Queen of the Blues

Dinah Washington
AZZ MUSIC HAS OFTEN BEEN CALLED THE ONLY ART FORM to originate in the United States, yet blues music arose right beside jazz. In fact, the two styles have many parallels. Both were created by African-Americans in the southern United States in the latter part of the 19th century and spread from there in the early decades of the 20th century; both contain the sad sounding “blue note,” which is the bending of a particular note a quarter or half tone; and both feature syncopation and improvisation.

Blues and jazz have had huge influences on American popular music. In fact, many key elements we hear in pop, soul, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll have their beginnings in blues music. A careful study of the blues can contribute to a greater understanding of these other musical genres. Though never the leader in music sales, blues music has retained a significant presence, not only in concerts and festivals throughout the United States but also in our daily lives. Nowadays, we can hear the sound of the blues in unexpected places, from the warm warble of an amplified harmonica on a television commercial to the sad cry of a slide guitar on a new country and western song.

What exactly are the blues? According to renowned songwriter and record producer Willie Dixon, the blues are “the true facts of life.” Let’s find out what he meant by going back to the birth of the blues, to where it all began.

(opposite)

Dinah Washington
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Born in 1924 as Ruth Lee Jones, she took the stage name Dinah Washington and was later known as the “Queen of the Blues.” She began with singing gospel music in Chicago and was later famous for her ability to sing any style music with a brilliant sense of timing and drama and perfect enunciation. By today’s standards, she would be considered a cross-over star. During her short career, she had over 40 hit songs in blues, jazz, R&B, and pop. In 1959, she recorded one of her best selling hits, “What a Difference a Day Makes.” In 1963 at the age of 39, Washington died from an accidental overdose of diet pills.
The History of the Blues

Out of the great suffering of African-Americans came the art form known as the blues. Between 1619 and 1808, thousands of West Africans, many from the Arada, Dahomey, and Fulani tribes, were captured at gunpoint and under brutal conditions brought to the New World as slaves. They were sold at auctions, brought to large farms and plantations, and forced to work in the fields from sunrise until sunset with little regard for their humanity. While working, they expressed their sorrow by singing old melodies from Africa. In the work song tradition of their former homeland, workers sang together. Many of these work songs had a call-and-response pattern in which one person led by singing a line that others repeated or “answered” in song. This type of song was called a “field holler.”

After the freeing of the slaves in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation and through the decades afterward, African-Americans in the South kept their work songs and worked the same fields as poorly paid tenant farmers. They were exposed to European music through their churches and through traveling shows and circuses. Some blacks participated in minstrel shows, a type of musical comedy review. The variations of old African melodies, combined with exposure to musical styles of Europe, developed into the form of music we know today as the blues. Around 1900, the guitar replaced the originally African banjo as the primary blues instrument, and the call-and-response pattern of the earlier field hollers was mirrored in the way the singer’s words were “answered” by the guitar player.

The Blues Go to the City

Blues music traveled with southern black Americans from rural farms to the cities along the Mississippi River, in particular New Orleans, Memphis, and St. Louis. Traveling bandleader W.C. Handy noted the growth of this new form by writing the songs “Memphis Blues” in 1912 and “St. Louis Blues” in 1914. In 1920, “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith was the first blues record. During the 1920s and 1930s, the blues flourished, and a number of singers and musicians became popular among the African-American community through their concerts and records sales.

Many blues-playing African-Americans moved to the northern cities during World War II. After the war, a new kind of blues, urban blues, developed. In the late 1940s, the urban blues became electrified, and drums were added to a band lineup that now included bass, piano, electric guitar, and amplified harmonica. Chicago became the capital of the new electric blues, and by the
The early hits of stars like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis in the 1950s followed the chord progressions and verse patterns of a standard twelve-bar blues. The basic beat of the blues, a syncopated 4/4 rhythm with a strong backbeat, was also used. However, it was a speeding up of the beat that allowed characteristics of the blues to evolve into rock and roll. Guitarist Chuck Berry’s 1954 recording “In the Wee, Wee Hours” has the same rhythm guitar pattern that, played twice as fast in 1955, became the hit “Johnny B. Goode.” Little Richard’s hits “Tutti Frutti” and “Lucille” are essentially blues songs, speeded up a bit. Eventually, rock and roll became a huge part of popular music, while the blues retained its small market.

In one of his numerous hit songs, Muddy Waters sang,

**Here’s a story that’s never been told:**
One of the blues got pregnant
And they named the baby
‘rock and roll.’

**Muddy Waters**  
1915–1983  
Blues composer and guitarist
SONG STRUCTURE

The basic structure of the standard blues song has changed little since W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” of 1914. A blues verse usually has three lines over twelve measures, or bars. The root (one) chord of a major scale is played during the first line for the first four measures, then the four chord is played for measures five and six, and the one chord is played again for measures seven and eight. The last line is different, with the five chord played for measures nine and ten and the one chord played again for measures eleven and twelve. A verse in a blues song has three lines of lyrics; the first and second lines are the same (with different chords) while the third line is different. This structure is known as “twelve-bar blues.” For example, from “St. Louis Blues”:

INSTRUMENTATION

In modern blues bands with electrified instruments, there is more than one standard set of instruments. For Chicago-style urban blues, the lineup is an electric guitar and amplified harmonica as lead instruments, and a rhythm section of bass, drums, piano, and rhythm guitar. Bands from the South, such as Memphis and New Orleans, often have wind sections of saxophones and trumpets, but these instruments are rarely featured soloists. The singer’s voice has always been prominently featured in blues music, but primarily as a lead singer. Harmony vocals are rare in the blues. By the 1960s, however, the blues had lost much of its following and many of the original blues artists had retired or passed away. The appearance of old blues songs on the recordings of popular rock bands, such as the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, led to a rediscovery of the blues by younger audiences. Many older blues musicians, some who had made their first records decades earlier, were rediscovered, including Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Freddie King, James Cotton, Bo Diddley, Howlin’ Wolf, John Lee Hooker, and B.B. King. As younger audiences embraced the blues, no longer was it the sole province of black musicians. White musicians, such as guitarist Duane Allman and Johnny Winter and harmonica player Paul Butterfield, became well known for their inspired interpretations of older blues compositions. Blues music also became popular with British musicians. Pianist-harmonica player John Mayall led a blues band that featured a succession of guitar virtuosos, including Eric Clapton, who later went on to record numerous blues songs and bring blues music to a wide audience of rock fans. Ironically, young white British musicians were largely responsible for the revival of the blues.
blues in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. Social commentators have credited this musical integration of older black musicians and young white audiences with contributing to the success of the civil rights movement in the United States and, ultimately, helping to improve race relations there.

Although the blues and today’s pop music have little in common musically, there are a surprising number of similarities between the blues and hip hop. Both were created by poor African-Americans; both start with a steady, primitive beat; both feature singers lamenting the hardships and injustices of life; and both feature the call-and-response pattern of singing. Because the blues has served as the basis for other forms of American music, its influence has been significant.
Current State of the Blues

Blues music is seeing a resurgence in popularity and now enjoys a broad contemporary market of listeners and concert goers. A few of the older generation bluesmen are still alive and remain active in the music scene. B. B. King and Buddy Guy are leading the way for younger musicians who are continuing their traditions. King won the 2001 Handy Award for contemporary album of the year for “Riding With the King,” his long-awaited collaboration with Eric Clapton. Guy plays at with his blues club Legends in Chicago, and his release “Sweet Tea” won the 2002 Handy Awards for male artist and guitarist of the year. Some of the most notable members of the younger generation of blues musicians include singer and guitarist Robert Cray, singer Etta Smith, guitarist Keb’ Mo,’ multi-instrumentalist Lucky Peterson, and harmonica player Sugar Blue.

A number of record companies feature blues artists. Chicago’s Alligator Records is one of the few recording companies dealing only in blues music. Mississippi-inspired Malaco Records has been recording blues acts for years and is currently featuring Little Milton, Bobby Bland, and Bobby Rush, among others. Chess Records has recently reissued collections of classic blues recordings.

Live blues music continues to remain popular among concert and club audiences, who appreciate its fundamental qualities of deep feeling and improvisation. Blues festivals have proliferated, with most featuring band after band, all aimed at satisfying their eager fans who love nothing better than listening to the blues from afternoon until dawn.

Web Sites of Interest

The Blues Foundation
http://www.blues.org/

This organization, based in Memphis, Tennessee, conducts the W.C. Handy Awards. Its goals, according to the foundation’s Web site, are “preserving blues history, celebrating blues excellence, and celebrating blues education.”

The Blue Highway
http://www.thebluehighway.com/

This Web site has biographies of blues musicians, news and essays about the blues, and a listing of blues radio stations. It includes an extensive, alphabetical listing of blues bands currently performing in the United States.

It’s Biscuit Time on the Blues Web
http://www.island.net/~blues/

Hosted by harmonica player and writer Tony Glover, this Web site is loaded with music samples, interviews with musicians, and articles about the blues.

Living Blues
http://www.livingblues.com

This is the Web site of the magazine of the same name published by the University of Mississippi. According to the site, the magazine has been “the authoritative source on the blues” since it was founded in 1970.

Blues in Britain
http://blueprint-blues.co.uk/

This is the Web site of the British blues magazine of the same name. The site contains information about blues music in the United Kingdom. It has hundreds of links to blues resources on the Internet.

References


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