

## Week 2 Early Blues/Pre World War II Blues

### I. Early Blues (taken from: <http://www.blues.org/history/>)

- A. As the influences above infer early African American music is a combination of the music of white and black Americans having interaction with each other through the above instances, it is a blending of the two traditions resulting a music all its' own.
- B. The blues rose as “distillate of the African music brought over by slaves. Field hollers, ballads, church music and rhythmic dance tunes called “jump ups” evolved into a music for a singer who would engage in call-and-response with his guitar.
- C. Following the civil war the blues begins to take shape, with singers accompanied by the guitar (or more likely the banjo)
1. The banjo is a precedent to the guitar and is an extension of the African “banjur”, showing the extension of the African tradition
  2. The guitar becomes more prominent and replaces the banjo as the primary instrument, although there are quite a few combinations of these instruments in certain areas.
- D. By the 1890's the blues were sung in many rural areas of the south
- E. The first recording of the blues was in 1895. George W. Johnson's recording of "Laughing Song" was the first blues song to be recorded.
- F. By 1910 the “blues” is applied to the tradition fairly regulary

1. Washington Irving (American writer) coins this term in 1807
2. The term “blue” had been associated with the idea of melancholia or depression since the Elizabethan era

## **Pre World War II**

### **II. Classic Blues**

- A. This was the first African-American form of music to be recorded, and the title refers to the first style of blues recorded.
- B. This was an urban style, played by professional musicians, closer to white style of music of the time.
- C. The leading performers were women (Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, etc) which could explain its appeal to a wider interest group.
- D. As radio and records developed genres started becoming more clearly defined.
- E. A lot of the musical themes were of love.
- F. Artists-Musical examples
  1. Ma Rainey-Crazy Blues
  2. Bessie Smith-St Louis Blues

### **III. Delta Blues** ([http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/schools/delta\\_school.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/schools/delta_school.htm))

- A. Geographically, the Delta encompasses the fertile bottomland between the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers. It also includes alluvial land across the Mississippi near Helena, Arkansas.
- B. Culturally, the Delta has been home to large cotton plantations worked by black slaves and later, sharecroppers.
- C. Much of the Delta was cleared after the Civil War when large levees were built on either side of the Mississippi River.

D. Life in the levee and sawmill camps had a frontier aspect, with men working in gangs, protecting themselves with weapons, and spending their hard-earned money on gambling, women, and itinerant musicians.

E. By the turn of the twentieth century, railroad gangs began laying track to connect the Delta with larger cities. The river promoted trade with New Orleans by providing a means of transporting cotton to market.

F. Most Delta blues musicians were itinerant loners who occasionally teamed with other musicians to play parties, sawmill camps, train stations, and anywhere people with spare change congregated.

G. Often the lumber and levee camps had pianists who played a two-fisted, eight-to-the-bar style called barrelhouse, the name given to a camp's barroom.

H. Three of the most famous Delta pianists were Roosevelt Sykes of Helena, Clarksdale native Sunnyland Slim, and Little Brother Montgomery of Kentwood, Louisiana. All were masters of the barrelhouse style and played extensively in the lumber camps of the Delta.

J. Good pianists like these could make better money with fewer occupational hazards in larger cities, and these three moved to cities like New Orleans, St. Louis, and even Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s.

K. Although we usually think of “Delta Blues” as solo artists with guitar and accompanying themselves singing this was not the norm.

1. As the note above reflects there were a number of piano players.
2. Many of the guitar players played with small “string bands”. We will listen to examples of Son House in this set up as well as a young McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters).

L. Many blues artists went back and forth between being “church” goers and singing in the church and being bluesmen.

M. Because of the above statement there is a large amount of biblical references and blues artists were often referred to as playing the “devil’s music” and really believed this to a point.

N. Robert Johnson is famous for having sold his soul to the devil in exchange for prowess on the guitar and is often cited as becoming a master musician overnight.

O. This brings up an important piece of technology that was becoming popular at the time, the phonograph.

1. Johnson has been pointed out by some scholars as the first artist to delve into other artists recordings and study them note for note.
2. The recording industry is greatly responsible for the misrepresentation of blues recordings. (i.e. recordings not reflecting music of the times but limiting artist to twelve bar format that is now recognized as the basic blues pattern)

#### K. **Important Artists**

1. Many of the great recorded Delta blues guitarists learned from guitarist **Charley Patton**, who lived on Dockery’s Plantation. Patton is referred to as the Father of the Delta Blues. *Musical Example: Bo Weevil Blues*
2. Tommy Johnson is one of Patton’s disciples and had a number of recordings. He is well know recently for being the inspiration for the blues character in the Coen Brothers film “Oh Brother Where Art Thou”. *Musical Example: Lonesome Home Blues*

3. Willie Brown is another of Patton's protégés. He was known to perform with Son House frequently. *Musical Example: Delta Blues*
4. Son House and Robert Johnson are probably the two most well know artists of this style. *Musical Examples: My Black Mama, Preachin' The Blues- Me and the Devil Blues, Crossroads, Theyre' Red Hot*

Other important artists are Bukkha White and Skip James. *Musical Examples: Devil Got My Woman, Shake Em On Down*