

**THE AFRICAN BACKGROUND OF THE BLUES**

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Tracing the African background of blues in America can be an arduous task at best in that much of its lineage is wrought with oppression by generations of deliberate and extreme actions by white slave masters to crush and wipe out the very cultural influences that helped to create it. There also appears to be a lack of consensus as to the very definition of exactly what the blues is, let alone where and when it actually came into being.

Accounts of the pre-Civil War era of the Deep South tell of slaves from all part of Africa “singing to themselves, hollering at each other across the fields, and singing together while working and worshipping.”<sup>1</sup> Although drumming and even the playing of horns was considered dangerous to plantation owners (for fear of insurrection), and banned almost everywhere in North America<sup>2</sup>, black slaves still retained their most basic means of expression as they “sang, clapped their hands, and stamped their feet, imitating the old African drum rhythms as they worked, worshiped, and entertained themselves.”<sup>3</sup> *Patting jumba* for instance, as described by an ex-slave in 1853, “is performed by striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.”<sup>4</sup> In 1940 W.C. Handy described work songs in laborer’s gangs where, while setting the rhythm for work, a straw-boss, “singing whatever sentiments lay close to his heart”, set the tune after which the others took up the melody.<sup>5</sup> Pratt argues a general agreement that the origin of the blues began most likely in plantations of the Deep South between 1870 and 1890 “coinciding with the adulthood of the first generation of blacks born after the emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> He refers to journal entries as early as the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Henrietta Yurchenco, “‘Blues fallin’ down like hail’: Recorded blues, 1920s-1940s,” *American Music* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 449.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> W. C. Handy, “The Music of a Free People,” in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 203.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Pratt, “The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance,” in *Rebel Musics*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Toronto: Black Rose Books, 2003), 123.

1830's describing "extra-ordinary wild and unaccountable" songs sung by slaves.<sup>7</sup> Since blues was so rooted in black folk music, be it work songs, field hollers, spirituals, or call-and-response jump-ups (as described by Charles Peabody in 1901, already popular by the early 1890's), it is difficult to determine just when the blues as we know it actually emerged.<sup>8</sup> Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, while still a vaudeville entertainer, described hearing a girl hanging around a tent in a small Missouri town around 1902 singing a "strange and poignant song" of how her man had left her, so unique that she decided to work it into her act.<sup>9</sup> Handy described hearing blues a year later in 1903 while waiting for a train late at night by a man singing and playing guitar with a knife blade. He described it as "the weirdest music I had ever heard."<sup>10</sup> Although earlier in 1892 Handy heard "shabby guitarists" playing what he called the "East St. Louis Blues", from the beginning the term blues was employed quite loosely.<sup>11</sup>

Handy describes blues as Negro "folk music of the purest type" and was the "expression of the emotional life of the race."<sup>12</sup> Palmer refers to blues as a musical idiom drawing on a number of sources not only of African influences but of other blues performers as well to create something unique and personal. Pratt likens blues to a discourse—a social process of making sense through telling stories by way of music and lyrics.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of how one labels blues, the impetus and inspiration for it can certainly be traced from the brutal enslavement of a race, subsequently cast adrift following the emancipation of 1865 into an often corrupt and hostile world of racism and oppressive Jim Crow legislation. "The music created was thus a response to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 45

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>12</sup> Handy, "The Music of a Free People", 203.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Pratt, "The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance", 121

new forms of thwarted individuality, by those who both performed and heard the music.”<sup>14</sup> The form of the blues tended towards 12 bar, AAA or AAB verses reflecting the poetry of West Africa “allowing the singer to set out a line, repeat it while thinking of a rhyming line...inciting the expectations of the listeners, who are in effect ‘invited’ to ‘receive’ the succeeding line.”<sup>15</sup> Palmer describes African Senegambian *griots*, some of whom sang and played in groups to encourage workers “by setting the rhythms for their tasks.”<sup>16</sup> In this way the call-and-response quality of this music can be traced from its African roots, through the work songs of slavery, to the form thus recognized as blues.

“For the poor individual with no land and no other marketable skills, for the blind and infirm, [the blues] was a way of survival.”<sup>17</sup> Blues performers based their songs on themes of the world they knew. They sang of discrimination, poverty, injustice, sexual topics, and personal relationships. “The blues singer would sing only of his or her own life [and]...subjects that did not affect the blues singer personally rarely entered the orbit of blues lyrics.”<sup>18</sup> An itinerant blues man would sing of loneliness, hunger, and of being on the road with no home. Topics would easily range from sacred to profane owing perhaps to blues singer’s lineage to pre-colonial Africa where “these two fields of activity were not generally thought of as polar opposites.”<sup>19</sup>

The vocal characteristics associated with blues “sometimes sung, sometimes chanted or half spoken, and embellished by cries, wails, moans, falsettos, gravelly tones...were imitated in instruments, sometimes as a dialogue in the traditional African call-and-response pattern.”<sup>20</sup> The bending of notes and sliding between pitches could readily be produced on string and wind

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<sup>14</sup> Ray Pratt, “The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance”, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Pratt, “The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance”, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Yurchenco, “Blues fallin' down like hail”, 449.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Yurchenco, “Blues fallin' down like hail”, 450.

instruments, although the piano was also a very popular instrument in America at the time as well. The pentatonic scale and essential “blue notes” of flatted or wavering thirds, (and sometimes flatted fifths and sevenths) was determined not by the “arbitrary tempered scale of European music”,<sup>21</sup> but by the singer’s natural harmonic resonances more akin to the African heritage from which blues performer descended.

As a form of folk music (by the people and for the people) which addresses personal issues as well as social conditions, the blues does in fact provide an outlet for human expression and social commentary. This helps to explain why this music has persisted for generations and has been such a strong influence on almost every type of American popular music hence. As Pratt asserts, the blues is indeed a “model of cultural commentary, critique, and resistance”,<sup>22</sup> and thus remains relevant for each ensuing generation as long as such basic issues as inequality, injustice, and hardship remain part of the fabric of the human condition.

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<sup>22</sup> Ray Pratt, “The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance”, 147.

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