreate the sound of older performers. They learned songs, vocal styles, and guitar techniques from LP reissues of early records and personal contact with "rediscovered" artists like Hurt, James, House, and the Reverend Gary Davis, a South Carolinian gospel singer who had moved to Harlem and taught young revivalists his virtuosic ragtime-blues guitar arrangements.

The folk-blues movement at first eschewed electric instruments, but in Europe an annual touring "American Folk-Blues Festival" presented House, James, and the duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee alongside the electric bands of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Buddy Guy. English performers were soon bridging the gap between older acoustic and modern electric styles on records like the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun." This fusion crossed the Atlantic with the British Invasion, and in 1965 Dylan teamed with members of Chicago's Paul Butterfield Blues Band for an electric set at the Newport Folk Festival. Soon the Rolling Stones, Cream, and Led Zeppelin were playing rock versions of songs learned from the records of Robert Johnson, Skip James, and Memphis Minnie, and John Hammond and Taj Mahal (the one African American to make an impact in the folk-blues movement) were alternating acoustic and electric albums.

Blues-rock became established as its own style in the later 1960s. Aside from Janis Joplin and Mick Jagger, its biggest stars tended to be guitarists, many playing extended solos that blended techniques learned from black players like B.B., Freddie, and Albert King with "psychedelic" effects inspired by marijuana and hallucinogens. This approach reached its apex with Jimi Hendrix, who had cut his teeth on the R&B scene,

then moved to London and returned in 1967 as the ultimate psychedelic bluesman. Hendrix transformed the sound of the electric guitar with wah-wah and feedback, creating a vocabulary that was adopted by contemporaries such as Clapton and Jeff Beck, and later by Stevie Ray Vaughan.

9. Soul and soul-blues.

While folk-blues and blues-rock were primarily marketed to white listeners, the association of blues with deep southern roots also attracted some black performers. In the 1940s Charlie Parker used the blues-based Kansas City approach as a basis for the harmonic innovations of bebop, but most boppers preferred more complex chord structures and rhythms. In the 1950s, some young African American jazz artists feared the music was losing its black audience, and turned to blues forms and tonalities in a movement known as Hard bop. With titles like “Work Song” and “Back at the Chicken Shack,” Cannonball Adderley and Jimmy Smith emphasized their connection to southern black traditions, which they signified with the word “soul.”

The high priest of soul was Ray Charles. After some minor hits as a West Coast blues pianist, by the mid-1950s Charles was mixing jazz, blues, and gospel styles, and he used the 12-bar progression for both hard bop instrumentals and hit singles like 1959’s “What’d I Say,” which mixed blues lyrics with a gospel call-and-response. In the 1960s this approach became the mainstream of R&B, with Ike and Tina Turner, Etta James, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett blending church shouts with blues themes. (See Soul music.)

A couple of down-home guitarist-singers managed to make an impact on the R&B charts: Jimmy Reed played loping Mississippi boogie shuffles and sang in a nasal, country style punctuated by his whining harmonica, and in the early 1960s his “Big Boss Man” was covered by rock and soul singers alike. Louisiana’s Slim Harpo, another guitar and harmonica player, even created a fusion of down home blues and contemporary funk with his “Baby, Scratch My Back.”

Many soul performers had mixed feelings about the word “blues,” which they associated with slavery and the miseries of southern segregation. James Brown, the most influential figure in the evolution from R&B through soul to funk, insisted that he neither liked nor played blues, though the 1965 record that heralded his independence from older R&B conventions, “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” used the classic 12-bar progression.

A few performers, notably B.B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, and Little Milton, continued to be known as blues singers while retaining an African American audience, but by the mid-1970s their style seemed to be on the way out. That changed to some extent in 1982 when Z.Z. Hill’s “Down Home Blues” became an anthem for older listeners who were tired of disco and uninterested in rap. Southern soul singers such as Denise LaSalle, Johnny Taylor, and Latimore began to be advertised as blues performers, and although they attracted few European American fans and thus relatively little attention from critics and historians, they have maintained a thriving blues circuit in the South and Midwest.

10. Conclusion.

Blues of one kind or another continues to be played and disseminated through recordings, concerts, and electronic media around the world, but since the 1960s it has tended to be presented in nostalgic terms, as a link to older artists, styles, and times. Some performers attempt to put their own twist on the classic patterns, but always with the consciousness that they are preserving an important heritage. When white alternative rockers like the White Stripes and black rappers like Goodie Mob and Nas explore and rework blues material, it is a way of keeping in touch with their musical or cultural roots.

As earlier blues artists have retired or died, people interested in connecting with those roots have increasingly depended on recordings. Whatever their own background, young fans are now more likely to explore the blues tradition by studying records than by listening to their relatives or neighbors, and to be particularly drawn to artists whose music suggests a different time and place. Such explorations have ranged from the jazz singer Cassandra Wilson's imaginative reworkings of Robert Johnson's Delta blues to the hip-hop artist Queen Latifah recording an album of Dinah Washington material backed by a 1940s-style band.

In the 1990s a new wave of African American players fused old rural blues with other styles: Keb' Mo' with contemporary singer-songwriter music, Alvin Youngblood Hart with hard rock, and Chris Thomas King and Corey Harris with hip hop and in the latter's case also reggae. In the 2000s, Otis Taylor and the Carolina Chocolate Drops have reached still further back, reviving pre-blues fiddle and banjo traditions.

In commercial terms, blues-rock remains the most popular style. Carried forward in the 1970s by Johnny Winter and given a new dose of soul in the early 1980s by Robert Cray, it found its dominant modern figure in 1983 when Stevie Ray Vaughan released his *Texas Flood* album. Inspired by Buddy Guy, Jimi Hendrix, and his brother Jimmie's Fabulous Thunderbirds, Vaughan was a one-man encyclopedia of blues lead guitar, and became the model for a new wave of bar bands. The 2000s brought a further blend of traditional blues with punk and alternative rock, most prominently in the work of the White Stripes and the Mississippi All-Stars.

Though its golden ages are in the past, blues remains a vital component of virtually all contemporary popular music. Any guitar-based band or soulful singer is building on the innovations of earlier blues artists. Delta slide guitar and wailing harmonica are ubiquitous in film soundtracks and television commercials, symbolizing everything from urban romance to the dusty plains of the old West. And rap has made a blues-rooted lyrical sensibility the core of modern street languages around the world. While retaining its deep association with African American tradition, blues has become an inextricable thread of global popular culture.

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