THE BLUES

The blues was the musical wellspring for rock & roll and the primary source of rock's urgency and emotional resonance. The direct, unadorned expression at the core of the blues—the emphasis on *feeling* above musical niceties and polished technique—informs the best rock music, while the flattened notes of the blues scale, the bent "blue notes" (the "notes between the notes" sung naturally by the human voice and mimicked by bent guitar strings and sliding saxophones, and approximated in black and white piano keys banged together) and other expressive devices of the blues lent musical grit and emotional depth to nearly all of the popular styles of the 20th century.

The blues was also the main source of rock's specific musical vocabulary. Most of the classic rock guitar lead, riff and rhythm patterns, for example, are directly descended from the rural acoustic blues of the Depression era and the electric urban blues of the post-war years, which also imparted the powerfully masculine imagery of the guitar itself. The rough-hewn, natural voices and emotional, note-bending singing styles of the blues were a further, liberating inspiration to young singers who had no time or talent for polite pop crooning. In contrast to the happy escape offered by popular entertainment, the blues seemed *real*, confronting the hardest times head-on and challenging its adherents to summon up the same tough stance in themselves.

The blunt sexuality of blues lyrics was certainly quite a contrast to the restraints of other styles: a country or popular or, Lord knows, gospel performer would never have dreamed of singing a blues staple like "you can squeeze my lemon till the juice runs down my leg..." The aggressive sexuality and macho posturing of the blues was mimicked with increasing boldness by rock performers who coveted the blues' expressive range and welcomed the controversy and devilish image the blues had always engendered. (The Rolling Stones, for example, built on their love for the blues to write songs and project an image very different from the pop-based cheeriness of the Beatles.)

The Outsider stance of the blues singers—an inescapable byproduct their skin color—was also refashioned to fit rock's rebellion, where the "struggle" was redefined in the context of young vs. old rather than black vs. white. The blues informed rock's sense of itself as a subculture outside of and even oppressed by the Establishment, a view that gained at least some credence during the Vietnam and Civil Rights era. And if a true blues "authenticity" was beyond the musical and experiential reach of young white singers like Elvis Presley or Mick Jagger, at least the spirit, intensity and rebellious individuality of the blues was theirs to claim and reshape in their own image.

The 12-Bar Blues

The musical form most associated with the blues—the 12-bar blues—was also borrowed frequently by other popular styles and was the musical framework for nearly all pre-Beatles rock & roll.[i] The 12-bar blues reflects the music's roots in the interaction between a leader and a group—a work crew or church congregation—that characterized both the slaves' "field holler" work songs and the repetitive "ring shouts" and "call-and-response" format of African-American religious music. This interaction is imbedded in the alternation between singing and instrumental "answers" and in the *aab* text format of a classic 12-bar blues, which consists of one line, sung twice, followed by a kicker, as in Robert Johnson's "Crossroads Blues":

Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride

Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride

Nobody seemed to know me, everybody passed me by.

The lyrics are set to a fixed sequence of accompanying chords that repeats, with new lyrics, every twelve measures:

- the first line (*a*) is sung to the home or "tonic" chord (the "**I**" chord; in the key of E, an **E** chord), followed by an instrumental answer or "response";

- the first line (*a*) is then repeated against a new, "subdominant" chord (the "**IV**" chord; in the key of E, an **A** chord—four steps up the scale from E), followed by a return to the home (I) chord and another instrumental response;

- the new line of lyrics (*b*) is sung to a new, climaxing "dominant" chord (the "**V**" chord; in the key of E, a **B** chord), which is resolved by a final return to the home chord and a preparation for the next 12-bar phrase.

Although the vast majority of blues songs utilize the 12-bar blues form, 8-bar, 16-bar and other adaptations are also fairly common, and many songs dispense with chord changes altogether and are instead shaped by a repeating riff (as in Howlin' Wolf's "Smokestack Lightnin'" and Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy") or hypnotic rhythm (as in John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillun" and almost any Bo Diddley song). In any case, the exact musical labels and theory are less important than the *feel* of the 12-bar blues (and it is certainly more complicated on paper than it is in the music). The overall motion and sense of inevitability created by each new chord and line of lyrics allows for unlimited repetitions without tedium, and highlights the individual expression each artist brings to this shared musical framework. In a similar way, blues lyrics, themes and phrases ("baby, where'd you stay last night," "that's all right, mama," "you're gonna need my help someday," and so on) formed a shared *lingua franca* that highlighted individual voices and visions against a shared language and context. As deceptively simple and evocative as a sonnet or Japanese haiku, the blues is supremely adaptable—unchanging and highly stylized, yet always fresh and capable of great expression.

Blues Roots

The roots of the blues stretches back to Africa and through the work songs, and dance accompaniments of African-Americans who, like their ancestors, viewed music as a part of everyday life and expression. Born in the cotton fields and the agony of slavery, the blues provided a common language for poor southern blacks. The music of the black church had a strong influence as well, both in the frenzied, hypnotic "ring shouts" and in the slow, stately spirituals that required an added measure of emotion that took the form of slurs, shouts, moans and bent, sorrowful blue notes: "the key note of blues and jazz, and the most haunting sound of the new world."[ii]

Religious songs and the blues both drew on real experience and provided a vision of escape—to a better life in heaven (or, perhaps, Chicago)—and a means of voicing pain with dignity and beauty. The slow, gloomy, solitary blues and the communal sorrow and celebration of black church music may have occupied opposite ends of the social and moral scale, but they were really two sides of the same emotional coin and a constant influence on each other, as the rural blues sound of gospel singer-guitarists like Blind Willie Johnson attests. (Not that one would admit to a fondness for blues in church,

where it was viewed as Devil's music, or around the more "respectable" members of the black community who tended to view it as the product of backwards rural people.)

The term "blues" dates back to "Blue Devils," a 16th century expression for depression or melancholia. By 1900 it was associated with a musical style as well, though no blues recordings were made until 1920 and the exact genesis of the blues remains something of a romantic mystery. Itinerant "songsters" and other 19th century blues predecessors played a variety of folk, popular, dancing, minstrel and religious songs on banjo, guitar, fiddle, mandolin and other mobile instruments (an eclectic folk tradition that was passed along in this century by Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly). Blues singers built on that tradition but developed strikingly individual styles and plaintive voices that lent a visceral chill to their accounts of love and hope lost. Their mournful "sung speech" melodies—sung within a narrow vocal range and punctuated by bending blue notes, growls, falsettos wails and aggressively rhythmic phrasing—were certainly very different from conventional European singing, pointing again to their earliest origins in the work songs that served as a means of expression and solace.

Ragtime & Jazz

The novel mixture of European harmonies with African-derived rhythmic syncopations sparked a craze for ragtime music at the turn of the century, making it the first widely-popularized blend of black and white in the post-minstrel era, and the first of many styles of black-based music—including blues, jazz, boogie-woogie, swing, rhythm & blues, rock & roll, soul, funk, disco, rap—to capture the general public's ear and imagination. Ragtime's piano roll precision and one-dimensional cheeriness limited its expressive range, but the increasing influence of the blues on pianists and ragtime bands inspired a more flexible and exciting music, dubbed "jazz," which gained popularity in the 1910's and then fueled the Roaring Twenties.

Meanwhile, in 1914, the year ragtime king Scott Joplin published his last piano rag, **W. C. Handy** published the classic "St. Louis Blues" and helped trigger a similar blues mania. A successful dance band leader, Handy heard the blues in the Mississippi Delta in 1903, then borrowed ideas from his rural counterparts and began writing and publishing his own original blues, beginning with 1912's "Memphis Blues." Handy's publishing success brought the blues to a wide audience and inspired a flood of popular songs from Tin Pan Alley that included "blues" in the title and lyrics, however ludicrously, to cash in on the craze.

[i]A short, merely representative list of songs employing the 12-bar blues includes "Rock Around the Clock," "Hound Dog," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Johnny B. Goode," "Long Tall Sally" (and virtually every other Chuck Berry and Little Richard song), "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," "What'd I Say," "The Twist" and "Wipe Out." The only other commonly used chord patterns in early rock & roll were the I-vi-IV-V pop-ballad progression, used on "Earth Angel," "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do" and most other doo-wop ballads and early sixties pop songs, and the I-IV-V-IV "garage rock" progression, used in "La Bamba," "Louie Louie," "Twist and Shout," etc.

[ii]Tony Heilbut, liner notes for "The Gospel Sound," Columbia Records.