

The Blues

Blues is a musical form which was first developed by African Americans in the rural South during the 1890s. In areas of large plantations, such as the Mississippi Delta, poor blacks sought wage labor on farms and in other industries, such as logging and levee construction, in order to escape the poverty and hopelessness of life on small, worn-out pieces of farmland. These workers often met with intolerable working conditions in a society which was completely segregated, and they responded by frequently moving from one plantation to another attempting to improve their lot.¹ Blues arose from this dissatisfaction. As Mississippi and Chicago Bluesman Howlin' Wolf once said,

“Blues is problems. If you don't have problems today, you have them tomorrow. You see, problems is, well, you might want to do something and you can't do it, and it'll worry you and get on your nerves; you might have some kind of business, somebody take half of it or all of it from you, well it turn you mad, see, you worked for it and they're taking it away from you, well that takes something from you...that's the blues.”²

One aspect of American music which was introduced by the blues was an aspect of realism which sprang, as Howlin' Wolf suggests, from the experiences of its practitioners. Blues typically addresses everyday life and celebrates its ups and downs while generally avoiding religious statements.

The basic vocal elements of blues arose from “hollers” that were sung by workers in the fields and other occupations requiring manual labor. Blues took these vocal expressions and added instrumental accompaniment and moved the music from the fields into juke joints, house parties, and other socially engaging environments. The appeal of the new music in this form led to its spread in popularity and ultimately to its positioning as a “root” musical form for country and rock-and-roll.

How did blues move from the Mississippi Delta and other rural locations to a position of world-wide prominence? In the early years of the 20th Century, professional bands began to incorporate blues into their shows. W.C. Handy, often referred to as “Father of the Blues,” published his first blues in sheet music in 1912. Handy's affinity for blues developed out of his experiences, and in Clarksdale, Mississippi, he made a conscious decision to place blues front and center during his career:

“One night while playing a dance, he was asked to play some of his native music. He tried to comply. The request then came for a local group to be permitted to play. Three rather ragged young black men began to play, as he recalled in his autobiography, ‘one of these over-and-over strains that seemed to have no very clear beginning and...no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on-and-on it went, a kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps.’

“Before long, ‘A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish, stomping feet. The dancers went wild.’ After it was over Handy strained his neck and saw there before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement. Then I saw the beauty of primitive music!”³

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From these humble beginnings, blues began to be performed and recorded professionally. The earliest blues recordings were made in 1920. Later that decade, country folk blues artists, such as Mississippi's Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson, were recorded. The sound of blues was utilized in other musical forms as the style became more widely recorded. Then in the late 1940s and 1950s, blues underwent another stage of development with the introduction of the electric guitar. Southern African Americans who moved to large cities like St. Louis and Chicago adopted the electric guitar and its amplified sound to enable them to play in larger, noisier venues. Mississippi's Muddy Waters (born McKinley Morganfield, from Clarksdale) and Howlin' Wolf (born Chester Burnett, from West Point) perfected the a new style of blues which included a band playing electric guitars, a bass, a piano or electric organ, drums , and occasionally an amplified harmonica. This electrified style of the blues was further refined by Mississippi's B.B. King (Indianola) as he and other blues musicians began to deliver their vocals in a shouting fashion which harkens to a gospel music influence.⁴

Today, blues can be heard around the world, in forms which range from the earliest folk blues to more modern electric styles. Also, the influence of blues on jazz, country music, and rock-and-roll demonstrates that the folk music of rural African Americans in the South has become a central aspect of American and world musical culture.

Source: David Evans, "Blues," in Wilson & Ferris, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989; pp. 995-998.

End notes:

1. David Evans, "Blues," in Wilson & Ferris, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989; pp. 995-998.
2. Howlin' Wolf, quoted by Paul Williams, album package liner notes, *Howlin' Wolf - More Real Folk Blues*, Chess 1512, Chess Records 1967.
3. Leander C. Jones, "W.C. Handy," in Wilson & Ferris, p. 1061.
4. Evans, p. 997.