

Country Blues

Country Blues styles are usually delineated by their region of origin, the Mississippi Delta, Texas and the Piedmont. Remember, within all these regions there are also Urban forms, centered around big cities/large metropolitan areas, and that travel and recordings kept styles fluid, allowing for non-regional influences.

Country Blues are variously/also referred to as Southern Blues, Mississippi Blues, Delta Blues, Folk Blues, Country Blues, 'Down Home' or Deep Blues. Most of the attributes defining the Blues (as described in the introductory info) describe Country Blues.

Delta or Mississippi or Country Blues

Delta Blues specifically references the Delta region of Mississippi, in the Northern and Western part of the state, between Memphis and Vicksburg (not near where the Mississippi River meets the Gulf - that's New Orleans). Probably the best candidate for where the blues began, this rural, heavily populated area of sharecroppers and farm laborers produced the greatest number of top notch blues pioneers, some of the earliest being Charlie Patton and Son House.

Here guitars are usually played chorded, with slide guitar common. This style of playing seems to have originated in Northwestern Mississippi on a folk instrument known as a "diddly-bow," made by stretching broom or baling wire along the wooden wall of a house. Sometimes a whole shack served as a resonator, with a nail on a rock for a bridge. Players would pluck the string or use a worn glass bottle or knife to slide along its surface, producing a glissando. This homemade instrument was often a learning tool to many Delta bluesmen.

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 have a call-and-response form. Charlie Patton was an innovator in that often his themes were about natural disasters and a few of his own personal ones.

Perhaps the best known Country Blues artists, more famous through his Black folk repertoire than any blues associations, was Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter).

As mentioned in the Urban Blues entry a clean distinction between Urban and Country is sometimes hard to make, and Border Blues, Memphis Border Blues or Jug Band Blues are major styles that originated in the countryside by rural string bands and codified in urban Memphis, TN.

Texas Blues

Texas Blues, in general, seem calmer and more relaxed than those from the Delta region do, as here slow blues and shuffles dominated. Artists favored plucked strings over chording songs, and in general the style could be characterized as relaxed and spare, with little ornamentation. The empty spaces created by this way of working left lots of room for the vocals to hover within, and the style fostered improvisational vocals. The vocal quality was also less gritty than Delta styles, often breathy, with songs exhibiting a slight accelerando as they moved along.

Hollers are generally linked to Texas Blues. 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. The earliest 'holler'-like blues were termed 'primitive' or 'field blues' or 'rural blues.' These were unaccompanied, improvised, emotional songs in free rhythm, without measures, of indeterminate form and performance length; the sound generally described as melancholy.

Well-known Texas artists who performed in the Holler-style include Blind Lemon Jefferson and Alger 'Texas' Alexander. Alexander was cousin to Lightnin' Hopkins who also incorporated a lot of Holler-style into his Blues.

Blind Lemon Jefferson was one of the earliest Texas artists to record in 1926, and his success played an important role in encouraging and influencing other artists. His style was minimal to the extreme; the guitar as such strummed sparingly as he sang over strong simple bass lines played on the instrument. Often he would stop playing and let his voice finish the melodic line. This pronounced bass line is a major characteristic of Texas Blues. Another characteristic with this more relaxed way of working was a less rigid rhythmic feel, with songs exhibiting more 'swing' than other blues.

East Coast, Seaboard or Piedmont Blues

Artists from the Southeast developed a blues similar to the blues found throughout the deep south that developed later and remained unchanged longer than the music of the Delta region. Artist in the southeast favored a more elaborate finger picked style of guitar playing over the slide or minimal

styles of other country bluesmen. Musicians here drew more heavily on European song forms, mixed more freely with white performers and favored dance tempos. So if the rhythm was regular to accompany dance, the range of influences created a more relaxed feeling.

Probably the most exceptional guitarist and renown artist was Blind Blake, someone we know practically nothing about except that he cut 80 sides for Paramount. Atlanta, GA, artists who recorded in the late 20s - early 30s include Blind Willie McTell, Barbecue Bob, Blind Boy Fuller, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Buddy Moss and Gary Davis. Carolinians included Josh White, Fulton Allen, and singer Pink Anderson and guitarist Floyd Council, the improbable namesakes of the rock group Pink Floyd.

Other Major Country Styles:

Other major rural, Southern styles grouped with Country Blues and less linked to a particular region because of their development throughout the South, include Holy or Gospel Blues, White Country Blues and Memphis Blues.

Holy or Gospel Blues

Many hymns, spiritual and camp meeting songs were sung in a blues style. Blind Joe Taggart, who usually accompanied himself on guitar, was the first to record a Gospel blues in 1926, "I Wish My Mother Was On That Train," performed a cappella with his wife. Texas born Blind Willie Johnson was considered one of the best. Edward Abbe Niles describes his "violent, tortured and abysmal shouts and groans and his inspired guitar..." Many religious artists singing gospel started as blues playing guitarists, including the Rev. Gary Davis and Pops Staple. The great Thomas A. Dorsey, abandoned hymn writing in the 1920s to played piano as Georgia Tom with "Ma" Rainey and Tampa Red, composing over 300 blues numbers. Later he returned to the church to become a leading Gospeler. It was common at train stations throughout the south to find itinerant singers performing Country Blues tinged spirituals and selling postcard sized sheets of paper with their lyrics called, "ballets."

White County Blues

Between 1925 and 1940 both city bred and country Blues based and Blues influenced music was a major component in white Country / "Hillbilly" music and Jazz dancebands. Regardless of what the music sounded like, songs with 'Blues' in the title proliferated. In truth the flow of folk music moved easily between performers of both races, and it was natural that the Blues structure

provided a basis for a wide range of hard time, hard-luck early Country music. Besides, few balked at bawdy lyrics couched in a 'blues.'

Probably the first to record, and one of the best white slide guitar players was Frank Hutchison, while another Virginian, Dock Boggs also specialized in the blues in the 1920s. Big stars of the time were the duo, Darby & Tarlton whose, "Birmingham Jail" / "Columbus Stockade Blues" sold over 200,000 copies. Uncle Dave Macon released the first recording ever to use the word 'hillbilly' in 1924s, "Hillbilly Blues." Brother act Austin & Lee's peppy and ragged, "Chattanooga Blues" was mistakenly issued as a race record on Columbia in 1927, illustrating the similarity between Black and White performance style at the time. One very influential singer was vaudevillian Emmett Miller, who performed in blackface and developed a wide range of comic song, breaking into falsetto mid-word and inventing a peculiar, personal 'yodeling' style.

Jimmy Rodgers perfected this yodel and borrowed liberally from Black southern singers to become far and away the best known white bluesman. Advertised as the "Blue Yodeler" and "Singing Breakman." Rodgers' 1928 song "Blue Yodel" sold at least a million copies. Call it plagiarism or proximity, his early recordings were often indistinguishable from those of African-Americans. Charles Wolf, in describing Rodgers' folksy interjections, could be summing up the genre as a whole; "...lyrics that had the effect, if not the intensity, of Blues."

Mandolinist Chris Bouchillon took white blues in a totally different direction in 1926 when he recorded, "Talking Blues." It was said that the session recordist thought Bouchillon's singing so bad he asked him to talk his blues. Black precursors included Talking Bill Anderson and Coley Jones, but the style was readily adopted by white bluesmen who performed on the radio in the 30s. Robert Lunn became the leading exponent, talking the Blues every Saturday night at the Grand Ole Opry for more than a decade. Today we know this style best from artists like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan.

Miller's and Rodgers' vocal tricks became the stuff Western Swing and singing cowboys were made of, while white Country Blues songs in general survive in bluegrass and country repertoires. Probably the most long lived influences can be found in the generations of southern white fiddlers and guitarists who incorporated Blues style matter of factly into Country music.

other names or sub-genres :	Folk Blues Down Home Delta Acoustic Deep Holy Blues Gospel Blues Mississippi Texas Piedmont East Coast Louisiana
era :	since 1860 to present heyday 1920s-1930 revival late 50s early 60
place :	Delta Mississippi Texas Piedmont East Coast Louisiana Georgia Tennessee California the Carolinas South Southern United States
meter :	slow moderate mid tempo
tempo :	duple 4/4 most common
instrumentation:	guitar harmonica
player or group configuration :	guitarist who sings. Less common: guitarist and harmonica or bass player less common: unaccompanied voice
vocalization :	solo male
lyric content :	betrayal and lost love hard times bad luck physical love
authenticity :	folk traditional
song or music structure or form	ballad lyric song folk song holler work song call and response talking
song or music sound description	acoustic un-amplified slide bottleneck chordal mournful melancholy airy base heavy intense sincere downtrodden defiant humorous ribald
gender :	male
remember :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACOUSTIC • MALE • AIRY GUITAR, LINES OFTEN FINISHED BY VOICE • BOTTLENECK • HARD LUCK, LOST LOVE & MELANCHOLY LYRICS

artist

song

specific keyword

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Charlie Patton	Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues High Water Everywhere	Delta
Son House	Preachin' the Blues	Delta
Mississippi John Hurt	Spike Driver Blues	Delta
Bukka White	The Panama Limited	Delta
Skip James	Devil Got My Woman Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues	Delta
Leadbelly	Midnight Special Good Mornin' Blues	Louisiana
Furry Lewis	I Will Turn Your Money Green Kassie Jones	Memphis
Sleepy John Estes	Deep South Blues	Memphis
Big Joe Williams	Baby Please Don't Go	Delta
Robert Johnson	I Believe I'll Dust My Broom Cross Road Blues Love In Vain Sweet Home Chicago	Delta
Blind Blake	Blind Arthur's Breakdown	Piedmont
Blind Willie McTell	Statesboro Blues	Piedmont
Blind Boy Fuller	Step It Up and Go	Piedmont
Rev. Gary Davis	I Saw the Light	Piedmont
Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee	Stranger Blues	Piedmont
Blind Lemon Jefferson	Match Box Blues That Black Snake Moan That Crawlين' Baby Blues	Holler-style Texas
Texas Alexander	Texas Easy Street	Holler-style Texas
Lightnin' Hopkins	Penitentiary Blues Short Haired Woman	Post-war Texas
Blind Joe Taggart	I Wish My Mother Was On That Train	Gospel Blues
Blind Willie Johnson	Jesus Is Coming Soon	Gospel Blues
Darby & Tarlton	Birmingham Jail	White Country Blues
Jimmy Rodgers	Blue Yodel	White Country Blues