

THE BLUES: HISTORY AND RESOURCES

MICHAELA LARSEN

ROTH ACADEMY OF MUSIC, SUMMER 2020

LARSEN12@MSU.EDU

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO LEARN THE HISTORY OF THE BLUES?

- The Blues is an awesome genre to listen to, but the artists who created it went through monumental struggles and oppression. We need to acknowledge this before we play or listen to the Blues to honor the past and to make sure that we advocate for equity in the future of music.
- The Blues has had a large influence on Rock n' Roll, Jazz, Pop, Country, and even modern Classical Music. It is a key part of American musical identity, and honoring its history acknowledges the essential role that Black enslaved Americans have played in that musical identity and gives credit where credit is due.

WHAT ARE THE BLUES?:

- The name comes from “Blue Notes”, notes which aren’t a part of the traditional major or minor scale, which is a cornerstone of the genre, and what makes the Blues sound like the Blues.
- The blues scale is based on the pentatonic scale, which lends itself to improvisation, a key element of the blues.
- Blues songs typically are about these subjects: spirituality, love, law & order, money, life & death, and traveling/migration.
- Evolved from African American spirituals, work songs, and ring chants--music sung by enslaved Black Americans.
- Expressed emotion, community, and shared experience by enslaved people.
- Known as The Great Migration, following the end of the civil war, many Black Americans moved from the south to Northern and Midwestern cities like Chicago, New York, and Detroit. These cities became hot spots for the Blues, since the tradition of the Blues was carried there during the Great Migration.

- Structure: 12 Bar blues Progression, can have variations and exceptions though!
- Lyric pattern: AAB
 Example: A: Come on, Oh baby don't you wanna go?
 A: Come on, Oh baby don't you wanna go?
 B: Back to that same old place, Sweet home Chicago.

(“Sweet Home Chicago” by Robert Johnson)

- Improvisation is a key part of the blues!! You can write your own Blues song using this chord structure and lyric pattern!

DELTA (RURAL) BLUES:

- acoustic guitar, slide guitar, vocals, banjo
- Based heavily on African American spirituals, call and response, bent notes, sliding between notes, and “Blue Notes” (notes that typically wouldn’t fit into a major or minor scale)
- Associated with the Mississippi River Delta (hence the name Delta Blues), and the rural south

URBAN BLUES:

- The fusion of delta blues with electric guitar, brass instruments, and a rhythm section, including drums and bass guitar
- Associated with northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York and popularized by artists like B.B. King and Muddy Waters.

ARTISTS TO LISTEN TO:

- Robert Johnson- A legendary Delta Blues guitarist and singer, first Blues artist to have his music preserved by sound recordings.
- Mamie Smith- the first Black artist to make a vocal Blues recording

- Ma Rainey- “Mother of the Blues”, one of the first Blues singers to have a professional career and in the first generation of Blues artists to record their music
- Muddy Waters: guitar player that bridged sounds of Delta Blues with Urban Blues, and innovated electric Blues guitar
- Sister Rosetta Tharpe: “Godmother of Rock n’ Roll” that had a major influence on Rhythm and Blues and was a large influence on artists like Little Richard, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, and Eric Clapton.