

The Story of The Blues – A Concise History

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The blues was born in the deep south, principally the Mississippi Delta, in the last decade of the 19th century. In the 1930s and '40s a huge number of Black Americans migrated north to Chicago and the blues went with them. At the same time, the blues spilled over into Memphis.

In the 1950's the blues had grown up from country music into something we call *Urban Blues*. The music had changed from solo, acoustic, country music to ensemble, electric city music. Urban Blues had become national music, not regional music, but it was still the music of African Americans. What the white population of America knew of blues was *blues-influenced* music.

In the mid-1950s American Popular Music was transformed by a new generation of musicians through recordings of small, independent record labels, principally Sun Records, located in Memphis, Chess Records, located in Chicago, Atlantic Records, located in New York City, and Specialty Records, located in Los Angeles. This was Rock And Roll.

Rock and Roll was not blues, but it was more than mere *blues-influenced* music, it was *blues-drenched* music. Blues was confined to the shadows, lurking behind racial barriers. In all of America, very few white Americans could tell you who B.B. King was, in spite of the fact he was constantly crisscrossing the country, playing to sell-out crowds.

By the 1960s blues may have been little known to whites in America, but a few white kids on both sides of the Atlantic were discovering it, and together they would change popular music profoundly and permanently. The English rock bands that comprised the “British Invasion” were devotees of Chicago Blues. They ate the blues and made it the foundation of their music.

In the early 1960s a handful of young whites in Chicago prowled the bars of Chicago’s South Side and adopted the culture and music of the masters they could hear for a few dollars. The black bluesmen accepted them and invited them on stage.

In the mid-1960s these disciples burst on the scene, reaching mass audiences with undiluted, full-fledged blues music, and they made no secret that they had borrowed it from the real originators. A short list of the disciples would include **Paul Butterfield, Mike Bloomfield, Charlie Musselwhite, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, John Mayall, and Eric Burdon.**

A dam burst. The social partition of race was dissolved and through the gap came a parade of America's greatest artists. A short list of the masters would include **Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, James Cotton, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Bobby Bland, and B.B. King.**

Legions followed. America had the blues and knew it. It was as if a great secret had been disclosed: *Our popular music derives its vitality, its form, its emotional power from a musical tradition that began in a dark corner of America where black men and women worked the richest ground in the country for the benefit and prosperity of white people.*

Once the secret was told America and the world embraced the pure forms of the music that had given America and the world so much. The masters got their just rewards. Riley B. King, alone in the world at age 14, sharecropping one acre of cotton and surviving on \$2.50 a month, became a celebrity of the stature of Louis Armstrong and Charlie Chaplin, with wealth to match it.

Source: <http://courses.dce.harvard.edu/~music139/bluesthestory.html>