African American Blues

Music has always been an important element in cultures and societies around the world. Story telling accompanied by drumbeats, fiddles, pianos, guitars and other instruments can be seen and heard throughout any civilization and its history. However, African culture and history has always had a deeper tie to music in my opinion. Ceremonies, whether religious, celebratory, or war like have all included some sort of musical instrument. Without African culture in North America, several types of music may not have developed and the blues as we know them would not be the same. African Americans created the Blues genre as a way to express their frustrations and emotions. Blues music is arguably the foundation for several popular styles and genres of today. Therefore, African American influence on American culture and music must be acknowledged.

This project begins with the origin of African culture and the diaspora to the United States. Once a foundation is established it is easier to understand how and why the blues are created. Transitioning from the foundation of the blues, elements and characteristics linked to this genre are analyzed. Then, several blues musicians are discussed and there is an examination pertaining the documentation of blues as a whole. This influential genre has been a style of music that many still associate with today and its roots tie deep to our culture in the United States.

Primary sources throughout this project range from lyrics of the great blues musicians to Alan Lomax’s documentation throughout the South. Several secondary sources are also utilized. Two of the more useful sources come from Eileen Southern’s, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* and Kevin Greene’s, “Just a Dream”:
Community, Identity, and the Blues of Big Bill Broonzy. These two scholars are experts on African culture and music. Kevin Greene focuses on Big Bill Broonzy, the Chicago migration, and the blues. Eileen Southern, on the other hand, provides a broad view of African American culture and influence, creating a strong foundation for understanding African music and its origins.

Introduction

When looking at music from a historical perspective, it is evident that there is a natural progression and integration of previous styles still heard in modern music. In order to understand the creation of the blues, one must listen to the music that came before it. Starting from the beginning, music was always a major part of African culture. With the birth of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Africans were drastically being separated from their homes and removed from their cultures. However, these Africans would bring their culture and beliefs with them to the new lands.

Evidence shows that aboard some slave ships, Africans were allotted time to dance, sing, and play music on the decks. While this gesture may seem nice, there were ulterior motives. It was for both entertainment and to let them exercise so they would be in better health once they reached their final destination.¹

As Africans became integrated into the slave system they were commonly placed into hard manual labor. Southern plantations were amongst the worst places for a slave. While working together Africans were starting to form a bond. When in the fields it has been recorded that slaves would sing songs in call and response form. Wooing about the

days work and how they missed their families, Africans would eventually translate these songs into the blues.

Prior to the blues genre, ragtime music was stretching across the United States. “In 1897, the first black man to produce a ragtime piece, *Harlem Rag*, was Tom Turpin.”

Ragtime music embraced a new style of piano playing that was never heard before and echoed the rhythm of some songs heard in the slave fields. Choppy chords along with progressively walking through scales are commonly heard throughout the genre of ragtime music. “The style of piano-rag music- called “jig piano” by some- was a natural outgrowth of dance-music practices among black folks.” However, a lack of other instruments behind the piano gave the musician the task of creating deeper elements within the music. “The left hand took over the task of stomping and patting while the right hand performed syncopated melodies.”

**The Creation of the Blues and the African American Influence**

Music has been a uniting factor bringing people of all different ethnic groups together for several generations. Prior to desegregation, the division of white and black folks was a fundamental element in the creation of the blues genre. Singing about the harsh exploitation of the slave trade and treatment of African Americans were popular topics. Artists such as Big Bill Broonzy, Charlie Patton, Ruth Brown, Willie Brown, Robert Johnson, Skip James, Ray Charles, and BB King carved the genre of the blues.

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3 Ibid. p 313
4 Ibid.
Plucking six strings and strumming away from the traditional musical form led to the establishment of the blues era.

The early twentieth century saw a transition from the traditional style of European classical music. “Large numbers of musically illiterate black music makers were not aware of its existence, and many blacks who could read music were unconcerned about it.” The traditional orchestra and symphony style of music was not the right sound to express the emotions of African Americans. There was a need to express emotion and tell a story while creating music. Eileen Southern writes:

The effect of slavery had been to create distinct and separate communities of blacks within the larger white communities of the nation, and the emancipation of the slaves did nothing to change this situation. Blacks lived, for the most part, in their own world and developed their own institutions and culture. Of particular relevance here is the fact that the black music maker developed a distinctive style of entertainment music, fitted to his own personal needs and expressive of his own individuality. It was not intended to be heard or understood by whites.

The idea that blacks created and developed their own institutions and culture is a very important note. With the creation of distinct societies and groups, one would have to agree and argue that there would be a creation of new customs and beliefs, or the continuation of long lasting customs from Africa. Along with customs and beliefs, their own music style, language and other elements would be integrated. Typically, in any setting whether white or black, people tend to form groups according to various qualities, beliefs and backgrounds. Blacks would form this new style of music in order to share their experience with other black folks.

There have been several different years associated with the foundation of the blues, but Southern argues that in 1903 it was heard and recorded for the first time.

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5 Southern, 311
6 Ibid, p 312
“W.C. Handy, the first man to popularize the blues, was struck with the possibilities of utilizing it in musical composition in 1903 when he heard a man singing a song in a Mississippi train station.”7 Another artist who is popularly identified with the blues is the earliest professional blues singer, Ma Rainey (Gertrude Melissa Nix Pridget Rainey). She claimed that she gave the songs the name “blues.”8 Other artists argue that the blues had existed years before Ma Rainey. New Orleans in particular was a culturally diverse center for artists throughout the south. “In New Orleans, even the street vendors used the blues, advertising their wares by playing blues on top horns bought from Kress’s dime stores.”9

As the blues progressed from the homes of players to the streets, there was an entertainment side to the music. Francis Davis writes:

These shacks in which the blues began its transformation from a form of self-expression to a form of entertainment were called juke houses. Juke is an African retention, a word meaning “evil, disorderly, wicked” in Bambara, a language spoken in parts of the Congo.10

The migration of blacks led to the creation of small towns and areas where the dominant population was of African descent. Every day, Africans would face the hardship of trying to survive. This can be heard in almost all blues music, the fight for survival. Listeners can hear the soul and hurt in the voices of blues singers and the lyrics often express as much emotion as the singer does.

7 Ibid. p 332
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Variations of the Blues

According to musical historians, there are four main types of blues music. Transitioning from the South, there are the Delta Blues, Chicago Blues, Texas Blues, and Blues Rock. The Delta Blues was the original type of blues music and was often played by black men from the Mississippi delta region. Artists that identify with this style of blues would be Charley Patton, Eddie J. “Son” House, Robert Johnson, Willie Brown, and Muddy Waters. As the blues traveled and progressed, there was a movement to the North. Chicago was next in line to have the blues. Greene argues that within this world musicians learned their art, honed their craft, established crucial musical networks, and developed identities outside of their labor pursuits that perpetuated the popularity and growth of Chicago’s blues.  

New inventions allowed singers and guitar players to amplify their voices and instruments. With a louder sound there was the addition of drums, horns, electric guitars and bass. Davis writes:

When Muddy Waters boarded that train in 1943, the Delta that Charley Patton had known no longer existed. When Waters plugged his guitar into an amplifier in Chicago a few years later, the transformation of the blues from a rural folk idiom to an urban popular music had already been underway for several decades….  

Greene also writes:

As southern migrants poured into Chicago beginning in 1940, it is hardly surprising that this rawer and edgier electrified Delta blues would follow them. This is what these migrants had heard on the radio, in juke joints, and in barrelhouses throughout the South during the period, and this is the sound that Muddy Waters mastered in Chicago.  

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12 Davis, p 48
13 Greene, p 148
Over the next fifty years the blues developed and morphed to become blues-rock. This occurred during the early 1960s and caught the attention of both black and white folks across the country. While copying the styles of Delta and Chicago blues, young artists were now adding a new twist to the element of blues playing. Some typical bands and players who identify with the new “blues rock” would be The Rolling Stones, ZZ Top. Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton and John Mayer.

The issue of race relations was heightened throughout the 1900s and both black and white folks experienced such notions throughout the South as well as the North. Blacks were migrating North in hopes of getting away from the fierce Jim Crow South only to find that racism was still dominant across the country. The creation of Chicago Blues was influenced by this migration. Greene writes:

> The issue of race greatly influenced Big Bill Broonzy’s identity and his negotiation of a new urban environment. He had left Arkansas to avoid embarrassing racist confrontations only to find that race also affected the lives of both black and whites in the North.\(^{14}\)

**Characteristics of the Blues**

Blues music does not have a specific cut formula one must use in order to achieve the sound affiliated with the blues; however, there are certain elements that must be present in order for music to be considered in the “blues” genre. For instance, often times a blues song reflects on a personal experience of the player and demonstrates the loss and hardship they are enduring. Subjects such as losing a loved one, losing a job, or just losing something in general may be considered “bluesy.” This provides a connection between the player and the audience in most situations.

\(^{14}\) Ibid. p 41
“Most frequently, the blues has a three-line stanza, of which the second line is a restatement of the first and the third line is a contrasting statement.”\(^\text{15}\) Along with the three-line stanza is the integration of the twelve bar structure. “Blues is typically performed in 12-bar structure, with a standard harmonic progression in 4/4 or 2/4 time.”\(^\text{16}\)

**12-Bar Blues Chord Progression**

![12-Bar Blues Chord Progression](http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary/appendix/blues/12-barblues.jpg)

Big Bill Broonzy demonstrates the classic picking style used when playing the blues in his trio of songs titled “Worried Man Blues, Hey, Hey and How You Want it Done.”\(^\text{18}\) He utilizes the call and response element while talking about finding his “baby.” Using AAB rhyme patterns and then progressing to a response with his guitar is a fundamental element of the blues.

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15 Davis, p 334
(Pictured above: Big Bill Broonzy smoking a cigarette and plucking the blues.)

However, it must be noted that some of the ideas and images depicted in songs both by Big Bill Broonzy and other blues artists have been known to be false. Some stories told in blues songs are not always factual events that happened to the specific artist. This is important to note because this issue ties back to the idea of folklore and story telling in African American history. Stories are being passed from ear to ear across the South.

Another typical element of the blues structure is the “call and response.” This element gives a communication depth to the song and is a basic element of musical form. For example, the singer would input his voice, and then immediately after respond with his or her musical instrument. This element vocal is also heard in several slave songs while working in the fields. One famous blues musician who was a key advocate of this musical element was, Robert Johnson.

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Documenting the Blues and Famous Musicians

While writing about sorrows and hard times, African American blues artists were struck hard by the segregation laws and Jim Crow era of the 1900s. Alan Lomax was travelling through Memphis when he came across an old tailor shop in the “black” part of town. Whites were not allowed in some buildings and Lomax was out of place. Behind the screen were two men playing guitars and singing the blues together. Lomax leaned up against the wall and listened to part of the song when one of the singers, Willie B., stuck his head out and told him to come in where he could hear better. Willie B. sung: “I’m goin down to the river, sit down and begin to cry. If the blues overtake me, I’ll drink that old river dry.”

The line seen above is a classic example of blues patterns, rhyme and repetition. “Goin down to the river” is a common concept seen in blues because these African singers sometimes referred to the “river” as a place of drinking. “If the blues overtake me, I’ll drink that old river dry” means the singer will drink his sorrows away until there isn’t anything left to drink. There is also a specific rhyme scheme involved and this helps with the rhythm of the blues.

Alan Lomax has been an important figure in documenting music and culture throughout the south. In the preface of, “The Land Where The Blues Began” Lomax writes:

The blues has always been a state of being as well as a way of singing. Leadbelly once told me, “When you lie down at night, turning from side to side, and you can’t be satisfied no way you do, Old Man Blues got you.”

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African American history has often been associated with folk tales and griots, keepers of history. These songs that were popularly sung throughout the Deep South spread by word of mouth and eventually by recordings. Muddy Waters and Alan Lomax shared several stories together as well as played the blues on different occasions. In an interview Lomax conducted, he asked Waters about the different feelings he had when writing the blues. Lomax writes:

Alan Lomax: Tell me, if you can remember, when it was that you made that blues. Muddy Waters (softly): I made it about the eight of October in ‘thirty-eight. A.L. Do you remember where you were, what you were thinking about? M.W.: Arkansas- I was changing a tire on my car. I had been mistreated by a girl, and it got running in my mind to sing this song. So I just felt blue and the song fell into my mind and come to me just like that and I started singing.\(^1\)

This interview was conducted after Waters finished performing the song, *Country Blues* for Lomax. *Country Blues* is one of the most covered songs to this day by musicians of all genres. In a version played for Lomax, the lyrics went like this:

Well, its getting late on the evenin’
I feel like, feel like blowin my horn.
I woke up this morning, find my,
My little easy, my little easy gone

Minutes seem like hours and
Hours now, oh it seems like days.
 Seems like my little woman
Better stop her lowdown ways.

I b’lieve I’ll go back to Memphis, boys,  
Gonna have some of this here hambone boiled  
I done laid round Clarksdale and  
I’m about to let my old, my little old hambone spoil.

Yes I’m goin back to St. Louis,  
I’m gonna have my little churnin done  
I can’t find no country woman can make my low-down,  
My little old butter come.

\(^1\) Ibid. p 409
Well now, bye-bye, babe, I ain’t got me
No more to say.
Just like I been tellin you, gal,
You gonna have to need my help some day.22

Another famous blues musician who must be recognized is Robert Johnson, born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, May 8, 1911.23 His famous song “Cross Road Blues” has been covered and played by almost any blues musician in the world. Johnson spent much of his life on plantations in the northern Delta. He moved with his family to Memphis in 1914, staying there until 1918, when his stepfather sent him to live at the Abbay and Leatherman Plantation near Robinsonville, Mississippi. This was where Johnson began playing harmonica and associating with older blues musicians.24 The following is a short excerpt from Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” Johnson sings:

I went to the crossroad,
Fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad
Fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above “Have mercy, now
Save poor Bob, if you please.25

Big Bill Broonzy is another famous blues musician who has become popularly identified with the transition from the delta blues to the Chicago blues. Making his way through the Chicago circuit was hard work. Big Bill was also very involved in the race relations surrounding the Chicago area. Blacks were branching out of the stereotypical job market as the economy was expanding. However, there was still racist sentiment

22 Ibid. p 408-409
23 Ibid.
towards blacks. Broonzy vented his emotions and thoughts on life through several of his songs. Kevin Greene writes:

In 1925, still a dedicated fiddle player, Broonzy bought his first guitar for $1.50 on Maxwell Street’s famous open-air market. For about a year, with the help of his newfound acquaintances, he polished his guitar chops among some of the city’s best and brightest blues talents.  

Muddy Waters once said:

There's no way in the world I can feel the same blues the way I used to. When I play in Chicago, I'm playing up-to-date, not the blues I was born with. People should hear the pure blues - the blues we used to have when we had no money.

It is clearly evident that African American blues has been an influential genre of music heard around the world. Inspired by harsh times and lifestyles, artists vented their feelings into the songs and music they produced. Without African American culture in the south, the blues may have never been created. The early 1900s saw and heard some of the best musicians travel and play. From poor southern towns to the big city of Chicago, influential artists such as Big Bill Broonzy, Charlie Patton, Ruth Brown, Willie Brown, Robert Johnson, Skip James, Ray Charles, and BB King paved the blues genre. Other artists have since played the blues and developed other styles but nothing compares to the soulful playing of the legends before them.

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26 Greene, p 65  
27 http://www.bluesquotes.com/search/label/Muddy%20Waters%20Quotes
Bibliography


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