

The Blues

The Blues is the name given to a style of music created by African-Americans at the end of the 19th century. Blues music was originally performed by one singer accompanied by guitar or banjo.

Blues lyrics The lyrics are raw and full of emotion, dwelling on love and loneliness. They tell of injustice and hopelessness, and the longing for a better life. They were passed on from musician to musician through **oral tradition** and often use slang and double meanings.

They have a three-line verse structure where the second line repeats the first - **A A B**. Sometimes singers **improvised** the words. The repetition of the first line gave them time to **think up** the third line. For example:

*"I went to the crossroads, feel down on my knees
I went to the crossroads, feel down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please""*

Many blues songs feature a short instrumental break (solo) after each line – a sort of **call and response**.

Origins of the Blues

African slaves brought their musical traditions with them when they were transported to work in the North American colonies. Early types of African American music included **spirituals** (religious songs using vocal harmony) and **work songs**.

Work songs were sung rhythmically in time with the task being done. They used **call and response** in which phrases from a lead singer were followed by the others. African music combined with the **folk music** of the white European settlers to produce new styles of music.

The Blues emerged towards the end of the 19th century. This early style of blues was known as **country blues** and was usually a solo singer accompanied on guitar or piano sometimes with added harmonica or drums. Well-known country blues musicians include Leadbelly, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson.

Most Blues songs:

- have four beats in a bar
- are built on the 12-bar blues form
- use three four-bar phrases

The most common chord structure uses three chords – the **tonic** (chord I), the **subdominant** (chord IV) and the **dominant** (chord V). In the key of C this would be:

Phrase 1	C (tonic)	C (tonic)	C (tonic)	C (tonic)
Phrase 2	F (subdominant)	F (subdominant)	C (tonic)	C (tonic)
Phrase 3	G (dominant)	F (subdominant) or G (dominant)	C (tonic)	C (tonic)

There are many variations on the above structure. Sometimes 7th chords are used (the same chords with an added 7th). The 12-bar blues form the basis of R 'n' B (rhythm and blues), rock 'n' roll and jazz.

Blues notes

Compared with the major scale, some notes, known as **blue notes** may be flattened by a semitone or 'bent' by a smaller interval. Blue notes are usually found on the third, fifth or seventh degree of the scale.

Guitarists can 'bend' the notes out of tune by pushing the strings sideways. A bottleneck is sometimes used to slide up and down the guitar strings. Both effects sound like a vocal cry.

Listen to the bottleneck guitar in the song "Travelling Riverside Blues" by Robert Johnson.

Social Changes

Until the end of the 19th century, America was largely a rural community. In the early twentieth century large numbers of people started to move to industrial cities. After the Civil War and emancipation of slaves the blues spread, together with the people who sang and played it. Many former slaves moved from the cotton fields of the southern states to northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit, where the blues became hugely popular.

City Blues

Different styles of blues emerged, known collectively as **city blues** or **urban blues**. During the 1940s and 1950s city blues was very popular in black clubs and bars. Some of these blues styles were jazz influenced and many had amplified bands. Well-known city blues musicians include Elmore James, Howlin' Wolf, T-Bone Walker and B B King.

The blues guitarist T-Bone Walker pioneered the rock guitar sound and technique, playing long solos and turning his amplifier up to distortion level. City blues produced many guitar soloists including B B King and Buddy Guy.

By the 1960s, blues guitarists such as Eric Clapton and others emulated this style. Many more blues rock guitarists have followed. The blues has left its mark on all areas of popular music and is the driving force behind white rock music.