

BLUES

Of all the Afro-American idioms in the background of jazz, by far the most important and influential is the Blues. Like the word Jazz, blues does not describe a melancholy or sad mood; it refers to a definite musical form which has been used to express a variety of moods. That form does not seem to have originated in Africa or Europe, but rather represents a coming together of elements from both traditions, a coming-together brought about largely by Afro-Americans and probably dating back to pre-emancipation times.

Like much music, the blues undoubtedly began as a kind of slow, rhythmic chant or lament. At least by the teens of this century, however, its music and its words had come to have a regular and apparently accepted form.

Musically, blues had come to mean a regular 12 bar form., usually harmonized (in simpler versions) with 4 measures on a I chord, two on a IV chord, two back to a I chord, two on a V chord, then the final two on a I chord. IE,

Bb	Eb	Bb	Eb	Bb	F	Eb	Bb
m.1	m.2	m.3-4	m. 5-6	m.7-8	m.9	M.10	m.11-12

To the layman, blues form is best known through its vocal version and its verse, or stanza, form. This form consists of a line (of approximate iambic pentameter length), the same line repeated exactly the same (or almost exactly the same), plus a third line of terminal length. For ie.,

*“Don’t the moon look lonesome shinin’ through the trees.
“Yes, the moon looks lonesome, shinin’ through the trees,
“Don’t your house look lonesome when your baby packs up to leave”*

Some quite simple blues achieve a high degree of poetry in their lyrics. More important from a musical standpoint, however, the blues were sung with melodic spontaneity (if the singer could manage it) and with high emotion manifest in various bent, quavered and freely inflected pitches and tones. These resources are common in African music and are analogous to practices in others of the worlds music’s as well.

When the blues came to be written down in Western notation-around the teens of this century-and played on western instruments, the standard was to the European system of pitch and, more specifically, the tuning of the piano keyboard. It became conventional to represent the bent tones of the blues by lowering or flattening the third or the seventh (later also the fifth) step in the scale, and these came to be called the blues scale.

C D Eb E F Gb G A Bb B C to C Eb F Gb G Bb C

In practice, bent notes can come almost anywhere the singer or player wants or feels them., but instrumentalists most often tend to flat the 3rd, 5th or the 7th.

For a singer, bending a note is simple enough, and a player of a stringed instrument, it is easy enough to bend pitch. Other instrumentalist “lip” these notes, and brass player can use 1/2 valves effects and a variety of mutes. Even pianists have learned

to “curve” or “bend” sound, through particular manipulation of touch, finger position and pedal. Monk was a specialist of textural manipulations.

The blues had become an instrumental as well as a vocal form as early as the twenties, and probably earlier. A player or group could improvise blues melodies (or interpret indigenous or traditional ones) for as many choruses as inspiration held up, using as a guide the 12 measure form and blues harmonic outline, repeated in cycles.

Trumpeter Henry “Red” Allen once said when playing the blues, “It’s like somebody making your lip speak, making it say things he thinks.....The Blues is a slow story. The feeling of beautiful things that happen to you is in the blues; it’s a home language, like 2 friends talking. It’s the language everybody understands”.

One significant fact is that as the instrumental blues were refined and developed, the blues notes did not get refined away or “corrected” but were retained right along with other aspects of the music. Furthermore, players were expected to find their own sounds, own voices, on their instruments just the way the singers did. And blues forms and practices began to be applied to other forms. Thus in 1947, a “modern” jazzman improvising on “All the Things You Are”, could use a personal melodic invention and employ the blues scale in a quite different context.

As suggested above, some melodies with blues in their titles are not really blues at all. This applies to tunes like “Singin’ the blues”, “I gotta Right to Sing the Blues”, but occasionally to jazz repertory as well, for ie, Jelly roll morton’s “Wolverine Blues” and Ellington’s “Old Man Blues”.

There are other forms of the blues as well, for example “How Long, How long in Trouble in Mind” is an 8 bar form, Louie Armstrong’s “Potato Head Blues” is a 16 bar expanded form. There is another 16 bar tradition jazz musicians have borrowed from the European traditional song “Old MacDonald Had a Farm”, which is also 16 bars in length, in which jazzmen have treated as blues. Examples would range from Sonny Rollins “Doxy” (recorded in the late 50’s)to Jimmy Noone’s “My Daddy Rocks Me”, recorded in the 1920’s. There are also 4 bar tags on tunes such as “Blue Suede Shoes” by Carl Perkins increasing the form to 16 bars.

Bessie Smith was the early Blues diva in the 1920’s. Her releases included tunes such as “Lost Your Head Blues”, “Young women blues” and combined with Louis Armstrong to record “West End Blues”. Her recordings helped to solidify 12 bar form and practice.

The vocal blues tradition has remained a vital tradition. It has become known also as R&B and manifested itself into popular musical styles, even R&Roll.

W.C. Handy first published “St. Louis blues” in 1914. He was one of the first folklorists collecting many early melodies from musicians, paying for the rights and publishing the music himself. Although he did not always stick to the original forms, and was erroneously called the “Father of the Blues”, he did much to help popularize this tradition in the early years of Jazz and blues evolution.

(Notes Taken from and based on *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz [Revised Edition]* by Martin Williams)

Three categories of Blues:

- a) Country Blues
- b) Classic Blues
- c) Urban and Instrumental Blues

1. Country, Southern or Folk Blues

Rural folk expression usually performed by a male singer. If it is accompanied, the singer usually plays the accompaniment himself on a simple folk instrument (fiddle, banjo, or guitar.)

Key Performers|:

- Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly)
- Blind Lemon Jefferson – “Black Snake Moan”
- Robert Johnson-”Hellhound on My Trail”

2. Classic Blues

Often sung by women, bridged the gap between folk music and the entertainment world. An art that was developed in minstrel shows and Black theaters.

These city Blues gave voice to the more callous aspects of ghetto life and attitudes. Key Performers:

- “Ma” Gertrude Rainey – “Moonshine Blues Blues”
- Bessie Smith – “Lost Your Head Blues”

3. Urban & Instrumental Blues

Key Performers: Jimmy Rushing, Joe Turner, “Hot Lips” Page and Louie Armstrong.

-Instrumental blues was void of lyrics or vocal lines

-Generally 12 bar blues bases around three chords I, IV, and V which served for countless instrumental compositions and improvisations in Jazz

-The 12-bar Blues became standard with instrumental ensemble musicians during the 1920’s.

Joe “King” Oliver “Dippermouth Blues”

Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith “West End Blues”

W.C. Handy

Published the first blues composition (“The Memphis Blues” 1912)

His most famous composition “St. Louis Blues” 1914

Blues Facts:

- 1) By far the most significant and influential idiom on Jazz.
- 2) Refers to a musical form, (12 bar matured) with 3 basic chords.
- 3) To the layman, it’s best known version is a lyrical A-A-B.
- 4) Many or most performances were improvised.

- 5) Intonation and use of the Blues scale (lowered 3rd, 5th and 7th). Early transcribers did not know how to dictate because of the bent pitch.
- 6) By the 1920's, instrumental blues grows into it's own tradition.
- 7) Blues inflects in traditional improvisations and teaches the improviser expression.
- 8) Blues becomes the predecessor of R&B, boogie-woogie style. W.C. Handy combined blues with early rag forms and style as well. This gave ragtime soul!
- 9) Blues had three basic forms of 8, 12 and 16 bars. The 12 bar form prevailed as most common.
- 10) Early blues used irregular phrase structure, and was dominated by the lyric with call and response.
- 11) Blues introduces riffs and arrangements to the Jazz idiom early on.
- 12) Louie Armstrong defines the idiom both instrumentally and vocally in the 1920's.
- 13) Blues introduces the trumpet and saxophone as solo voices.
- 14) Many great jazz men played in the blues circles from way early on.

Ragtime Jazz and Classical

- 1) Becomes available to the public in 1893, it was popularized through piano music.
- 2) Rag was term used loosely by many parties. It came from a couple different sources, Black Cog dancing and “to improvise” a melody, or “syncopate a melody”. Both sources indicate that Black dancers and musicians were syncopating melodies and making them their own. In a sense improvising song and dance.
- 3) The key element of all Ragtime music is the prevailing use of syncopation. Syncopating melody occurs against a 2-feel (oom-pah) to produce a uniquely rhythmic music.
- 4) Two main conceptions take place in this idiom:
 - a) Jazz Rag- (Jelly Roll Morton, Eubie Blake, etc.)
 - b) Classical Rag- (Scott Joplin, Joe Lamb, Tom Turpin, etc.)
- 5) Classical Ragtime has long extended sectional forms, which usually are 16 bars long. No transitional sections usually occur in Ragtime music. Melody exists, but is the least important musical ingredient in this music.
- 6) Scott Joplin was the best known Ragtime composer. He hoped to develop a Black-American Classical genre or idiom.
- 7) Ragtime overlapped with other well known musics in it’s day, most specifically Blues and Brass Band music. Much borrowing took place. (for ie-- W.C. Handy’s use of Blues melodies in Ragtime forms) Ragtime gave early Jazz musicians a music with much European influence in regards to form and harmonic structure.
- 8) Ragtime is seen by some as part of the evolving musical tradition of Brass-band music. This is true and not true. The musics used similar musical forms, and Joplin may have borrowed. But, Rag has it’s own musical history which includes unique dance traditions. (Black-cog dancing)
- 9) Ragtime was so popular in it’s day that there were Ragtime ensembles, Brass Bands playing the music and improvisatory musicians playing Rag. Furthermore, there was a craze for piano sheet music which began in 1893, Joplin performed at the World Exposition in Chicago in 1894.
- 10) Rag’s influence on the Jazz Evolution:
 - a) developed a percussive rhythmic music, where rhythm was the chief ingredient.
 - b) Introduced syncopated melodies.
 - c) Rag helped to develop a swing feel, which is now in Jazz.
 - d) You found a primitive Rhythm section in Rag ensembles:
banjo---fiddle---sticks
(piano)--(Tpt. or sax)--drums

- e) introduced Jazz musicians to music with prevailing use of European harmonies.
- f) Duple Meter-used commonly for dance and marches.
- g) Melodic improvisation, especially in improvised Rag idioms.

SCOTT JOPLIN- Ragtime's greatest composer

born-Texas, Nov. 4, 1868

died-New York, April 1, 1917

Key Compositions:

Maple Leaf Rag

Swipsey Cake-Walk

Easy Winners

Elite Syncopations

The Entertainer

Tremonisha

Key Partners:

John Stark

Lottie Stokes (second Wife)

Key Musical Styles:

Ragtime

Joplin Facts:

- 1) Joplin's name does not always fit into Jazz or classical history books because of the unique compositional quality of his style.
- 2) Joplin had a great love and respect for European composers, especially Chopin and Strauss. He saw himself as a Black-American counterpart to these composers.
- 3) His style was the most daring exponent of Rag. His music was a vital ingredient of the chemical process from which Jazz emerged.
- 4) He was a child prodigy with musical education financed by his mother's work as a domestic servant. After she died, he traveled throughout the midwest, and even performed at the World's Fair in 1894. He enrolled into George Smith College shortly after where he studied composition.
- 5) In 1900, he moved to St. Louis to work with publisher John Stark. Under Stark, Joplin expanded his works to extended pieces, including writing ballets and operas.
- 6) Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag sold over 1 million copies, making it the number 1 Ragtime song of all-time.

7) Although Rag had been developed by pianists Tom Turpin and James Scott, Joplin had bigger dreams. Joplin wanted the music to go into concert halls, opera houses and concert settings and not played in saloons and bars. He wanted to expand the musical scope and emotional weight of Ragtime.

8) His first opera, “A Guest of Honor”, was lost and never found. Joplin devoted his last years to writing “Treemonisha”, an opera later hailed for its greatness.

9) “Treemonisha”, was described by Joplin’s biographer Rudi Blesh as “the legend of the Negro Eden”. Treemonisha a female spiritual leader, is taken by many as to be a figurehead of Joplin’s mother.

10) The music industry absorbed Joplin’s rags as fast as he could write them. Stark refused to publish his opera, reasoning that a white audience would not support music from a Black composer. In desperation, Joplin staged the production himself in Harlem in 1915. The production had no scenery, costumes, lighting, or musicians. Joplin played all the music himself on piano. The show was a flop crushing Joplin's dreams.

11) “Treemonisha” was finally performed in 1972 on Broadway, this time with considerable success. It was also released on disk in 1976. Joplin died at the age of 49, of TB. Nearly 60 years after his death he won the Pulitzer prize for his contributions to American music.

JELLY ROLL MORTON

born: New Orleans, October 20, 1890

Died: July 10, 1941

Key Recordings:

1923-Piano pieces including “King Porter Stomp”

1926- “The Pearls” and “Sidewalk Blues”

recorded with his band the Red Hot Peppers

1938- Library of Congress Recordings.

Key Musical Styles:

Ragtime

Blues

Minstrel songs

Spirituals

Improvisatory Black-American Music

Morton Facts:

1) Claimed to have invented Jazz, (just as W.C. Handy did years before)

2) Helped Ragtime swing and liberated the improviser.

- 3) Left early as a child, Morton did many things to survive in his early years. This included, pimping, vaudeville performer, music publisher, common thief, and boxing promoter. But most of all a talented, gifted musician.
- 4) Learned to play in New Orleans Storyville District. Learned drums, harmonica, piano, guitar and trumpet.
- 5) Moved to Chicago in 1923 and began to record some of the finest examples of early Jazz.
- 6) It was in Chicago that his arranging and composing skills became evident. Many consider him Jazz first composer/arranger.
- 7) Led a group called the Red Hot Peppers.
- 8) As Swing became popular in the 30's Morton became less of a force. But, "revitalize", which later was put on live stage shows.
- 9) Alan Lomax asked Morton to play on his Library of Congress collections. His views concerning his contributions were dismissed by most. However, it is important to note that Morton is considered a cornerstone of Jazz and Black-American Music.