

# A Century Has Got The Blues

Around the turn of the century masses of black Americans started moving north in search of a better life. On their journey they created a musical style that has become their most powerful voice: the blues. It is an intense and poetic expression of the black experience in the USA and it has not ceased to inspire the popular music of the western world for a century now. Without the blues, there would be neither jazz, nor rock and roll, country, rap or hip-hop.

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## The Word *Blues*

When people say *I've got the blues* they mean they are in trouble, they are sad, they are heartbroken, abused or victimized. They want to say they are lost, shattered, depressed and hurt. They mean life is hard on them and pain is the overriding feeling in their system; and most people also think the expression they use is of black American origin. But they are wrong. The phrase *having the blues* goes back to 18th century England where the expression *blue devils* used to be slang for melancholia. The word *blues* is plural when it refers to feelings, singular when it means the music. So the blues man does not say *The blues is bad today* but *The blues are bad today*. The word *blue* is an adjective and synonym of sad, down or melancholic, as in *I feel so blue today*. And last but not least, *blue* is of course a color too.

## The Blues Highway

The civil war officially ended black slavery in the American South. The fate of the blacks was not much improved however. They continued to work in the fields as cheap, exploited and humiliated laborers or as sharecroppers, i.e. farmers who got their supplies on credit at the plantation owner's shop till they could pay back their debt after harvest time, which left them penniless and in need of renewed credit again. Sharecroppers lived in shotgun shacks, so called because a bullet fired through the front door would go straight through the house and out of the back door. In addition to their poverty and lack of education they were exposed to the atrocities of Southern racism to make matters worse. So out of their sorrow grew a raw new music called the blues, depicting work, love, poverty and the hardships freedmen faced in a world barely removed from slavery. Stories of the freedom, respect and good money waiting for them in the cities of the north triggered a mass migration of about five million black Americans from 1915 to 1970. The main route they took was the Mississippi Delta. From New Orleans along the river up to Baton Rouge, Jackson, Memphis, St. Louis to Chicago they varied their songs about moving away from the bad place to a better place. Some of the money the blacks could spare on leisure went into the making of famous blues legends like Robert Johnson, Willie Dixon, Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Little Walter, W.C. Handy, Howling Wolf, Albert King, John Lee Hooker, Bessie Smith, Billy Holiday, Etta James etc. who had a tremendous influence on white musicians such as the Rolling Stones, the Beatles or Eric Clapton, to name just a few of the profiteers of the blues. The money the white stars made because of the black inspiration and their blues cover versions, by the way, is yet another sad chapter in the outrageous history of black exploitation by the western civilization and of course it will never be equaled by the amount of money the original blues musicians make with their own material.

## Definitions of the Blues

Intuitively the blues does not seem to be hard to define. It is a simple, albeit powerful form of music and poetry. But the closer you look at the phenomenon the more complex it gets and what starts out simple

grows into a rich proliferation of definitions. Formally the blues consists of twelve bars, four beats to the bar, with the stress on the third beat. The first two lines of the three line stanza are repeated and they rhyme with the third one. There is a catchy intro and there are a few solo passages. And the tempo is either slow, walking or fast and rocking. Here is an example:

*Well, I rode number 74, boys, and the rain was falling down,  
Well, I rode number 74, boys, and the rain was falling down  
Well, you know it got awful cold and chilly, boys, but I was Chicago bound.*

If you look at a collection of blues songs you will find quite a few examples of the pattern described above. But there will be more examples of variations and modifications of the basic pattern, both musically and lyrically. And there are of course sophisticated blues pieces that only remotely resemble the classic pattern. Moreover there is the simple, acoustic guitar and mouth harp based country blues as well as the more electric, rhythm and bluesy urban style. Some blues is more jazzy and swinging, some is simple and meant for dancing and some is highly poetic, refined and nearly spiritual.

The basic pattern is very simple, but the possibilities to improvise and vary are virtually unlimited. In a way it is like the human being. We are all the same, essentially, and yet every person is a different and unique variation. Both blacks and whites seem to recognize themselves in the simplicity of this metaphor, which might further account for the many definitions of the blues. Basically there are about as many definitions of the blues as there are people defining it.

### **More Definitions of the Blues**

Some say the blues is black. A white man, they claim, can not sing the blues. Others simply say: the blues is a feeling. For some people the blues is about sadness and suffering of any kind. In a broadly existential sense it is the heart and soul of man crying out their grief in an attempt to get over it. The blues is both self-therapy and group therapy. It is a technique that allows you to rocket yourself into the darkest void and the very depth of your pain and feeling so hard, that there results enough momentum, speed and energy to emerge and jump back up into life and back onto your feet again revitalized and reborn. Willie Dixon called the blues the facts of life and he said: „Everything that’s under the sun likes music. But blues is the greatest ...!“ The blues is also the musical history book of the blacks, both musically and historically. It has developed out to the black field or work songs – to pace the work of chopping cotton with hoes or pounding railroad ties - and their church music, the Negro spirituals and gospel songs via music for parties in the front or backyards of the South and via music for juke boxes in roadhouses and juke joints. And ultimately, of course, the blues has become a world music. Historically it openly or covertly chronicles the fate of the blacks in the USA, especially in its so called country blues form that deals with labor conflicts, racial problems and poverty. The blues is also part of the oral tradition of the blacks. Stories are passed on to people by mouth. The form of the blues that most typically does that is the talking blues, in which the singer tells a story rather than singing it. The modern development of the talking blues is the rap, even if at first sight this might not be so obvious. And then of course the blues is also defined as the working man’s, poor man’s or common man’s medium or voice. The blues is an individual’s determination to keep fighting, not to give up and to move on to something better. The blues reflects the black individual’s need to tell his story, to sing his song and to be heard. And last but not least, “the blues is simply how life feels as it goes on,” says the owner of a blues bar somewhere in the Mississippi Delta.

### **P.S. The Blues Will Live**

The blues can also be painted, e.g. Bill Traylor, or written, e.g. Toni Morrison or James Baldwin. The century of the black mass migration in the US is over. Some people in the black blues scene think the blues is dying. The young don't go for it anymore. But these people fail to see that there is a great and productive urban blues scene in almost every American city – and in Europe too. The century of the blues might be over, but the blues will never die. The blues has become a world music, the blues are contained in every form of popular music everywhere in the world today and they are an existential phenomenon you also find in other traditional forms of music, like flamenco or Swiss folk music, you just need the right ear and the right musician. Or, in B. B. (Blues Boy) King's words: "I might bend, but I will never break!"