

# Music: the story of the Blues

by Robert Springer

## What is - or what are - the Blues?

The Blues is a feeling, most African Americans will tell you. If your girl or boyfriend leaves you, for instance, it's quite likely you'll feel sad or **dejected** for days. In other words, you'll feel *blue*; you'll *have the blues*.

What few African Americans will tell you is that the origin of the expression isn't black and American, but English, although today it's usually associated with African Americans. In 16th century England, people who were depressed were said to be **persecuted** by the "blue devils". Later, in 1807, American author Washington Irving already talked about "having a **fit** of the blues".

But the blues today is generally understood as being a type of music which expresses the feeling of depression which was once common to African Americans, due to oppression, **segregation** and problems with the other sex. This may be the reason why African Americans used to say "White men can't have the blues", at least not the same kind of blues

The origins of the blues are difficult to retrace because, quite naturally, an oral **genre** like the blues leaves few written traces. It seems to have developed about 100 years ago, though the name "blues" was not yet used at the time. It grew out of black field songs, **negro spirituals** and the white folk ballads imported by British **settlers** and somewhat modified on American **soil**.

The first blues recordings appeared around 1920. They were made by black women singers who were actually singing a somewhat **adulterated** form of the music which, strangely enough, was later called "the classic blues". **Ma Rainey** and **Bessie Smith** were the most authentic and popular performers of the genre in the 1920's.

The original country or rural blues did not come to be recorded until around 1925, when the record companies realised they could make quite a profit by asking black farmers, who were at best semi-professional musicians, to record a few songs for them in return for a little whisky and about \$5 per song. The lady singers, being professional **entertainers**, of course requested more.

Thanks to this fortunate circumstance, we are now reasonably certain that the country blues originated from the Mississippi Delta (an area in the *state of Mississippi* which must not be confused with the Delta of the Mississippi river in *Louisiana*). Blacks here once made up over 90% of the population, and were heavily exploited and oppressed. Typically in this original form of blues, a black **sharecropper** would sing about his **hardships**, while accompanying himself on the guitar. The rural blues also developed in the cotton-growing region of East Texas, and through much of the South Eastern part of the USA.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many Blacks migrated to the North and Midwest. They found work in the factories in Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and other cities; but ghettos formed quite soon, when, by **sheer** weight of numbers, they began to **overwhelm** the whites who left city areas they had once had to themselves. Blacks brought their ethnic culture and their music with them. Blues singers migrated too, especially since, in a lot of cases, they were workers themselves, and like everyone else they were trying to **make a better living**.

A certain nostalgia for the south developed; but at the same time, the transplanted Blacks were becoming more sophisticated, preferring to listen to music played by musicians more sophisticated than the rural blues performers. Thus small blues **combos**, with piano, guitar, harmonica and other instruments, began to replace the solo performers. From the 40's onwards, they converted to electric instruments, and began to play a new form of blues, louder, more aggressive, which came to be called "urban blues". In the 50's, *Muddy Waters* and *Howlin' Wolf* were among the major **exponents** of this type of music, and later served as models imitated by many sixties groups such as the *Rolling Stones* and the *Animals*.

After a period of **hibernation** in the 50's, the growing popularity of blues with young white audiences gave a lot of black blues-singers the opportunity to play again on a larger scale, for more money than before.

Still, it is quite clear that today the blues, as an independent genre, is no longer considered as very fashionable. Yet with its easy-to-learn three-**chord** structure, it is a convenient **springboard** for musical improvisation. It has had a wide influence on modern popular music of many varieties, and on musicians who wish to return to the roots of modern popular music before jumping off in another, perhaps new, direction.