

Listening to the Blues

- Tempo
- Voices of the instruments, e.g. thick, thin, textured, smooth
- Ambient room sound vs. studio sound
- Mood
- Emotion of the singer
- Dynamics, i.e. variation in loudness
- How the beat is parsed out (more on this in lecture)

How does this song work, how does it get across, how does this performance access my heart [if it does]?

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

Learning to listen is a bit like learning to play — you need to do a lot of it to get good at it. Here are some categories of listening attributes that may help.

- **Filters:** Train yourself to filter out everything except one instrument. This is a feat of concentration. Play a song and focus as exclusively as you can on the bass. The bass is the foundation, both rhythmically and harmonically. You will see the foundation stones of a song by filter all but the bass. Then change your filter and focus on another instrument.
- Slow the song down to 75% and listen again. And again. It's like watching diving contests in slow motion.
- **Rhythm.** Is it a shuffle? Is it a straight beat? Where is the emphasis? Is it on the 1 and 3 of the measure, or the 2 and 4. Listen, separately, for the pieces of the drumming, the bass drum, the snare, the cymbals, the high-hat (that's the clapper-type cymbal operated by a foot pedal). What is the tempo? When comparing two versions of the song ask if the tempos are the same. Is the tempo steady?
- **Solos.** Think of a solo as a story, with its own narrative. How is it constructed? How is it punctuated? How does the soloist use pauses?
- **Instruments Voice** What is the tonal signature of the instrument? Fat? Thin? Edgy? Distorted? Plain?

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- **Phrasing** Phrasing is the way an instrument or a singer parses the time with his/her notes. It is the single most important means of expressing emotion that a musician has. Think of an instrumentalist as a conversationalist, and think of a singer as an instrumentalist. Take a simple verbal expression like "It's dark out tonight," or "Makes you feel lonely," and imagine all the variations in timing and emphasis you could use to say it, e.g. how you enunciate the last word: "LONE-ly", "lonne-LY", "LONE...LY". In blues phrasing tends to move attention away from the beat.

There is no substitute for repeated listening.