

# **BLUES**

## **The origin of blues and how it affected pop music.**

### **Work songs**

The Africans who were sold and shipped to America as slaves took their own music with them. Because they were used to singing during work, they did that in America as well. These songs are called work songs.

The type of work influenced the songs they sang. Body movements necessary for the type of work often determined the rhythm and tempo of the songs. The slaves sang railroad songs while railways were being built and sang plantation songs during the cotton picking. Because the type of work is very different, these two types of songs are also clearly different. At the regular rhythm of a railroad song, the workers could perform certain movements simultaneously. The function of a plantation song is mainly to make the monotonous cotton harvesting less boring and to forget the heat a bit. While singing, tall tales were sometimes told: 'pick a bale' cotton a day 'is really impossible, because' a bale 'weighs 750 kg. Work songs were also often sung in prisons, for example when constructing a railway or highway. Call and response (a simple melody sung by one man and repeated by others, often improvised), is an important characteristic in work songs.

*Prison songs – Early in the morning (railroad song)*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsiYfk5RV\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsiYfk5RV_Q)

*This song is from the movie '12 years a slave'. (Cotton picking song)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcJ6Wxdcj-E> (00.36-end)

*Name two musical characteristics, which define these pieces as a work song.*

---

---

### **Country Blues**

In the southern states of North America arose the oldest blues, the country blues. In order to express their sad feelings, the slaves sang about their situation and often accompanied themselves on guitar. The atmosphere of this music is bleak and sad. The name blues finds its origin in the expression 'I'm feeling blue'. The slaves sang about their daily worries, about love, the hard work they had to do and discrimination, but they sang their songs without any kind of protest.

## **Blackwater Blues – Bessie Smith**

The Mississippi River flooded in 1927, leaving about 700,000 people homeless. Especially the poorest, often ex-slaves, were hit. After all, they lived too close to the river.

### BLACKWATER BLUES

When it rains five days and the skies turn dark as night  
When it rains five days and the skies turn dark as night  
Then trouble's takin' place in the lowlands at night

I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my door  
I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my door  
There's been enough trouble to make a poor girl wonder where she want to go

Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond  
Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond  
I packed all my clothes, throwed them in and they rowed me along

When it thunders and lightnin' and when the wind begins to blow  
When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begins to blow  
There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go

Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill  
Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill  
Then looked down on the house were I used to live

Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go  
Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go  
'Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more

Mmm, I can't move no more  
Mmm, I can't move no more  
There ain't no place for a poor old girl to go

*When listening to 'Blackwater blues' what do you think is typical in Blues music?*

*Analyze the music and also the lyrics.*

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Blues characteristics.**

The characteristics of the blues are the ‘blue notes’ (too low intonation of a few notes), the blues chord progression and the three-line AAB verse form. In typical pieces a singer would tell a sad story through a series of verses.

Each verse usually had three lines or phrases. The first two are about the same, third is different (AAB) . This applies to the melody, but also to the text.

I hate to see the evening sun go down (complaint. A)  
I hate to see the evening sun go down (repeat of complaint. A)  
For my baby, he done left this town. (commentary or explanation, always rhymes)

There was also a certain pattern that followed with the accompaniment, the chords often played on acoustic guitar. Each phrase is four bars long and each verse contained three phrases. This became the 12- bar Blues pattern.

I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
V	IV	I	I

The numbers stands for the chords you need to play.  
You use the first, fourth and fifth chord of the major scale.

**How to create a major scale**

C major is the easiest major scale to play because all you have to do is start on a C and play all the white notes up the keyboard until you reach the next C up. Can you see how the notes go up using a variety of semitone and tone steps?

**AFBEELDING KEYBOARD**

A set pattern that every major scale follows:

**Tone – Tone – Semitone – Tone – Tone – Tone – Semitone**

All you have to do is learn the pattern and you will be able to apply it to any note on the keyboard.

Watch out! Every letter has to be in there. So when you look at the keyboard, there can't be a scale like this: g – a – b – c – d – e – g<sup>b</sup> – g

It has to be: g – a – b – c – d – e – f# - g

The first, fourth and fifth chords in major scale G are G, C and D

Blues in E

Major scale: \_\_\_\_\_

Write down the 12 bar blues pattern in E

— — — —  
— — — —  
— — — —

## **Urban Blues**

Millions of ex-slaves moved to the big cities in the north of America. There was a big movement of blues musicians from Mississippi to Chicago, which became the blues center of the North. While living in the city the blues music changed character. A pianist or harmonica player and a rhythm section consisting of bass and drums joined the bluesman. The electric guitar made its appearance and the harmonica was amplified. The lyrics took up urban themes and also became a little more aggressive. This type of blues, played in big cities, is called 'city blues', 'urban blues' or simply 'Chicago Blues'. Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed are big names in the Urban Blues.

*Listen to Jimmy Reed – Big Boss Man*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd-o\\_kLONVI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd-o_kLONVI)

*How do you know this is Urban Blues in stead of Country Blues?*

*Name three characteristics you can hear in the music.*

---

---

## **Rhythm & Blues**

In the black clubs and pubs there arose a rougher, louder version of the blues sounds, because the electric guitar made its appearance. Drums, bass and saxophones are added to create a form of blues with a strong emphasis on rhythm and the afterbeat: rhythm & blues. The rhythm & blues unlike the urban Blues is fast so you can dance to this music. It is as ecstatic and exciting as the gospel, but the lyrics are sexual and full of street language. This is normal to the black community, but shocking for the whites. 'Rhythm and Blues' was basically a code phrase for "music recorded and bought by black people". This was an improvement over the previous term, "race records".

*Ray Charles – Mess Around*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNe5npkid-s>

*The Blues pattern is used here as well. The beginning sounds like there is played an intro, but in fact the pattern starts right away.*

*How many times do you hear the 12 bar blues pattern? \_\_\_\_\_ Times.*

*Why is the combination of instruments you hear typical in Rhythm & Blues?*

---

---

## **Rock 'n' Roll**

Many white Americans live in 'suburbs'. The role patterns are fixed: father has a boring office job and listens to crazy country music on the radio while he is washing the car. Mother is happy with her new washing machine and vacuum cleaner. But teens are looking for a way to escape boredom. They tune in more and more on the black radio stations, because they want to dance to swinging music. This dance music (rhythm and blues) was so popular that white artists like Elvis Presley also started playing them. Sometimes they used existing lyrics that they adapted: 'well you wear low dresses, the sun comes shining through' they (the white people) found too rude so they made it 'You wear those dresses, your hair done up so nice'. This slowly developed into a new style: Rock n roll. Rock n Roll is more than just music, it shakes up society and influences the lifestyle of young people. The appearance of the artist became important and the (sexy) way they danced became popular. In the early 50's the white youths were increasingly taking off against their parents. For the first time a youth culture existed.

Elvis Presley was taking cues from blues music to create his own rock 'n' roll/rockabilly style. Having grown up in Memphis, Elvis had been exposed to country Blues from an early age and incorporated elements from the genre. The rhythm of the rock n roll is often not in swing, but straightforward, played in a fast dance pace.

The rock n roll-band is reduced to these instruments: guitar, bass (first acoustic, then electric), piano and drums. Important feature in rock n roll is the tight beat with a strong afterbeat, accents on the snare drum on 2 and 4. There are also many breaks and there's an important role for the electric guitar. Rock n roll numbers often use the '12 bars Blues pattern'.

*Elvis Presley – Shake Rattle and Roll*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L95px7eqqo4>

*What are the differences between Rhythm & Blues and Rock 'n roll?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---