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# THE BLUES

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A Very Short Introduction

**Elijah Wald**

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# Introduction

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## What is blues?

Blues music first swept the United States in the early 1910s, remained a driving force in the pop mainstream for some six decades, and continues to be played and heard around the world. Once performed by neighborhood bands, street corner guitarists, and theatrical divas, blues is now routinely heard as background music for car commercials and Westerns, in forms ranging from gentle acoustic guitar melodies to crunching blues-rock. Blues has been whispered, shouted, growled, moaned, and yodeled, and played on everything from harmonicas to synthesizers. So, considering a century's worth of shifting audiences, tastes, and technologies, any attempt to understand the music has to start with the question: What, exactly, is blues?

In 1917 an Irish American musical comedy star named Marie Cahill sang, "The blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad." Twenty-five years later, an African American guitarist named Son House sang, "The blues ain't nothing but a low-down, aching chill." In between, one of the biggest stars of the first blues recording boom, Ida Cox, sang that the blues was nothing but "your lover on your mind" and "a slow aching heart disease." All of those answers were echoed over the years by other singers and they continue to represent the broadest definition of blues, as music that expresses a universal emotion. In this sense, the word has been associated with mournful, heartrending songs in many languages and styles: *flamenco* is often described as Spanish Gypsy blues, *rembetika* as Greek blues, *morna* as Cape Verdean blues, *tango* as Argentine blues, *enka* as Japanese blues. The range of comparisons gives a sense of how deeply blues has become part of our musical understanding.

However hallowed by history, though, the idea that blues is fundamentally a musical heart-cry has some problems. For one thing, along with some of the most moving, cathartic music on earth, the American blues tradition has produced thousands of comical party songs and upbeat dance music. The first music to be called blues seems to have been slow, but not necessarily sad—it was a sexy rhythm popular with African American working-class dancers in New Orleans and other parts of the Deep South. Once the style became a national craze in the 1910s, blues compositions were played in all sorts of tempos and rhythms, and that range has been increasing ever since. Blues continues to be associated with deeply emotional performances, but it has never been limited to them.

There is also a purely musical definition of blues: a progression of chords consisting of four bars of the tonic (I), two bars of the subdominant (IV), two bars of the tonic (I), a bar of the dominant seventh ( $V^7$ ), a bar of the subdominant (IV), and two final bars of the tonic (I). This "twelve-bar blues" is what a musician means if she calls for her bandmates to play, say, "a blues in F."

This twelve-bar blues is ideally suited to the West African tradition of call-and-response, in which a lead voice or instrument states a phrase that is answered by other voices or players. In the most common twelve-bar song pattern, the leader sings two repeated lines, each of which is answered by an instrumental phrase, then a rhyming third line that is answered by a final instrumental passage. The Bessie Smith–Louis Armstrong duet of "St. Louis Blues" is a classic example of this sort of musical conversation:

# Ida Cox



"Oh, the Blues Ain't Nothin'"  
Every woman has some sad and blue  
times when she's been around women  
like you!"



"Oh, the Blues Ain't Nothin'"  
Every man needs to see his man  
get a load like when she means him,  
for to make him, when she can."

## "Blues Ain't Nothin' Else But"

"Oh, the Blues ain't nothin' but a good woman feeling bad"—a slow, aching heart disease — like consumption, it kills you by degrees. Ida Cox, at last, tells what the Blues are! Every verse is a picture. Hear it and discover how many kinds of Blues you've got. *A 2-hit record!* On the other side is "Last Time Blues" with Jimmie O'Bryant doing some great stuff on his sobbing, throbbing clarinet. Paramount No. 12212.

### Blues! Blues! Blues!

12212—*Blues Ain't Nothin' Else But* and *Last Time Blues*, Ida Cox, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders, with Jimmie O'Bryant's clarinet and Tommy Ladnier's mournful cornet.

### Be Sure To Get These Three!

- 12211—*Freight Train Blues* and *Don't Shake It No More*, Trixie Smith, acc. by Down Home Synopsators.
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- 12213—*Cool Kind Daddy Blues* and *Georgia Sam Blues*, Anna Lee Crisholm.

- 12209—*The Coze of Armour Avenue* and *The Chicago Gauge*, Faye Barnes.
- 12207—*Chicago Monkey Man Blues* and *Worried Anyhow Blues*, Ida Cox. Hear Ida sing all about her Monkey man — if they were money, she'd be a Chicago millionaire.
- 12202—*Barrel House Blues* and *Walking Blues*, "Ma" Rainey, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders.
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### Sacred Selections

- 12025—*My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race* and *Father Prepare Me*, Norfolk Jubilee Quartets.
- 12073—*When All The Saints Come Marching In* and *That Old Time Religion*, Paramount Jubilee Singers.

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If your dealer hasn't Paramount Records, order direct from us. Just pay postman 75 cents each, plus 10-cent C.O.D. charge. *We pay postage and insurance.* Send no money. Just give numbers of records you want and name and address. *We send, free, our new Paramount Black Swan "Book of the Blues".*

**The New York Recording Laboratories**  
12 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.

## FREE!

**This Handsome Photograph of Ida Cox**

Just put your name on this coupon, and we will send you FREE large-size picture of Ida Cox, Uncrowned Queen of the Blues. Suitable for framing.



# Paramount

[Including Black Swan]

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

## The Popular Race Record

The New York Recording Laboratories  
12 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.

Send me free, postpaid, large picture of Ida Cox.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Early definitions of the blues are listed in an advertisement for Ida Cox's hit song "Blues Ain't Nothin' Else But."

Smith begins by singing, : "*I hate to see the evening sun go down.*"

Armstrong echoes her final note on his cornet and adds 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.*"

And Armstrong builds an arching obbligato leading into the next verse.

This basic chord progression, simple as it is, has been used in many and varied contexts: the Victor Military Band playing "Memphis Blues" in 1914, Blind Lemon Jefferson singing "Matchbox Blues" in 1927, Glenn Miller swinging through "In the Mood" in 1939, Hank Williams and the Driftin' Cowboys wailing "Move It On Over" in 1947, Chuck Berry rocking through "Roll Over, Beethoven" in 1956, James Brown getting funky with "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" in 1965, and the White Stripes grinding out "Stop Breaking Down" in the twenty-first century.

Similarly, that basic lyrical form—two repeated lines followed by a rhyming third—has been used for innumerable songs and produced some of the most memorable verses in the English language: "See, see rider, see what you done done (2x) / You made me love you, now your gal done come." "You don't know, you don't know my mind (2x) / When you see me laughin', I'm laughin' just to keep from cryin'." Or, in another mood, "Good golly, Miss Molly, sure like to ball (2x) / When you're rockin' and rollin', can't hear your mama call."

The twelve-bar/three-line pattern is the most common blues form, but once again does not fully define the style. For one thing, there are at least two other common blues chord patterns, the eight- and sixteen-bar blues. The eight-bar blues may well have predated the twelve-bar, since it is a simpler form that often has just two lyrical lines: One famous early verse went, "I walked all the way from East St. Louis / Didn't have but one lousy dime." Furthermore, some blues artists—notably John Lee Hooker and Robert Pete Williams—have refused to be tied to any set chord patterns, improvising words and music as the mood struck them and varying chords and bar-lengths from verse to verse.

The basic twelve-bar form has also been used to back lyrical forms other than the two-plus-one-line verse. Some early blues verses just repeated a single line three times. Some very popular records of the 1920s and '30s, such as Papa Charlie Jackson's "Shake that Thing," divided the standard chord pattern into a two-line, four-bar verse followed by a three-line, eight-bar chorus:

Old Uncle Jack, the jellyroll king,

He just got tight from shaking that thing.

Want you to shake that thing,

Oh, shake that thing,

I'm getting sick and tired of telling you to shake that thing.

So, as with the definition that ties blues to deep emotions, the definitions that tie it to specific musical or lyrical patterns are useful in many situations, but insufficient in others.

Another common way to define blues is as a tradition that employs a range of tonal and rhythmic practices originating in West Africa. To the extent that they can be expressed in European notation, many blues melodies are based on a pentatonic or five-note "blues scale" that is frequently used by



West African performers, consisting of the first, the flatted third, the fourth, the fifth, and the flatted seventh notes of the European major scale—the flatted third and seventh notes in particular are often called “blue notes.” As with any description that uses formal European terms to describe non-European styles, this is a simplification: any good blues singer uses a broad range of microtones and moves between them with a freedom and subtlety that cannot be captured in Western notation. Many of the most popular blues instruments—the slide guitar, the harmonica, the saxophone, and the standard guitar as played by note-bending virtuosos like Lonnie Johnson and B. B. King—are favored specifically because they can play those “in-between” tones.

Musicians who demonstrate a mastery of those microtones and a similarly African-derived rhythmic sense are often said to have a “blues feel.” In practice, though, such descriptions tend to be a mix of musical judgments and judgments of cultural authenticity. Many people consider the blues tradition to be primarily a matter of ethnicity and culture, the musical heritage of the African American South, which can rarely if ever be fully understood by northern, or foreign, or white artists. In a similar sense, the word is sometimes applied to the literary style of African American poets and novelists—or, more rarely, European American writers who are familiar with African American milieus—whose work reflects the language and spirit of the world that produced blues music.

Finally, there is the most widely understood definition of blues in day-to-day speech, which is as a marketing category. The range of performers who have been marketed as blues artists is huge and disparate, and the decisions that have resulted in some being filed as blues while others are filed as folk, jazz, or rock are full of odd contradictions. For example, Jimi Hendrix is typically filed as a rocker, but Stevie Ray Vaughan’s covers of Hendrix are typically filed as blues. (A cover is a recording that deliberately recreates another artist’s performance of the same song.) Nonetheless, most listeners have a pretty good idea of which records are likely to be filed in blues sections of stores and played on blues radio shows, and which performers are likely to be presented at blues festivals. And, despite its logical shortcomings, this definition reflects the evolving history of blues as a commercial style, and is no more vague or contradictory than the equally market-based definitions of jazz, rock, or classical music.

So, depending on the situation, one can define blues in emotional, musical, cultural, or commercial terms, and these definitions overlap at times and diverge at others. Blues has meant many different things to many different people over the years, and no definition will ever satisfy all listeners or readers. The best one can hope to do in a short introduction is to provide a selective overview of how blues and our understanding of blues have evolved, and to provide some guideposts for further exploration—while always remembering that there are other, equally valid ways to cover the same territory. No single book can touch on more than a few aspects of blues, or give more than a hint of how this apparently simple style has managed to permeate virtually every other form of American music and influence so many other styles around the world.

# **Part I**

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## **A short history of blues**

# Chapter 1

## Roots of the blues

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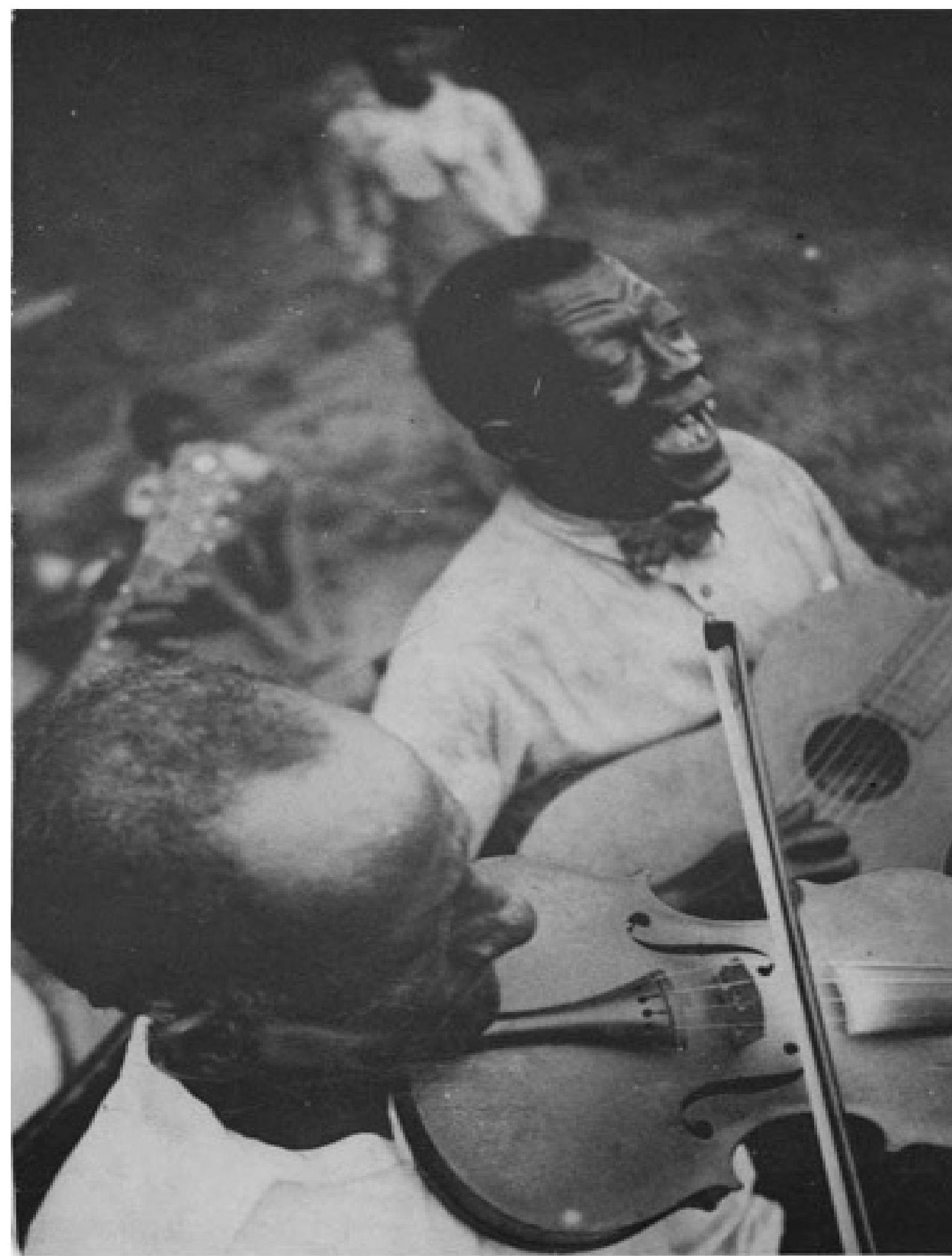
The history of blues as a broadly popular style of music begins in the fall of 1912, when W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues"—along with two similar songs, "Dallas Blues" and "Baby Seals Blues"—sparked a national craze. Handy was a music teacher, bandleader, and songwriter based in Memphis, Tennessee, and he modeled his blues on older songs he had heard around the Mississippi Delta region. "Memphis Blues" was not the first blues to be published in sheet music form, but its lively melody caught the ear of a New York bandleader named James Reese Europe, who was then employed by America's most influential dance instructors, Vernon and Irene Castle. The Castles used "Memphis Blues" to accompany a new step called the fox trot, and this helped to make the song into an enduring hit. In 1914 it became the first blues preserved on record, in an instrumental version by the Victor Military Band and then by a white vaudeville singer named Morton Harvey. Handy capitalized on his success by writing a follow-up, "St. Louis Blues," which included a section in tango rhythm—another specialty of the Castles—and the next few years brought so many blues hits that by 1917 Marion Harris, who sometimes billed herself as the "Queen of the Blues," was making fun of the fad, singing "Everybody's Crazy 'Bout the Dog-gone Blues, But I'm Happy." (The lyric began in classic fashion: "Blues ain't nothing but the easy-going heart disease.")

Though most of the people listening and dancing to blues seem to have thought of it as a new style, it was also associated with older rural and street music—one of Handy's biggest hits referred to "the blind man on the corner who sings the Beale Street blues." So any understanding of blues has to begin with some exploration of its sources in the earlier music of the African American South.

### Folk songs

The folk music of black southerners—which is to say, the music nonprofessionals played and sang for their own pleasure and shared with their friends and neighbors—drew on many traditions, from European and African importations to commercial pop songs and tunes people made up on the spur of the moment. Some of the most distinctive elements of what would come to be known as blues can be traced to West Africa: common rhythms, instrumental techniques that were adapted by banjo players, fiddlers, and eventually guitarists, and a rich and varied range of singing styles. The vocal traditions were particularly important, since the vast majority of black Americans had arrived in the United States as slaves, without any possessions, and most continued to be extremely poor even after emancipation. Singing is one of the few pleasures that requires nothing but a voice and can be enjoyed while alone or while working. Rhythmic work songs kept groups of laborers moving in unison, and people working alone would sing "field hollers" to calm herd animals, to let their friends and co-workers know where they were, or simply to pass the time.

The group work songs provided blues with one of its most common features, the widespread African practice known as "call and response." A lead vocalist sings a line, and the people around him reply, either echoing his words or singing a responsive phrase. In the Americas, such songs were adapted to group labor on plantations, and later on railroads, lumber gangs, and sailing ships—many popular "sea shanties," sung by black and white sailors alike, have roots in this tradition. In blues, this call and response is typically refigured as a conversation between a singer and an instrument, either played by another musician—as in Bessie Smith's duets with Louis Armstrong—or by the singer on her own piano, guitar, or harmonica.



## **2. A Louisiana singer nicknamed Stavin' Chain sings a murder ballad with fiddle accompaniment.**

Meanwhile, the “field hollers” or “moans” provided blues with distinctive vocal textures. (The terms “holler” and “moan” are more or less interchangeable, though the former is more common when describing outdoor singing, and the latter for home or church styles.) To a great extent, these were simply vocal improvisations, and many people did not even think of them as songs: Muddy Waters recalled that in the fields of the Mississippi Delta, “Every man would be hollering, but you didn’t pay that no mind.... They was just made-up things. Like a feller be workin’ or most likely some gal be workin’ near and you want to say somethin’ to ’em. So you holler it.” Such hollers could be wordless moaning melodies; scraps of songs remembered from minstrel shows, dances, or church; or improvised meditations on the singer’s feelings. For example, one of the most beautiful surviving hollers—which the folklorist Alan Lomax preserved and titled “Tangle Eye Blues”—is the lament of a prisoner named Walter “Tangle Eye” Jackson, recorded at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in 1947:

Well, it must have been the devil that foo-ooled me he-ee-ere,  
Hey-ey, hey, hey-ey,

Jackson’s voice soars and dips, stretching his phrases into supple, floating cries.

Whoa, I’m all down and ow-ow-ow-ow-out,  
Hey-ey, ey, oooh, o-oh, Lord.”

Countless blues singers have built their songs in a similar way, fitting their thoughts to scraps of melody and filling the spaces between their words with vocal or instrumental passages that extended the mood. Lomax called Jackson’s holler a “blues” not because it followed any particular blues form but because its theme and style reminded him of the songs of stars like Bessie Smith and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Lomax was particularly interested in such hollers because he saw them as a link between the African past and later blues and gospel; on an album released in the 1970s he emphasized this connection by intercutting a Mississippi holler with a similarly moaning, melismatic vocal from Senegal, the two performances blending into a single intercontinental lament.

### **Religious songs**

The title of “Tangle Eye Blues” places it in a secular tradition, but its words could as easily be understood as the lament of a Christian led astray by the devil. And although black Americans have often been as judgmental as their white neighbors when it comes to separating religious music and party music, a great deal of black church singing draws on the same sources and has undergone the same evolution as blues and other secular styles. The call-and-response forms of the work songs were also used for camp-meeting spirituals and gospel compositions, and the loose meter and microtonal inflections of the field hollers can still be heard in the moaning of many black religious congregations.

African American church music also drew on other influences, though, in particular the hymns of composers such as the seventeenth-century English theologian Isaac Watts. In 1842 a white minister named Charles Colcock Jones wrote: “One great advantage in teaching [the Negroes] good psalms and hymns, is that they are thereby induced to lay aside the extravagant and nonsensical chants, and catches and hallelujah songs of their own composing; and when they sing, which is very often while about their business or of an evening in their houses, they will have something profitable to sing.” But singers did not necessarily have to choose between what they learned from hymnals and what they learned from their neighbors; many were comfortable with both styles and combined them, reworking European harmonies and the ornate language of the King James Bible to fit with African-derived

forms. Such interchanges have continued over the years, with African American religious music drawing on secular styles and African American secular performers taking tunes and techniques from the churches, to the point that the distinction between sacred and secular—important as it is to many people, both black and white—often has little meaning in terms of musical approach or of the way listeners react to performances that thrill or move them.

### **Professional styles**

Though often celebrated as a folk or “roots” style, from the beginning blues also drew on music performed by professional and semi-professional entertainers. The distinction between folk and professional (or “pop”) styles is not always clear: Professional “singing school” teachers spread church songs that have survived in oral tradition, and field hollers and blues have reworked lines drawn from pop songs, while old folk lyrics and melodies have been adapted and published by both gospel and pop composers. By the same token, although blues has deep roots in older styles and continues to be sung by nonprofessionals, the style that emerged in the 1910s and ’20s was largely created by professional entertainers and greeted by audiences as a modern pop trend.

Of course, what is new to one audience may be old to another. W. C. Handy and Ma Rainey, who were separately advertised as the Father and Mother of the Blues, were up-to-date entertainers, but Handy recalled being inspired by the music of a ragged guitarist he heard at a Mississippi Delta train depot in 1903, and Rainey said that she learned her first blues—though the style did not yet have that name—from a girl who came to hear her sing in a tent show in rural Missouri in 1902. In the words of the folklorist John W. Work, who interviewed Rainey in the 1920s: “The song was so strange and poignant ... [and] elicited such a response from the audiences that it won a special place in her act. Many times she was asked what kind of song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, ‘It’s the *Blues*.’ ”

Handy and Rainey were both veterans of the “minstrel show” circuit. Minstrelsy took its name from a quartet of white entertainers who made their debut in New York in 1843 as the Virginia Minstrels and purported to be presenting music and dances they had adapted from slaves in the South. For the sake of verisimilitude they colored their hands and faces black, and their success inspired a flock of “blackface minstrel” imitators. By the 1850s there were also some African American minstrel troupes performing similar material, and in the early twentieth century such groups toured throughout the country, and were especially popular in the rural South.

The standard minstrel show included banjo and fiddle players, singers, and comedians who played tambourine and bones (literally a pair of polished bones, which the player clicked together like castanets). As fashions changed, other instruments were added, and much minstrel music ceased to be linked to plantation traditions. Minstrel troupes performed everything from opera and sentimental “parlor songs” to comic novelties and dance music. In areas without formal theaters, minstrel shows often provided the largest and best-organized musical entertainment available, and virtually any African American star who wanted to reach a broad audience did minstrel tours. As Handy wrote, “It goes without saying that minstrels were a disreputable lot in the eyes of a large section of upper-crust Negroes... but it was also true that all the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel shows got them all.”

Like the blackface makeup—which was routinely used by both Euro- and Afro-American minstrel comedians into the 1940s—many minstrel songs and routines were at best stereotypical and at worst blatantly racist. But that did not keep them from being laughed at by plenty of black audiences, and

minstrel material regularly resurfaced on the blues scene. Large African American minstrel companies like Silas Green from New Orleans and the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels (in which Rainey starred for many years) toured all over the South, and similar material was also presented in the smaller, less formal "medicine shows." Medicine shows ranged from two or three people to fairly large troupes, with the entertainment designed to draw a crowd that could be persuaded to buy some dubious medicine or ointment. Many rural musicians, both white and black, traveled with such shows as well as in circuses and, more rarely, on the vaudeville theater circuits.

Minstrelsy and its offshoots were far from the only professional styles to cross racial boundaries; virtually all southern rural music shows signs of Afro-European interchange. The "square dances" popular throughout the South were adapted from French ballroom figures, but the music that was played for them mixed Irish and African fiddle techniques. Fiddles of various kinds are as common in Africa as in Europe, and some experts have estimated that between a third and a half of the southeastern fiddle repertoire is of African American origin. The other standard rural instrument, the banjo, was originally an African import, which became popular with both races because it was loud, portable, and easier to make than a fiddle or guitar—the basic banjo was just an animal skin stretched over a wooden hoop, with another piece of wood attached as a neck.

African-derived tunes and techniques crossed racial lines not only because they were catchy but because such a large proportion of the music performed in the antebellum South was played by African Americans. The minstrel craze typed slave musicians as playing banjos and fiddles, but they also played pianos, cellos, flutes, and whatever else was demanded by white listeners, and their repertoire ranged from their own melodies to European classical compositions. The more formal concert music left little trace in blues, but well into the twentieth century many black rural guitarists still played "Spanish Fandango," the standard beginning piece in nineteenth-century classical guitar manuals. Meanwhile, white musicians and dancers were adopting African American approaches, to the point that it is often impossible to trace a given style or tune specifically to African or European sources.

Many rural musicians were farmers who picked up spare money or groceries by playing at weekend dances, but others were full-time professionals who could perform anything from fiddle tunes to ragtime, Tin Pan Alley waltzes, and, in some cases, classical concert pieces. Isolated communities developed regional styles and specialties that would influence their local variations of blues, but after emancipation African Americans began traveling widely in search of better jobs and living conditions, so songs and styles spread rapidly across the South and then to northern industrial centers that drew large populations of southern immigrants.

The turn of the twentieth century was a particularly rich period of musical innovation, due not only to this mobility but to the dawn of recording and the increased availability of store-bought instruments. Sears Roebuck's mail order business made guitars accessible to musicians who previously had considered them an upper-class instrument, and the shift from banjo to guitar played a significant role in the rise of blues: Banjos have very fast sound decay, which means that one has to play relatively quickly and cannot mimic the drawn-out contours of a vocal performance. The guitar has greater sustain, making it more appropriate for slow songs, and also has a warmer tone, making it more suitable for accompanying sentimental ballads or moaning hollers.

Records were meanwhile making a previously unimaginable range of music available even to remote rural households—though until the 1920s, very few of those records preserved African American or rural performances. A handful of African Americans were recorded as early as the 1890s—the music comedian Bert Williams was a major recording star in the second decade of the twentieth century—

but their records were marketed to a mainstream (which is to say, mostly white), middle-class audience and tailored to that audience's tastes. And when blues hit in the teens, the early records were aimed at similar audiences and featured white bands and artists. Like the blackface minstrels, many of these white blues interpreters claimed to have adapted their material from African American folk sources, and it is similarly hard to sort out how much of this was true and how much was marketing. Both minstrelsy and blues clearly drew on older African American rural traditions, but in both cases professional compositions were also being imitated by rural amateurs, who in turn were imitated by the next generation of professionals—and semi-professionals, and semi-amateurs. As a result, by the time blues reached the national market it was impossible to sort out to what extent the style had been formed by unknown bards in rural cabins and on small-town street corners, and to what extent it had been developed by professional entertainers in tent and theater shows.



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