

## Blues

Blues is a genre of Afro-American folk music which originated from slaves working on plantations in the southern states of the USA. Blues music reflected the status of Black Americans after slavery was abolished; there were over 4 million Black people in the country, a power that could not be denied.

The slaves developed field hollers in a “call and response” style which served as the basis of all blues music. Blues kept the “call and response” form of expression but it differed in that the “call” was not answered by another participant but by the singer themselves.

Early instruments used in Blues include the guitar, banjo and harmonica, these usually accompanied a solo singer. Blues players developed new instrumental styles, using typical banjo picking styles on the guitar and combining both chords and single notes by picking the melody on the bass strings and brushing the higher strings. In the 1920s the slide style was introduced, this used a glass or metal tube on the fretting hand to produce a glissando like effect. The slide effect was also used on the banjo. Later when Blues became more popular and moved north singers were accompanied by jazz instruments like the trumpet, trombone, clarinet, piano and contrabass. With the increased popularity of blues and the variety of instruments that played in the blues orchestra some instrumental problems were encountered and their solutions led to advances in blues instrumentation, for example the resonator guitar was designed to balance the volume of the guitar when playing with wind and brass instruments but due to its distinctive “blues” sound was used even after electronic amplification solved this problem.

The most common structure in blues is the 12 bar blues. It uses a twelve bar pattern and is in common time. It uses chords 1, 4 and 5 or the tonic, subdominant and dominant respectively. The chords are repeated through out the song in this pattern:

Bar	-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Chord	-	I	I	I	I	IV	V	I	I	V	V	I	V	(except for the last time when its V)

Blues music has a slow tempo and the lyrics are soulful and melancholy reflecting the themes of black American life before and after the liberation they include drinking, railroads, jail, murder, poverty, hard labour, love lost and tales of personal experience on plantations. Although the lyrics and style of blues can be seen as oppressing it is on the whole is a powerful, emotive and rhythmic genre celebrating the life of black Americans. In the 1940s a faster style of blues was developed called Rhythm ‘n’ Blues. It was a combination of mainly Blues and Jazz and was performed by small combinations of four or five musicians. In the 1950s Rock and Roll was developed from Rhythm ‘n’ Blues with influences from jazz and Gospel music.