

A Brief History of the Blues

by Robert M. Baker

Joseph Machlis says that the blues is a native American musical and verse form, with no direct European and African antecedents of which we know. (p. 578) In other words, it is a blending of both traditions. Something special and entirely different from either of its parent traditions. (Although Alan Lomax cites some examples of very similar songs having been found in Northwest Africa, particularly among the Wolof and Watusi. p. 233)

The word 'blue' has been associated with the idea of melancholia or depression since the Elizabethan era. The American writer, Washington Irving is credited with coining the term 'the blues,' as it is now defined, in 1807. (Tanner 40) The earlier (almost entirely Negro) history of the blues musical tradition is traced through oral tradition as far back as the 1860s. (Kennedy 79)

When African and European music first began to merge to create what eventually became the blues, the slaves sang songs filled with words telling of their extreme suffering and privation. (Tanner 36) One of the many responses to their oppressive environment resulted in the field holler. The field holler gave rise to the spiritual, and the blues, "notable among all human works of art for their profound despair . . . They gave voice to the mood of alienation and anomie that prevailed in the construction camps of the South," for it was in the Mississippi Delta that blacks were often forcibly conscripted to work on the levee and land-clearing crews, where they were often abused and then tossed aside or worked to death. (Lomax 233)

Alan Lomax states that the blues tradition was considered to be a masculine discipline (although some of the first blues songs heard by whites were sung by 'lady' blues singers like Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith) and not many black women were to be found singing the blues in the juke-joints. The Southern prisons also contributed considerably to the blues tradition through work songs and the songs of death row and murder, prostitutes, the warden, the hot sun, and a hundred other privations. (Lomax) The prison road crews and work gangs where were many bluesmen found their songs, and where many other blacks simply became familiar with the same songs.

Following the Civil War (according to Rolling Stone), the blues arose as "a distillate of the African music brought over by slaves. Field hollers, ballads, church music and rhythmic dance tunes called jump-ups evolved into a music for a singer who would engage in call-and-response with his guitar. He would sing a line, and the guitar would answer it." (RSR&RE 53) (author's note: I've seen somewhere, that the guitar did not enjoy widespread popularity with blues musicians until about the turn of the century. Until then, the banjo was the primary blues instrument.) By the 1890s the blues were sung in many of the rural areas of the South. (Kamien 518) And by 1910, the word 'blues' as applied to the musical tradition was in fairly common use. (Tanner 40)

Some 'bluesologists' claim (rather dubiously), that the first blues song that was ever written down was 'Dallas Blues,' published in 1912 by Hart Wand, a white violinist from Oklahoma City. (Tanner 40) The blues form was first popularized about 1911-14 by the black composer W.C. Handy (1873-1958). However, the poetic and musical form of the blues first crystallized around 1910 and gained popularity through the publication of Handy's "Memphis Blues" (1912) and "St. Louis Blues" (1914). (Kamien 518) Instrumental blues had been recorded as early as 1913. Mamie Smith recorded the first vocal blues song, 'Crazy Blues' in 1920. (Priestly 9) Priestly claims that while the widespread popularity of the blues had a vital influence on subsequent jazz, it was the "initial popularity of jazz which had made possible the recording of blues in the first place, and thus made possible the absorption of blues into both jazz as well as the mainstream of pop music." (Priestly 10)

American troops brought the blues home with them following the First World War. They did not, of course, learn them from Europeans, but from Southern whites who had been exposed to the blues. At this time, the U.S. Army was still segregated. During the twenties, the blues became a national craze. Records by leading blues singers like Bessie Smith and later, in the thirties, Billie Holiday, sold in the millions. The twenties also saw the blues become a musical form more widely used by jazz instrumentalists as well as blues singers. (Kamien 518)

During the decades of the thirties and forties, the blues spread northward with the migration of many blacks from the South and entered into the repertoire of big-band jazz. The blues also became electrified with the introduction of the amplified guitar. In some Northern cities like Chicago and Detroit, during the later forties and early fifties, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, and Elmore James among others, played what was basically Mississippi Delta blues, backed by bass, drums, piano and occasionally harmonica, and began scoring national hits with blues songs. At about the same time, T-Bone Walker in Houston and B.B. King in Memphis were pioneering a style of guitar playing that combined jazz technique with the blues tonality and repertoire. (RSR&RE 53)

In the early nineteen-sixties, the urban bluesmen were "discovered" by young white American and European musicians. Many of these blues-based bands like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Cream, Canned Heat, and Fleetwood Mac, brought the blues to young white audiences, something the black blues artists had been unable to do in America except through the purloined white cross-over covers of black rhythm and blues songs. Since the sixties, rock has undergone several blues revivals. Some rock guitarists, such as Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, and Eddie Van Halen have used the blues as a foundation for offshoot styles. While the originators like John Lee Hooker, Albert Collins and B.B. King--and their heirs Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and later Eric Clapton and the late Roy Buchanan, among many others, continued to make fantastic music in the blues tradition. (RSR&RE 53) The latest generation of blues players like Robert Cray and the late Stevie Ray Vaughan, among others, as well as gracing the blues tradition with their incredible technicality, have drawn a new generation listeners to the blues.

The Blue Tonalities And What Defines The Blues

There are a number of different ideas as to what the blues really are: a scale structure, a note out of tune or out of key, a chord structure; a philosophy? The blues is a form of Afro-American origin in which a modal melody has been harmonized with Western tonal chords. (Salzman 18) In other words, we had to fit it into our musical system somehow. But, the problem was that the blues weren't sung according to the European ideas of even tempered pitch, but with a much freer use of bent pitches and otherwise emotionally inflected vocal sounds. (Machlis 578) These 'bent' pitches are known as 'blue notes'.

The 'blue notes' or blue tonalities are one of the defining characteristics of the blues. Tanner's opinion is that these tonalities resulted from the West Africans' search for comparative tones not included in their pentatonic scale. He claims that the West African scale has neither the third or seventh tone nor the flat third or flat seventh. "Because of this, in the attempt to imitate either of these tones the pitch was sounded approximately midway between [the minor AND major third, fifth, or seventh], causing what is called a blue tonality." (Tanner 37) When the copyists attempted to write down the music, they came up with the so-called "blues scale," in which the third, the seventh, and sometimes the fifth scale-degrees were lowered a half step, producing a scale resembling the minor scale. (Machlis 578) There are many nuances of melody and rhythm in the blues that are difficult, if not impossible to write in conventional notation. (Salzman 18) But the blue notes are not really minor notes in a major context. In practice they may come almost anywhere. (Machlis 578)

Before the field cry, with its bending of notes, it had not occurred to musicians to explore the area of the blue tonalities on their instruments. (Tanner 38) The early blues singers would sing these "bent" notes, microtonal shadings, or "blue" notes, and the early instrumentalists attempted to duplicate them. (Kamien 520) By the mid-twenties, instrumental blues were common, and "playing the blues" for the instrumentalist could mean extemporizing a melody within a blues chord sequence. Brass, reed, and string instrumentalists, in particular, were able to produce many of the vocal sounds of the blues singers. (Machlis 578-9)

Blues Lyrics

Blues lyrics contain some of the most fantastically penetrating autobiographical and revealing statements in the Western musical tradition. For instance, the complexity of ideas implicit in Robert Johnson's 'Come In My Kitchen,' such as a barely concealed desire, loneliness, and tenderness, and much more:

You better come in my kitchen, It's gonna be rainin' outdoors.

Blues lyrics are often intensely personal, frequently contain sexual references and often deal with the pain of betrayal, desertion, and unrequited love (Kamien 519) or with unhappy situations such as being jobless, hungry, broke, away from home, lonely, or downhearted because of an unfaithful lover. (Tanner 39)

The early blues were very irregular rhythmically and usually followed speech patterns, as can be heard in the recordings made in the twenties and thirties by the legendary bluesmen Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson and Lightnin' Hopkins among others. (RSR&RE 53) The meter of the blues is usually written in iambic pentameter. The first line is generally repeated and third line is different from the first two. (Tanner 38) The repetition of the first line serves a purpose as it gives the singer some time to come up with a third line. Often the lyrics of a blues song do not seem to fit the music, but a good blues singer will accent certain syllables and eliminate others so that everything falls nicely into place. (Tanner 38)

The structure of blues lyrics usually consists of several three-line verses. The first line is sung and then repeated to roughly the same melodic phrase (perhaps the same phrase played diatonically a perfect fourth away), the third line has a different melodic phrase:

I'm going to leave baby, ain't going to say goodbye. I'm going to leave baby, ain't going to say goodbye. But I'll write you and tell you the reason why. (Kamien 519)

Construction Of The Blues

Most blues researchers claim that the very early blues were patterned after English ballads and often had eight, ten, or sixteen bars. (Tanner 36) The blues now consists of a definite progression of harmonies usually consisting of eight, twelve or sixteen measures, though the twelve bar blues are, by far, the most common.

The 12 bar blues harmonic progression (the one-four-five) is most often agreed to be the following: four bars of tonic, two of subdominant, two of tonic, two of dominant, and two of tonic. Or, alternatively, I,I,I,IV,IV,I,I,V,V,I,I. Each roman numeral indicates a chord built on a specific tone in the major scale. Due to the influence of rock and roll, the tenth chord has been changed to IV. This alteration is now considered standard. (Tanner 37) In practice, various intermediate chords, and even some substitute chord patterns, have been used in blues progressions, at least since the nineteen-twenties. (Machlis 578) Some purists feel that any variations or embellishments of the basic blues pattern changes its quality or validity as a blues song. For instance, if the basic blues chord progression is not used, then the music being played is not the blues. Therefore, these purists maintain that many melodies with the word "blues" in the title, and which are often spoken of as being the blues, are not the blues because their melodies lack this particular basic blues harmonic construction. (Tanner 37) I believe this viewpoint to be a bit wide of the mark, because it places a greater emphasis on blues harmony than melody.

The principal blues melodies are, in fact, holler cadences, set to a steady beat and thus turned into dance music and confined to a three-verse rhymed stanza of twelve to sixteen bars. (Lomax 275) The singer can either repeat the same basic melody for each stanza or improvise a new melody to reflect the changing mood of the lyrics. (Kamien 519) Blues rhythm is also very flexible. Performers often sing "around" the beat, accenting notes either a little before or behind the beat. (Kamien)

Jazz instrumentalists frequently use the chord progression of the twelve-bar blues as a basis for extended improvisations. The twelve or sixteen bar pattern is repeated while new melodies are improvised over it by the soloists. As with the Baroque bassocontinuo, the repeated chord progression provides a foundation for the free flow of such improvised melodic lines. (Kamien 520)

Conclusion

One of the problems regarding defining what the blues are is the variety of authoritative opinions. The blues is neither an era in the chronological development of jazz, nor is it actually a particular style of playing or singing jazz. (Tanner 35) Some maintain (mostly musicologists) that the blues are defined by the use of blue notes (and on this point they also differ - some say that they are simply flatted thirds, fifths, and sevenths applied to a major scale [forming a pentatonic scale]; some maintain that they are microtones; and some believe that they are the third, or fifth, or seventh tones sounded simultaneously with the flatted third, or fifth, or seventh tones respectively [minor second intervals]). Others feel that the song form (twelve bars, one-four-five) is the defining feature of the blues. Some feel that the blues is a way to approach music, a philosophy, in a manner of speaking. And still others hold a much wider sociological view that the blues are an entire musical tradition rooted in the black experience of the post-war South. Whatever one may think of the social implications of the blues, whether expressing the American or black experience in microcosm, it was their "strong autobiographical nature, their intense personal passion, chaos and loneliness, executed so vibrantly that it captured the imagination of modern musicians" and the general public as well. (Shapiro 13)

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