

The History of the Blues

I. Week 1 Predecessors to the Blues

A. Early American music (Colonial music) the slaves encountered when they came to America (*from: <http://www.colonialmusic.org/>*)

1. Colonial was music that was brought here and helped define the people who were to make a new country music.
2. Music included ballads, dance tunes, folk songs and parodies, comic opera arias, drum signals, psalms, minuets and sonatas. Such music came mostly from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Italy, France, and Africa, and was played on whatever instruments were handy.
3. In early America a variety of types and styles of music emerged, expressing the full spectrum of colonial life. It is clear that while our ancestors were musically dependent upon Great Britain and Europe, for the most part, uniquely American developments were already felt before 1776.
4. Colonial music involved both written and oral/aural processes. Many people knew a large body of tunes by ear, and we frequently find new sets of words "composed" to fit these older tunes. Single tunes also served a variety of functions—for example, "Over the Hills and Far Away" served as a theater song, a recruiting song, a dance tune, and a military march.
5. Most instruments that we have today were around by the Revolution when pianos were just coming into popularity; but certainly some instruments were more prevalent than others.

- a. Violins were by far the most popular instruments.
- b. Men of all different classes, from Thomas Jefferson to indentured servants and slaves, played violins or fiddles.
- c. Prices varied from cheap to quite expensive and there's little doubt that violins were imported in great numbers.
- d. Second in popularity to violins were flutes of many different kinds, also played for the most part by men.
- e. There were fifes, recorders (in early America these were called common or English flutes), and transverse flutes (called then German flutes).

B. Women's instruments

1. A very tight self-regulation of activity in the name of "maintaining reputation" limited musical options for women.
2. Many wealthy women played harpsichords on which they practiced and performed for family and friends.
3. An English guitar, a now extinct 10-string version of a Renaissance cittern with a flat back and a tear-drop shape, and was tuned to an open C chord.
4. The grandmother of our modern guitar was around also, but not as popular; it is called today a Baroque guitar, and it was a small version of a classical guitar with gut strings, frets of gut tied around the neck,

and strung as a modern 12-string without the bass E strings, so it was also a 10 stringed instrument. It wasn't until around 1820 that the standard guitar had 6 strings. Women also played harps, but not before the end of the 18th century.

5. Drums and trumpets, trombones and french horns, 'cellos, violas da gamba, clarinets, oboes and bassoons, glass 'armonicas, hammered dulcimers, organs—all these appeared, in varying numbers, within in the colonies.

C. Theater Music

1. Musical theater in the colonies was very popular.

2. Ballad operas were the most popular. These were compilations of familiar folk tunes with new words strung together by spoken dialogue to tell a comic story.

3. The Beggar's Opera was the most famous ballad opera. Compiled in 1728 in London as a reaction to the elite Italian opera that was so popular among the wealthy in that city. The Beggar's Opera was performed in the colonies as early as 1750. Just as many people today will buy the sheet music and/or CD to a favorite movie or musical, so the colonists would bring home the music and words to songs in The Beggar's Opera(or to any of the many other ballad operas), and play and sing them at home.

D. Dance Music

1. Music was also critical to the favorite pastime of the colonists—dancing. There was a huge repertory of dance tunes, mostly English and Celtic reels, hornpipes, jigs, and minuets.

2. Dancing was usually accompanied by a single violin, but for special occasions there may have been 4 or 5 musicians.
3. Whatever instruments and players could be gathered was fine for the dancers.
4. We have a reference to a dance being accompanied by a solo french horn, for lack of a more suitable instrument. This must have been quite a challenge, since brass instruments had no valves yet!

E. Church Music

1. The most varied sort of music in colonial America was related to the several religious denominations active in the area.
2. Congregationalist churches of New England encouraged the singing of psalms, anthems, and fusing tunes.
3. After 1720 paid singing masters taught church members to read from music, and a large body of unique compositions emerged, most notably by William Billings of Boston.
4. In the colonial South, the official tax-supported Church of England evoked considerably less enthusiasm on the part of parishioners. More organs graced private homes in the South than found use in churches.
5. Most musically sophisticated were the Moravian settlers in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. These largely Germanic people copied, performed, and even composed new chamber pieces that were far superior to the general level of musical accomplishment in the colonies.

6. Baptists, Methodists, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, and other Protestant denominations all rose in importance through the 1700s, but Catholics were persecuted (especially in Maryland) and flourished only after the Revolution brought true religious freedom.

7. Native Americans and African Americans were in many cases Christianized, and the rise of the Negro Spiritual as a popular choral style after the Civil War is attributed to musical interactions dating back well into colonial times.

F. Military Music

1. Two general sorts of military music are associated with early America, mostly during the late colonial period and Revolutionary period.

a. A "Band of Musick" consisted of professional musicians hired by officers to play contrapuntal music at parades, during meals, and for dancing.

b. This ensemble often consisted of oboes, clarinets, (French) horns, and bassoons.

2. The second type of military music was often referred to as "field music."

4. Field music consisted of the fifers and drummers who played during the march, during battles, and for the various camp duty calls which regulated soldiers' lives.

II. Early Slave and European Influences (taken from:<http://www.gse.uci.edu/lessons/blues.html>)

A. Background on slaves

1. Because of its location the Americas, many Africans bound into slavery came from the regions of West Africa.
2. When being sent to the Americas slave holders actively sought to destroy prior tribal allegiances as well as other remnants of Africanisms in order to reduce cohesion among slaves that might lead to rebellion.
3. Slaves could bring few actual objects of the lost African life with them in the difficult western passage of the slave ships.
4. Slaves brought with them many memories or retentions of African culture, tradition and religion. This is an important link to musical retentions.
5. To assure spiritual as well as physical survival, African slaves learned to adapt their knowledge to the conditions of the New World. This is another predecessor to musical influence.

B. Elements of retentions of African music

A. According to letters and diaries in which eighteenth and nineteenth century American and European travelers in the American south recorded their impressions of the "wild and primitive" music of black slaves, the strong emotive power of the dissonant singing was mentioned.

B. The primary difference between European and African conventions in music is that European music is polyphonic (composed of the juxtaposition

of many complimentary and contradictory tones) while African music is polyrhythmic (composed of the juxtaposition of many complimentary and contradictory rhythms).

C. since the focus of African music is rhythmic rather than tonal, traditional African musicians were more interested in the variety of possible shadings around it than in replicating the pure tone itself. This caused notes to sound "fuzzy" or imprecise to Western trained ears.

D. The modal scales that Africans employed did not fit precisely into the standard European diatonic scale (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do). In order to accommodate to the tuning of European instruments, black American musicians created the so-called "blue notes" (the flatted fifth and seventh notes of the eight note diatonic scale).

E. With stringed instruments, American players purposely ran knife blades or annealed bottle neck "slides" along the metal strings of the fretboard to distort or extend the "pure" tones that instruments were designed to produce. Often instead of, or in addition to, regular strumming, bluesmen slapped and pulled at guitar, fiddle or bass strings to increase this "dissonant" effect.

F. The slaves' native languages were tonal, so there was a much closer link between the concepts of "speaking" and "singing." In such African societies, music and song were not experienced as being separate from life and work and, therefore, work and communal activities were organized by musical rhythms.

1. Musical aspects of African music (most found in African American music)

- a. Layered rhythms (poly rhythm)-rhythm is a general organizing factor in music
 - b. “Swing element”, messing around with time
 - c. metronomic sense of rhythm
 - d. Syncopation
 - e. Call and response
 - f. Riffs-short repeated phrases
 - g. Timbre- fuzzy, buzzy sound
 - h. Talking drums
2. Vocal qualities of early African American music
- a. Western African languages are tonal
 - b. Distinction between talking and singing not that great
 - c. Sliding into notes, descending melodic lines
3. Social context
- a. Music includes audience participation
 - b. Music associated with dancing, difficult to separate music from dance
 - c. Music has a functional content
 - d. Family lineage kept in songs, griot-social commentary as well

I. Early African American Music-General Characteristics

A. Non religious music

1. Music was functional

- a. Field hollers, work songs, etc

1. Field hollers were used as a form of communication among black plantation workers in the South.
2. They were short solo calls and wails.
3. More work songs come from the Negro than from any other American folk group
4. In Carolina low-country, slaves timed their singing to the long sweep oars, the leader, chanted verse after verse and the rowers rumbled a refrain. On the docks Negroes sang sailors' chanteys as metronomes to their heaving and hauling. Some chanteys, like "Old Stormy," they took over from the white seamen; others they improvised. Along the Ohio and Mississippi waterfronts Negro roustabouts created "coonjine" songs, so-called after the shuffling dance over bucking gang-planks in and out of steamboat holds. Unless the rhythm was just right a roustabout and his bale or sack of cottonseed might be jolted into the brown waters.

b. Coded messages in songs

c. Music as a way for people to comfort themselves

B. Minstrelsy

1. Minstrelsy was a performance genre where white people would dress up in "black face" and perform songs of black people
2. It lasted from the 1830's-1870's

3. The musical imitations of the whites were not an accurate replication of the black music of the time, in fact the first black face performer (George Washington Dixon) was performing music based on Irish and Scottish folks songs. This might have been because these were folk songs he thought it didn't matter what kind of folk songs.
4. Shows white peoples fascination with black music, was a lower white class entertainment, and primarily for the northerners about the southerners.
5. Created many stereotypes still mentioned today.
 - a. Thomas Dartmouth Rice invented the Jim Crow-Southern black plantation caricature, became term used for segregation rule (he also popularized the "cakewalk", which was originally black people making fun of the way white people danced, then whites would imitate the blacks imitating them, the winner of the dance would win a cake.
 - b. Jim Crow, southern slave character again that was a childish, innocent image.
 - c. Zip Coon-black urban sophisticate, free black couldn't be as sophisticated as blacks, made fun of white upper class as well.
 - d. Old Darkie-father and uncle figure.
 - e. Old Mamie.
6. Dan Emmett-led the 'Virginia Minstrels', they were the pro-typical minstrel group, had banjo, fiddle, and bones player, (some bands also had a tambourine).

7. Exemplified white problems with blacks.
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8. By 1850's becomes formalized entertainment and people forget what the black face represents but keep it out of tradition.
9. Around time of Civil War blacks become directly involved in Minstrelsy and started having their own bands and directing the music to an African-American direction.

B. Religious music (taken from <http://www2.worldbook.com/features/aamusic/html/spirituals.htm>, http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brown/folkexpression.htm, <http://afroamhistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa030501a.htm>)

1. Early African music, still continues in “underground” religious functions
2. Early African Christian music
 - a. Early converts of protestant Christianity taught slaves to sing “hymns”
 - b. African American music traditions began to emerge as its own form in the latter half of the 18th century
 - c. Tradition know as the spiritual
 - d. Spirituals were sung in both religious and non sacred settings
 - e. Addresses both sacred and secular ideas,

1. Many slaves thought of themselves as modern children of Israel and sought freedom from bondage
2. The slaves based most of their spirituals upon characters and stories from the Bible
3. “Lining out”, also called ring shouts or shout spirituals
 - a. Leader sings a line then congregation sings back
 - b. Started by Europeans, copied by slaves, discontinued by Europeans
 - c. Form of religious event, performed mostly in praise houses or after a formal religious event
 - d. Call and response, as mentioned above, accompanied by singing, hand clapping, foot stomping, thigh slapping
 - e. Grew out of spiritual tradition
 - f. Similar themes to spirituals
 - g. Hymns notated in early 1800’s, Richard Allen, by late 1800’s arranged spirituals appear
 - h. George L. White, a young white teacher at Fisk University, devoted a repertoire of classical and other music forms originated with slavery but evolving to reflect different themes after emancipation
 1. Starts the Fisk Jubilee Singers
 2. Begins touring with this group in 1871
 3. Starts a tradition of musical groups in historically black colleges and universities

C. Ragtime

1. Late 1800's ragtime starts, evolving out of minstrel tradition.
2. Although usually thought of as a piano tradition today this is untrue. In the hundreds of articles on ragtime music in the early part of the last century a small percentage (216-16) referred to piano music.
3. Considered to be the first real "American music", meaning first true music of African and European influences.
4. Ragtime is characterized mainly by a rhythmic feel, featuring the 3 versus 2 beat pattern.
5. Very controversial music at the time, symbolized the fears of whites of blacks, lots of racial tension at the time do to reconstruction.
6. Scott Joplin, very famous composer.