

The blues are a strophic, lyric song form built on three short musical phrases, in duple meter, usually 4/4 time. A typical blues has a three line verse, each line having 4 measures (12 measures or bars in a verse), rhymed A-A-B with 5 stressed syllables. The first line is often repeated as the second line with the verses used "as thematic building blocks rather than narrative units." The third line usually addresses the concerns of the first two. Almost all blues are in a major key. The harmonic pattern is Tonic (1-4 measure) / subdominant (5-6) / tonic (7-8) / Dominant(9-10) / Tonic (11-12). Most urban blues will substitute a subdominant in the tenth measure. Blues of course take many other forms and many styles of music can be given a blues treatment.

The Blues originated in America's deep south, from Florida to Texas, with the Mississippi Delta making a strong claim as point of origin. This secular music began as an orally transmitted vocal folk form sometime after the Civil War and evolved into a commercial popular music.

The blues incorporates a range of attributes generally considered of West African origins: non-European polyrhythms, irregular or floating vocal accents, and a pentatonic vocal scale. Two African-American song forms that have had the greatest influence on creating blues are hollers and work songs or chants. Hollers are performed unaccompanied, usually in a high pitched vocal tone, having a loose rhythm, with short verses of simply rhymed material arranged in one or two melodic phrases. Hollers are generally linked to Texas. The earliest 'holler'-like blues were termed 'primitive' or 'field blues' or 'rural blues.' These were unaccompanied, improvised, emotional song in free rhythm, without measures, of indeterminate form and performance length. Work songs are associated with Mississippi Delta work-farms or prison gangs. Work songs have short phrases, vocal pauses and natural, strong regular rhythms derived from physical activity. Escape and love-gone-bad are major themes of these songs punctuated with familiar set phrases, wordless vocalizations and variation on a theme improvisations. Many work songs take a call-and-response form.

Anglo-American ballads are a source of much blues material. Good examples of this are the many blues versions of "John Henry" and "Careless Love." Christian religious music performed by African-Americans was less influential in the formation of the blues. The blues was the devil's music, the opposite of religious song. It was a distinction many bluesmen reveled in, and just as many blurred as religious songs were often given a blues treatment.

Certainly the spirituals' charged emotional delivery affected performance style. In content and mood, spirituals known as "sorrow songs," such as "Lay This Body Down," were important. To add to the confusion some work songs were taken from hymns and spirituals. For the most part blues lyrics were concerned with the realities of the here and now, not some future utopian reward.

So called 'blue notes,' common to blues, jazz and much African-American music are an attempt to reconcile the sung pentatonic scale with the European diatonic scale and Western instrumentation. To make an instrument sound more like what was sung the pitch would be raised or lowered slightly. These ambiguous, bent or flattened notes are usually on the 3d, 5th & 7 degree, on C major scale = E, G, B.

Another solution that was to become a characteristic of the blues was to use 'open chord' or 'slack key' tunings on the guitar, allowing a performer to slide a metal or glass object along the strings (bottleneck or slide style) to match the sung melody. On the piano the adjustment between the pentatonic and diatonic was a dialog between the left and right hand.

While conveying feelings to an audience was important, the blues, whether acoustic or electric, were primarily a dance music, most songs having a pronounced steady beat. Some guitar players, especially in Texas, would play more base line than melodic accompaniment.

The blues are an almost rigidly solo vocal form on record, as if there's no room for anyone else in this highly personalized music. The call and response common to West African root music and work song precursors takes form in an instrumental mimicking of a sung line, as is the repetition of a first line, and spoken asides, expostulations and shouts. Talking as likely as singing, wordless sounds common.

Blues music is often characterized as 'real' and 'authentic,' the performer sincere, serious, intense and passionate. Lyrics tend to display the same seriousness, often melancholy, occasionally raucous and humorous.

Lyric content conveys remorse, recrimination, seeks redress, blame, regret, loss, Despite the situation, an acceptance of the situation. Even when specific (names, places) the feeling is universal. Love is a problem in the blues. Sometime a song of complaint becomes a vehicle of protest.

In general, the playing and singing style is economical with few frills, a lot of space around each note. Vocal quality and playing technique are pretty rough. Hitting the right note is usually less important than conveying emotion.

Authenticity is conveyed because the singer's song is perceived as 'personal.' Performers of the blues are closely associated with the life they portrayed in song. Writer Mark A. Humphrey describes a tendency to characterize the Delta bluesman as Byronesque "brilliant, defiant, and self-destructive." It is this mythos, as embodied by and referencing the bluesman, that informs all underground youth music to this day.

The term "blues" was in use long before it described the music, indicating boredom prior to 1860 and unhappiness after. The word "Blues" is first used in a copy written commercial composition in 1912 titled, "The Dallas Blues" an instrumental by white Oklahoman Hart Wand, a dance orchestra leader. A few months later W.C. Handy published, "Memphis Blues" and in 1913, "St. Louis Blues," a tune that set the standard for the blues form.

The "St. Louis Blues," neatly encapsulates all the wonderful problems of characterizing and defining a "blues"; it incorporates popular dances of the time, including the tango and a rag, while it's sheet music proclaims it a ragtime composition that is "ushering in modern jazz."