

# AFRICAN MUSIC AND THE PRE-JAZZ ERA

## Introduction

Before jazz existed, the European and African musical traditions were converging in slave camps, churches, and revival meetings all across the South. Because African music has an oral tradition, the work songs, shouts, and field hollers that were a part of everyday life in Africa were committed to memory and retained when slaves were brought to the New World. By the end of the 19th century, these traditional song forms had changed and adapted themselves to their new environment, and in some cases incorporated elements of European music in their performance. This cross-fertilization of musical cultures was essential to the birth of jazz, which ultimately came in the early years of the 20th century. But by this time, black musicians and singers had already been exerting their influence on American culture and music for many years. Although minstrel shows spawned many negative stereotypes that lasted for many years after minstrelsy itself died out, they were an important and perhaps necessary beginning to the dialog between blacks and whites on the issue of race and, in the years after the Emancipation Proclamation, important stepping stones for black musicians into the world of entertainment.

Three musical forms that were the byproducts of the blending of African and European musical traditions came into existence in America in the 18th and 19th centuries, and each were important influences on the creation of jazz. Spirituals, the blues, and ragtime were each created to meet the specific needs of their performers and their respective audiences, and each found different ways to achieve the cross-fertilization of the African and European traditions. But one thing that all three had in common was that they were uniquely American styles, and could only have been created here.

## African Music

### African Musical Tradition

Africa is rich with musical traditions, but it is important that one does not make the assumption that there was one single culture that produced them. It is a huge continent—roughly four times the size of the United States—with at least 2,000 communal groups and probably at least that many languages and dialects. Africa should also not be thought of as an isolated continent, free of outside influence before the slave trade began. Instruments from ancient Greece and China have been dug up from African soil in recent years; Arabic invaders established a presence as well, as far back as the eighth century. Africa is a rich and diverse land of many cultures, traditions, and people.

## KEY TERMS

12-Bar Form  
AAB Lyric Form  
Abolitionist Movement  
Blue Notes  
Blues Poetry/Lyrics  
Blues Scale  
Cakewalk  
Call and Response  
Diatonic Scale  
Griot  
Improvisation  
Jug Bands  
Minstrelsy/Minstrel Shows  
Pentatonic Scale  
Pianola  
Second Awakening  
Sheet Music  
The Missouri School  
*Treemonisha*  
Vaudeville

## KEY PLACES

Mississippi Delta  
Sedalia, Missouri  
West Africa

## KEY FIGURES

Blind Lemon Jefferson  
Charley Patton  
James Bland  
John and Alan Lomax  
Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)  
Robert Johnson  
Son House  
Scott Joplin  
Stephen Foster

## MUSIC STYLES

Country Blues  
Ethiopian Song  
Field Holler

Ragtime  
Ring Shout

Shout  
Spiritual

The Blues  
Work Song

In this chapter's discussion of African music, it is important to note that the references to the characteristics of and instruments used in African music are from historical African traditions that are in some cases hundreds of years old, rather than current African styles or trends. In the same way, references to European music point to the traditional classical music of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, not current European musicians. It is these traditions that were brought to the New World by Europeans as settlers and Africans as slaves that were important to the creation of jazz.

In Africa (as in Europe), each region and culture has its own indigenous musical styles and practices. However, there are a few common characteristics that have been observed throughout the continent. Possibly the most important of these is the functional role that music plays in everyday life—so much so that in many African cultures, there is no specific name given to music. Of course, there is functional music in our culture—we sing “Happy Birthday” at birthday parties and play fight songs at football games and somber music at funerals. Songs of this nature exist in African culture as well, but music's functional role goes much deeper. Among the many functional songs are those:

- To celebrate the loss of a first tooth
- To celebrate the passage into adulthood
- To shame bed wetters and thieves
- To tell of historical events
- To disseminate information, whether it is about an upcoming activity or a warning of some sort

One of the most important classes of functional songs is the work song. Work songs are as varied as the type of work that needs to be done, so there are work songs about, among other things:

- Building boats
- Cooking dinner
- Hunting
- Cleaning the home

Although these songs functioned as a way to make work go easier, work songs are celebratory—one is doing work that will make life better.

Another general characteristic of African musical tradition is the blurring of the distinct lines between the performer and audience. It is not uncommon for a person who might be singing a song as part of a story to have his or her listeners join in and participate. In parades and other celebrations, those who started out as nonparticipants soon find themselves joining in. This is not to say that anyone and everyone can lead the proceedings—that role is usually left to the most highly skilled in each community, known as **griots**. In addition to serving in the role as a sort of professional musician and entertainer, griots are also in charge of maintaining the oral history of the community.

Because the African tradition is an oral one, music is passed on from one generation to the next by memorization rather than writing it down. We memorize songs and pass them on in our culture as well, but on a much more limited scale.

In addition to serving in the role as a sort of professional musician and entertainer, **griots** are also in charge of maintaining the oral history of the community.

Think about the last time that you saw the written music to the song “Happy Birthday”—few if any of us have, yet everybody knows it. Imagine having “Happy Birthday” and hundreds of other songs that have some sort of functional use committed to memory, without ever bothering to learn how to read music. Such is the nature of the African oral music tradition.

Music in African tradition also has a very close relationship to dancing, to the extent that the two are usually not thought of separately. One custom that has been widely observed throughout the continent that combines music and dance is the **ring shout**. The ring shout and variations of it were widely observed in America at church camp meetings and at Congo Square in New Orleans during the 19th century.

## Characteristics of African Music

The most noticeable characteristic of African music is the heavy emphasis on rhythm. Many in our culture have mental images of the “savage drumming” from old movies shot in Africa, but in reality, the rhythmic content of the music is very sophisticated. Often contrasting, syncopated rhythms, each played by a different musician, are superimposed on each other, creating a polyrhythmic effect that is so complex that it cannot be written down using standard music notation (which, by the way, was invented by Europeans and is largely irrelevant to African tradition).

African harmony and melody is equally complex, although to European-trained ears, it often is characterized as simple and primitive. Once again, part of the problem rests with the urge to interpret one culture through the standards of another. One commonly observed quality of African melody is the strong reliance on a five-note **pentatonic scale** (on a piano, this can be approximated by playing the black keys only).

Another important aspect of African music is the importance of **improvisation**. Many instrumental performances are comprised of short melodic phrases that are repeated for long periods of time—sometimes hours—with slight variations that are introduced at the whim of the player. Improvisation is perhaps most notable in vocal performances, where a commonly used technique is **call and response**, with one lead singer issuing the call, and the rest of the participants providing the response. The very nature of call and response lends itself to much variation and improvisation.

African music is also characterized by the close relationship between instrumental music and speech. People in every culture talk using countless inflections and variations of pitch and tonality to enhance their delivery. Most African instruments are played in a way that imitates the human voice, using tonal inflections, slurred attacks, and bending of pitches. The talking drum, which when played by an experienced musician can produce an almost perfect copy of human speech, is found throughout Africa. Other instruments such as xylophones, flutes, and trumpets are also played in this way.

The **ring shout** was derived from the West African circle dance. Participants form a circle and shuffle in a counterclockwise direction in ever increasing speed and intensity, eventually reaching a state of hysteria.

The most noticeable characteristic of African music is the heavy emphasis on rhythm.

The **pentatonic scale** is a five-note scale (usually 1-2-3-5-6, or do-re-mi-sol-la) commonly used in folk music from different cultures, including Africa. The pentatonic scale differs from the European major scale, which has seven notes (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti).

**Improvisation** is perhaps most notable in vocal performances.

**Call and response** is a melodic phrase played or sung by one performer that is answered by the rest of the group.

## Music Analysis

### Track 1: “West African Drum Music”

A great example of the polyrhythmic and improvisational nature of West African traditional drum music.

**Drums with vibrating membranes** (or drum-heads) are usually played by ensembles of two or more musicians, each playing one drum.

**Percussion instruments without membranes** include xylophones, log drums, gongs, gourds, and other instruments that are shaken or struck in some manner.

**Stringed instruments** are usually plucked with the fingers or struck with a stick.

**Wind instruments** are trumpets made of wood and ivory, wood flutes, bagpipes, and horns made from elephant tusks.

The **Abolitionist Movement** was the campaign to eliminate slavery in the United States that included the Underground Railroad, a secret network that smuggled slaves to freedom in the North. In 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe published the best selling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was a powerful factor in galvanizing antislavery sympathizers for the movement.

## The Instruments of Africa

Although there are a countless number of musical instruments used in Africa, four general categorical lines can be drawn:

1. **Drums with vibrating membranes (or drumheads).** These are usually played by ensembles of two or more musicians, each playing one drum (as opposed to the modern jazz percussionist who usually plays two or more conga drums at a time). Two examples are the djembe, a bird bath-shaped drum, and the kalangu, or talking drum.
2. **Percussion instruments without membranes.** These include xylophones, log drums, gongs, gourds, and other instruments that are shaken or struck in some manner. Two examples are the shakere, a seed-filled gourd that is covered with a bead net, and the kalimba, or thumb piano.
3. **Stringed instruments.** These are usually plucked with the fingers or struck with a stick. Three examples are the korro, a large harp; the sanko, a zither-type instrument; and the banjar, the ancestor of the banjo.
4. **Wind instruments.** Trumpets made of wood and ivory, wood flutes, bagpipes, and horns made from elephant tusks.

Box 2-2 contains photos of some African instruments.

### BOX 2-1

#### Characteristics of African Music

- Heavy emphasis on complex rhythm, syncopation, and polyrhythm
- Melody relies strongly on a five-note pentatonic scale
- Importance of improvisation
- Close relationship between instrumental music and speeches

## The 19th Century African American

### Slavery

The slave trade commenced in what is now the United States in 1619 when slaves were first brought to Jamestown, Virginia, and continued unabated throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Many of the slaves came from what are now the **West African** countries of Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria along the western coast of the continent. By 1807 when activists from the **Abolitionist Movement** finally persuaded Congress to outlaw the further importing of slaves, there were 400,000 native-born Africans in America living alongside hundreds of thousands of descendants of native-born Africans. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, it is estimated that there were approximately four million slaves in the United States. When Africans were brought to America to become slaves, they were stripped of their belongings, their family and community connections, their property, and their human dignity. The one thing that could not be taken from them, however, was their rich musical heritage.

Because of its oral nature, the songs and traditions of African culture were already firmly committed to the memory of the new African Americans, who not only retained them but continued their practice and performance. Slave owners generally did not encourage African instruments, particularly drums. After the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, where drums were supposedly used to coordinate a slave uprising, many colonies banned their use by slaves. As a result, singing became the most important form of musical expression.

BOX 2-2

Instruments of Africa



a

The African Djembe is a bird bath-shaped drum.



b

Contemporary Djembe



c

The Kalimba is a thumb piano.



d

The Shakere is a seed-filled gourd that is covered with bead net.

Among the most important song forms that existed in slave camps during this time were the **field holler**, the **shout**, and the **work song**. These forms served essentially the same purpose—to make work easier to bear—but exhibited differences in construction and performance. The field holler is a solo song-shout without form or steady rhythm, highly spontaneous and improvisational. The shout is more defined than the field holler and contained stanzas or verses of three lines, often times with the second line being a repeat of the first. The work song, as it was most commonly found in the American slave environment, was sung by a group of workers, usually incorporating call and response, with a distinct pulse. Quite often, tools that were being used in the work, such as plows, shovels, and axes provided accompaniment to the singing.

It is important to point out the fundamental difference in the way that slaves felt about work in their new surroundings. They were no longer working for themselves, nor was work improving the quality of their lives. As a result, the very nature of the field hollers, shouts, and work songs began to change to a more personal expression of one's troubles and pain, and eventually became primary sources in the creation of the blues.

Among the most important song forms that existed in slave camps during this time were the **field holler**, the **shout**, and the **work song**.

## Music Analysis

### Track 2: "Holler" Charley Berry

### Track 3: "Early in the Mornin'" Johnny Lee Moore

The tracks, "Holler" by Charley Berry and "Early in the Mornin'" by Johnny Lee Moore demonstrate two song forms of African origin that survived in the New World. "Holler" is a field holler, performed in the rambling and spontaneous shouting/singing fashion by a solitary worker in the field. "Early in the Mornin'" is a work song performed by a work crew, singing short, repetitive phrases in call and response fashion while accompanying themselves in a steady rhythm with their work tools. Although both songs were obviously recorded in contemporary settings, they are believed to be accurate reproductions of the forms that were commonly sung on farms, plantations, and prisons throughout the South during the 19th century.

## Slaves and Christianity

From the beginning of slavery, missionaries and other religious people concerned about saving the souls of the slaves made efforts to convert them to Christianity. The church was a welcome respite for many slaves, with its message of deliverance from their wretched existence to the Promised Land. Musical activities were one of the most popular aspects of church life, and the singing and playing of church hymns was one of the ways that African Americans were first introduced to traditional European harmony and European instruments such as the piano and organ.

The first independent black church in America, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), was organized in 1793 by the Rev. Richard Allen. In 1801, Allen published a hymnal entitled *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns Selected from Various Authors by Richard Allen, African Minister*. Although it contained only text and no music, it is likely that Allen's hymns were sung using techniques such as call and response, repetitive phrases, and shouting. This blending of African music tradition with European church music, the **spiritual**, had been a common practice for many years by this time.

Spirituals were the first American music genre to combine elements of African and European musical traditions; many more, including jazz, would follow during the next 200 years. In the early years, it is widely believed that the performance of spirituals contained more African influences such as improvisation, shouting, and rhythmic variety than today's pre-arranged and notated variety. The popularity of spirituals grew quickly, especially during a particularly strong religious movement from 1800 to 1830 known as the **Second Awakening**. During this period, large camp meetings were held throughout the South with active participation by both blacks and poor whites, and new songs were introduced. The ring shout was also commonly performed at these camp meetings.

## Minstrelsy

**Minstrelsy** was the most popular form of entertainment in America in the 19th century. Through these traveling shows, people in different regions throughout the country were able to share for the first time the same songs, skits, and jokes (the “Why did the chicken cross the road?” joke has minstrel show origins). Emerging around 1820 and reaching its greatest popularity between 1850 and 1870, **minstrel shows** consisted of a series of short comedy skits, song-and-dance routines, and juggling acts. The primary feature of the minstrel show was a comical and derogatory depiction of slaves and their lives. The entertainers, all of them white men, blackened their faces with burnt cork and impersonated slaves in ways that were funny to their white audiences. The two most common characterizations were the slick, hustling ladies man, Zip Coon, and the lazy, no-good Jim Crow.

Minstrel shows included a small band that usually included:

- Banjo
- Tambourine
- Fiddle
- Bone castanets

**Spiritual**—music coming from the early black Christian church that generally consisted of European hymns sung using African performance techniques.

The **Second Awakening** was the second wave of a religious revival in the United States during the years 1800–1830 that was characterized by camp meetings attended by thousands that lasted for days at a time.

**Minstrel shows** consisted of a series of short comedy skits, song-and-dance routines, and juggling acts.

## Music Analysis

### Track 4: “I’ll Meet You On That Other Shore” St. James Primitive Baptist Church

A great example of what an early spiritual may have sounded like.

One of the feature presentations in each show was a dance contest called the **cakewalk**, patterned after the syncopated songs played by slave string bands on fiddles and banjos and accompanied by foot stomping. The cakewalk (so named because the best dance team won a cake) became extremely popular, and the music that accompanied it was influential in creating ragtime.

Minstrel shows spawned a whole genre of songs called **Ethiopian songs** (or sometimes called Plantation songs) that stereotyped Southern folk life and often contained references to the negative stereotypes depicted in the shows. The most prolific and famous composer of such songs was **Stephen Foster**, whose songs include many that are still sung today, such as “Hard Times Come Again No More,” “Oh! Susanna,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “Beautiful Dreamer.” Foster was a product of his time, and some of his song lyrics are overtly racist in tone. In others, the racial overtones were less pronounced but included lyrics in black dialect. For instance, “Camptown Races” includes the line “De long tail filly and de big black hoss Doo dah! Doo dah!” in the second stanza. Other famous examples of minstrel songs include Dan Emmett’s “Dixie,” which to this day has racist overtones associated with it for many people.

After the war and Emancipation, black minstrel companies began to organize and put on shows of their own. In an interesting twist of irony, black minstrel shows, playing for black audiences, caricatured the white minstrel shows, which were of course caricatures of slave life. Some black minstrels even went as far as to put on blackface. The most famous writer in the black minstrel tradition was **James Bland**, who wrote approximately 700 songs, including “Oh, Dem Golden Slippers” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.”

As the 19th century came to an end, the popularity of minstrel shows waned as **vaudeville** emerged. Like minstrel shows, vaudeville shows were touring shows of short comedy skits and musical acts, but without the humor associated with slave life (although racial stereotypes persisted for many years). Although minstrel shows created and perpetuated many negative racial stereotypes, they provided one of the first avenues for blacks to gain experience as professional musicians and entertainers. Many of the first generation of jazz musicians and blues singers in the early 20th century got their start in minstrel and vaudeville shows. The popularity of minstrel shows also suggests that even in a time when racism was overt and common, white America was fascinated with African American culture.

## The Blues

Like jazz and spirituals, the blues is a uniquely American phenomenon. It originated from the field hollers, shouts, and work songs sung in the fields and the prison work camps of the South in the 19th century. Over time, these song forms began to take a mournful tone as singers increasingly used them as a means of personal expressions of pain and oppression. Instead of celebrating prosperity through work, the singing of these songs became a catharsis. Eventually, the blues became an emotional release for feelings of lost love, sexual frustration, poverty, jealousy, and a whole list of other things.

**The blues** played a vital role in the birth of jazz, and by all accounts was born just a few years earlier than jazz and in very nearly the same place. But as these two forms evolved during the 20th century, the blues and jazz developed into two very different but parallel musical universes, although they share some fundamental musical elements. Even though most people think of the blues as an expression describing a depressed mood, musicians know the blues as a specific format of musical and lyrical rules that can be conveniently molded into an infinite variety of tempos, styles, and interpretations. The different settings in which these blues formulas have been used throughout the years is seemingly unlimited. Consider this:

The **cakewalk** was originally performed by slave couples who pranced proudly with high-kicking steps that imitated the pretentious behavior of white folk.

Like minstrelsy, **vaudeville** was a touring show of short comedy skits and musical acts, but without most of the humor associated with slave life.

Although they share some fundamental musical elements, **the blues** and jazz developed into two very different but parallel musical universes.

Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” from the 1940s, Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” from the 1950s, and the Beatles’ “Can’t Buy Me Love” from the 1960s were all popular tunes of their day that utilized blues elements. Recordings by jazz musicians of songs using blues formulas are even more common, undoubtedly numbering in the thousands, and can be found among every evolutionary style of jazz from the earliest to the most contemporary. These elements of the blues certainly are, always have been, and always will be embedded into the very fabric of jazz.

There are three essential musical elements that usually determine whether a song is in fact a blues song. They are the 12-bar form, the blues scale, and the blues poetic formula. Although it is possible to have a 16-bar blues song or a blues song that does not use the standard poetic formula, these are exceptions. Each of these elements are described below.

**12-bar form**—The standard blues form, which uses 12 bars or measures for each verse.

**Diatonic scale**—the notes from a specific key or scale and the harmony that is derived from those notes.

The **blues scale** is a six-note scale that eliminates the second and sixth scale notes and lowers, or flats, the third and seventh scale notes.

### The 12-Bar Blues Form

The blues as it is performed today is usually in a **12-bar form** with a standardized chord progression. In its simplest form, only three chords are used: the I, IV, and V chords of the **diatonic scale**. In the key of C, those chords are C (built on the first note of the C scale), F (the fourth note) and G (the fifth note). Over the course of 12 bars, the chord progression unfolds in this manner:

Bar:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Chord:	C	C	C	C	F	F	C	C	G	F	C	C
	I				IV		I		V	IV	I	

This harmonic structure found in contemporary blues comes directly from European harmonic principles commonly found in European religious music. Although hymns of this nature sometimes have complicated harmonic schemes that include reharmonizations, deceptive cadences, and passing chords, most can be distilled down to only three chords, in fact the same three chords found in the blues: the I, IV, and V.

When you hear a jazz musician play the blues, it will probably sound different than the way a blues musician plays the blues. Jazz musicians add their own interpretations, rhythms, and dissonances that give the blues a uniquely jazz flavor. Contemporary urban blues musicians such as B. B. King and Buddy Guy tend to play the blues in a way that is closer to its original form.

### Blues Notes and the Blues Scale

One prominent feature of the blues is the **blues scale**. The blues scale is a six-note scale (as opposed to the seven-note major scale) that eliminates the second and sixth scale notes and lowers, or flats, the third and seventh scale notes. In addition, a flat-fifth scale note is added beside the existing fifth note. For example, a C major scale looks like this:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C	D	E	F	G	A	B
(do	re	mi	fa	sol	la	ti)

The blues scale looks like this:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C	E <sup>b</sup>	F	G <sup>b</sup>	G	B <sup>b</sup>	



The lowered or flatted notes E<sup>b</sup>, G<sup>b</sup>, and B<sup>b</sup> are known as **blue notes**, and when used in blues melodies or improvised solos, they produce the dissonance that gives the blues its unique, mournful quality. Blue notes, or notes that closely resemble them, appeared in work songs, shouts, field hollers, and spirituals well before the existence of the blues, so their origins seem clearly to be African. Some scholars have speculated that the blue note came into being as slaves attempted to superimpose the five-note pentatonic scale that was common in Africa onto traditional European harmony. In the preceding example, this would be the E<sup>b</sup> pentatonic scale (E<sup>b</sup>, F, G, B<sup>b</sup>, C) superimposed onto the C major scale. In any event, the blues scale has become a ubiquitous presence in contemporary music, as it is commonly heard in the performance of the blues and jazz as well as pop music, gospel, rock, rap, hip-hop, and contemporary 20th century classical music.

The lowered or flatted notes E<sup>b</sup>, G<sup>b</sup>, and B<sup>b</sup> are known as **blue notes**, and when used in blues melodies or improvised solos, they produce the dissonance that gives the blues its unique, mournful quality.

## Blues Poetry

**Blues poetry** or **lyrics** also generally follow an established guideline. Over the 12-bar form, three phrases are sung, the first two being identical, the last phrase generally responding in some way to the first two. This formula is known as the **AAB lyric form**. A similar three-line form was commonly heard in the performance of the African shout as well as sorrowful songs sung by slaves first noticed around the mid-19th century. Here is an example:

**Blues poetry** or **lyrics** also generally follow an established guideline. Over the 12-bar form, three phrases are sung, the first two being identical, the last phrase generally responding in some way to the first two. This formula is known as the **AAB lyric form**.

- A: Since I lost my baby, my whole world has turned blue,
- A: Since I lost my baby, my whole world has turned blue,
- B: Since I lost that woman, don't know what I'm gonna do.

Another example:

- A: My man, he don't love me, he don't treat me right,
- A: My man, he don't love me, he don't treat me right,
- B: Now I'm so tired and lonely, I just sit and cry all night.

These two examples also illustrate the visceral and emotional nature of most blues poetry.

The AAB form fits over the 12-bar blues progression with each of the three phrases using four bars, like this:

Bar:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Chord:	C	C	C	C	F	F	C	C	G	F	C	C
Phrase:	A —————				A —————				B —————			

Most often, each phrase does not fill up the entire four bars allotted to it, so jazz and blues musicians have widely taken up the practice of inserting an instrumental riff at the end of each phrase, creating a call-and-response pattern something like this:

Bar:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Chord:	C	C	C	C	F	F	C	C	G	F	C	C
Phrase:	A — — —				A — — —				B — — —			
Riff:	— — — —				— — — —				— — —			

Although some blues tunes do not use the standard AAB poetry format, generally speaking most do. Jazz composers have also used this phrasing formula when

writing instrumental jazz tunes based on the 12-bar blues. Many tunes from the swing era, such as “One O’clock Jump” and “C Jam Blues,” as well as more contemporary tunes, such as Sonny Rollins’ “Tenor Madness,” have used riffs to substitute for the vocal lines, while still patterned on the AAB lyric form.

## Country Blues

Although it took the blues several years to evolve into the form that we know today, no musicologists or recording engineers were present to witness its birth. As a result, we can only make educated guesses as to the how, why, and where. Historical evidence suggests that it happened between 1880 and 1900; these were the years immediately following Reconstruction (which ended in 1877), when the climate of racial oppression, hatred, and violence toward Southern blacks was at its worst. The number of lynchings peaked in the 1880s and 1890s. During this time period, the free Southern black man was faced with perhaps an even more depressing dilemma than slavery—trying to make a living with little or no job skills in this hostile environment. For many, continual moving around became the norm, not only in the constant pursuit of a job but often just to stay alive. Evidence also suggests that the blues evolved out of the field hollers, shouts, and work songs that were still being sung by sharecroppers as well as longshoremen and other laborers.

Some of these laborers chose to try to earn a living, or supplement their living by singing and playing music. Soon there were itinerant male singers traveling from place to place, playing on street corners and in small, dilapidated rural restaurants and nightclubs called honky tonks or juke joints for tips and loose change. They accompanied themselves on the guitar, an instrument that was cheap, readily available, and easy to carry around. At first, they sang popular and traditional songs, but eventually new songs about bad luck and trouble that rambled on in spontaneous fashion began to emerge.

In time, as they exchanged musical ideas with others they met through their travels, certain tendencies and standardizations began to emerge. These standardizations included the abovementioned use of the blues scale, the AAB lyric form, and the 12-bar form, as well as interpretive playing and singing styles. These men were the first blues singers, and they played what today is called **country blues**, the first blues style. W. C. Handy wrote of hearing one of these men play the blues for the first time in 1903, an account that provides us with a convenient mark in time as to knowing when this process was nearly complete. Handy, who today is known as the Father of the Blues helped standardize things even further with his 1912 hit “Memphis Blues,” which was notated and sold in **sheet music** form. It and his blockbuster 1914 hit “St. Louis Blues” provided many Americans with their first experience hearing the blues.

## The Mississippi Delta

The most fertile area for the development of the country blues was the **Mississippi Delta** region, a 250-mile stretch of land stretching north to south from Memphis, Tennessee, down to Vicksburg, Mississippi. This region had some of the best farmland in the world, with topsoil as deep as 30 feet that had washed down from Mississippi River erosion over hundreds of years. Hard work, oppressive heat,

**Country blues** is the first blues style, characterized by male singers who accompanied themselves on the guitar.

**Sheet music** is the music that is notated and sold in a loose, unbound sheet format. From the late 19th century on to the present, popular music has been sold in this fashion, with lyrics, melody, and piano accompaniment.

The most fertile area for the development of the country blues was the **Mississippi Delta** region, 250 miles of land stretching north to south from Memphis, Tennessee, down to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

### BOX 2-3

#### Characteristics of Country Blues

- Solo male vocalist
- Guitar self-accompaniment
- Earliest versions loosely, but not strictly, adhere to 12-bar form

poverty, and racial terror characterized life in the Delta in the late 19th century. It is in the Mississippi Delta that some of the most legendary figures of the blues were born or played, including Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and B. B. King. The Delta Blues style often features slide guitar playing with haunting vocals, often speaking of superstition, jealousy, and trouble. Today Highway 61, the legendary “Blues Highway,” runs through the middle of this historic area, the holy land of the blues.

## Early Delta Blues Musicians

The first Delta bluesman to achieve fame was **Charley Patton** (1891–1934), a regional celebrity who began recording in Chicago for Paramount Records in 1929 and soon became their biggest-selling artist. Patton was the consummate entertainer and a strong, rhythmic guitarist who employed tricks such as popping strings and beating his guitar like a drum. Patton’s recordings give an insight to the early years of country blues, before the 12-bar form was standardized. His recording success paved the way for two other Delta bluesmen, Willie Brown and Son House, to record.

Born in the heart of the Delta in Riverton, Mississippi, **Son House** (1902–1988) was one of the main influences on both Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson. A preacher by the age of 15, House picked up the guitar at age 25 and started recording sometime around 1930. After his playing partner and friend, Charley Patton, died in 1934, House went largely into retirement until 1964, when researchers found him in Rochester, New York. House became a celebrity as one of the few remaining bluesmen from the early years of the Delta until he was forced to retire in 1976 for health reasons.

Undoubtedly the most famous and legendary Delta blues musician was **Robert Johnson** (1911–1938). Although he only recorded 29 sides at two recording sessions in 1936 and 1937, many of his compositions have been recorded not only by other blues artists but also by rock performers such as the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Eric Clapton. Some of Johnson’s most famous songs include “Love in Vain,” “Cross Road Blues,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” and “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom.”

Johnson was born south of the Delta in Hazelhurst but by 1918 or 1920 had moved to Robinsonville, just south of Memphis with his mother and stepfather. By the late 1920s, he had taken up the guitar and was learning to play from Robinsonville-resident Willie Brown, as well as Charley Patton, a frequent visitor. Sometime around 1930, Son House arrived in town, and Johnson fell in love with House’s clean yet intense slide guitar playing. Robert Johnson was still a novice at this point and was often ridiculed by Brown, Patton, and House, which may have been a factor in his decision to abruptly leave town. When he returned to the area sometime around a year later,

### Early Delta Blues Musicians

- Charley Patton
- Son House
- Robert Johnson

© Delta Haze Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

Undoubtedly the most famous and legendary Delta blues musician was **Robert Johnson** (1911–1938).

## Music Analysis

### Track 5: “Cross Road Blues”

(Johnson) Robert Johnson recorded at the Gunther Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, on November 27, 1936

Robert Johnson was one of the most influential of the Delta blues musicians, and his song “Cross Road Blues” is a blues classic. As was the case with many of the early country blues singers, Johnson does not strictly adhere to the 12-bar form: after each phrase, he noodles around on the guitar before singing the next phrase. However, the AAB form is intact on each of the verses. This song achieved fame among rock musicians when it was covered by Eric Clapton’s band Cream in 1968. Cream renamed the song “Crossroads.”

0:00	Introduction
0:07	First verse
0:42	Second verse
1:14	Third verse
1:42	Fourth verse
2:12	Fifth verse

he found House and Brown playing at a little joint in Banks, a few miles east of Robinsonville and amazed them with a newfound technique that was brilliant, dazzling, and electrifying.

What had happened to turn the novice into the virtuoso? Some believe the myth that Johnson sold his soul to the devil to become great. There is indeed a legend with African voodoo roots that instructs a guitarist to go to a crossroads at midnight and wait until a large man approaches. The man (supposedly the devil himself) will tune your guitar, play a song, hand it back to you, and disappear into the darkness without saying a word. The guitarist from then on could play whatever he wanted to, but the price was a life of torment and haunting nightmares.

In reality, Johnson had returned to the Hazelhurst area and began absorbing influences from phonograph records made by other blues guitarists. He also came under the tutelage of the unrecorded local guitarist Ike Zinermon, who scholars believe was the most important influence on Johnson’s revolutionary modern style that stunned his contemporaries. His last years were spent traveling around the Delta from one juke joint to another, moving from woman to woman, and not setting down roots. Sometime in 1938, word of him spread to impresario John Hammond, who planned on bringing him to New York to take part in his “From Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall in December that would have undoubtedly made Johnson a star. Unfortunately, Robert Johnson did not live that long, poisoned at a juke joint outside of Greenwood by the jealous husband of a woman he had reportedly been having an affair with. He died on August 16.

### Texas Blues

Texas was also the home to a wellspring of blues artists that emerged in the early years of the 20th century. The bluesmen of this region were known for their strong guitar playing in a more relaxed, folk-like manner than the Delta style. Two of the greatest early Texas bluesmen were **Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)** (1888–1949) and **Blind Lemon Jefferson** (1893–1929). From common roots in rural Texas, the two met and performed together in Dallas around 1915 before each parting to go their separate ways. Jefferson headed off to the Delta, where a talent scout discovered

#### Texas Blues Musicians

- Blind Lemon Jefferson
- Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)

him and brought him to Chicago where in 1925 he made one of the first country blues recordings. It was in Chicago that he died mysteriously in a snowstorm in December 1929.

Leadbelly's early life was considerably more troublesome. In 1917, he was arrested for shooting a man and sent to the Shaw State Prison Farm in Texas. He was pardoned in 1925 after performing one of his original songs for Governor Pat Neff. In 1930, he was arrested again in Louisiana on charges of assault to commit murder and sentenced to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. With the help of researcher **John Lomax**, Leadbelly was released again in 1934 and eventually moved to New York, where he became a part of the burgeoning Greenwich Village folk scene in the 1940s. In 1951, two years after his death from Lou Gehrig's disease, the folk group The Weavers had a million-selling hit with Leadbelly's tune "Goodnight Irene."

## Ragtime

During the antebellum years, slaves often played syncopated music in string ensembles called **jug bands** (also called juke bands or washboard bands) consisting of fiddles and banjos, washboards, and foot stomping. Prominent in the sound of the jug band was the banjo, descendent of the African banjar that is basically a drum with strings stretched across the head. The very nature of its drum-like construction led the banjo to be played in a syncopated fashion with short, percussive melodies. When minstrel shows copied these jug bands for inclusion in their own shows, their syncopated rhythms immediately became a popular feature.

After the Civil War, more black musicians began playing the piano, and the instrument began popping up in social halls and juke joints all across the South. As rural itinerant pianists began to get jobs playing for dancers at these places, a new style began to emerge by the 1890s that copied the syncopation of the jug bands. In **ragtime**, as it eventually became known, pianists used the left hand to substitute for the foot-stomping beat and the right hand to simulate the short, syncopated banjo melodies. The early ragtime pianists came about developing the style by traveling around and exchanging ideas in much the same way that country blues developed. As all this was happening, the piano was becoming one of the most popular instruments in America. Between 1890 and 1909, sales of pianos increased from 100,000 a year to 350,000 a year. Helping to fuel this popularity was the introduction of the **pianola**, or player piano, in 1897, which allowed the consumer to buy pre-recorded piano rolls that played when one pushed on the pianola foot pedals. It was also in 1897 that the first instrumental ragtime piece, William Krell's "Mississippi Rag," was published.

Like country blues, ragtime had its own center of development. In the Missouri cities of St. Louis, Sedalia, and Carthage, a number of talented young performers and composers gathered and began exchanging ideas in the 1890s. **The Missouri School**, as they became known, included Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, James Scott, Scott Hayden, and Louis Chavin. Some of these men reportedly put on exhibitions of their work at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and caused a sensation. By the late 1890s, rag



© Getty Images

**John Lomax** (1867–1948) and his son **Alan Lomax** (1915–2002) were important musicologists who archived American blues and folk music both by recordings and by publishing books such as *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* in 1936.

**Jug bands** consisted of fiddles and banjos, washboards, and foot stomping.

**Ragtime** is a notated and fully composed piano style that was popular in the 1890s and early 20th century.

### The Missouri School

- Scott Joplin
- Tom Turpin
- James Scott
- Scott Hayden
- Louis Chavin

The introduction of the **pianola**, or player piano, helped increase the popularity of pianos.

**BOX 2-4**

Characteristics of Ragtime

- Fully composed instrumental (piano) music
- Notated and sold as sheet music and piano rolls for player pianos
- Short, syncopated melodies in the right hand imitating banjos
- Heavy beat in left hand imitating foot stomping
- Stiff, marchlike rhythm
- Complex form: AABBAACDD (each letter represents the statement of a theme)

pieces were published with increasing frequency and with so much commercial success that on January 23, 1900, the Ragtime Championship of the World Competition was held at Tammany Hall in New York to much acclaim. For the next 10 years, the ragtime craze took America by storm. The characteristics of ragtime are outlined in **Box 2-4**.

Ragtime took a different course of development than the blues and jazz when its early players and composers made the conscious decision to Europeanize it. This meant, first and foremost, that ragtime would be written down, like piano music from the European classical music tradition. This left no room for improvisation or flexibility in the performance of a ragtime piece. They also began to use sophisticated forms that resembled those from classical music. One common ragtime formal structure was the AABBAACDD form, in which four distinct themes are used. Ragtime has also always been an instrumental music, which further separates it from the blues and some jazz. These rules ultimately became restrictive on ragtime's development, and it was not able to evolve past its origins like the blues and jazz eventually would.

**Scott Joplin (1868–1917)**  
Piano/Composer

The man who did more to bring ragtime to America than anyone else was **Scott Joplin**. Joplin was born in Texarkana, Texas, to a poor railroad family; interestingly, his mother played the banjo. Showing great skill at his piano studies of European classical music, Joplin was good enough to leave home while still in his teens to try to make his living traveling the juke joint circuits. In 1885, he settled in St. Louis and started to publish sentimental songs. In 1896, he moved across the state to **Sedalia, Missouri**, and got a job playing piano at the Maple Leaf Club where in 1899, publisher John Stark heard Joplin play his composition “Maple Leaf Rag.” Stark published the piece; within 10 years, it had sold approximately one million copies, the first piece of sheet music in history to do so.

© MPI/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

An undated formal portrait of **Scott Joplin**, composer of “Maple Leaf Rag.”

Joplin clearly had higher aspirations than writing rags. In 1903, he wrote a ballet, *The Rag-Time Dance*, and an opera, *A Guest of Honor, a Ragtime Opera*. Although he continued to write piano rags, a lucrative venture for him, he chafed at the way many ragtime pianists were speeding them up and adding showy embellishments. Many of his publications carry a warning at the top: “Note: Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast.” In 1907, he began work on his ultimate ambition, *Treemonisha*.

*Treemonisha*, an opera of early black folk life in America with very little ragtime content, engulfed most of Joplin’s energy for the next eight years. Unable to find a publisher for the 230-page score, he did so at his own expense in 1911. Joplin then went about the monumental task of producing the work for the orchestra and 11 voices with staging, costumes, scenery, and lighting. Although *Treemonisha* did eventually premier in Harlem in 1915, it was with only Joplin at the piano, no staging, and an underrehearsed cast. Music critics panned it, and it closed after one performance. Crushed, Joplin went into mental and financial decline. In 1916, he was committed to Manhattan State Hospital, where he died from dementia the next year.

Scott Joplin was one of the first of many musicians who during the course of the 20th century would try to reconcile the differences between Western European music and African American music and create a new idiom. Ultimately, his efforts did not go to waste, however; in 1976, he was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Treemonisha* after it was resurrected and staged as he had originally intended for the first time.

## Music Analysis

### Track 6: “Maple Leaf Rag”

(Joplin) Scott Joplin from a Scott Joplin made Cannonized piano roll cut in 1916, recorded in stereo in 1986

This is a recording of a piano roll made by Scott Joplin himself, the composer of “Maple Leaf Rag.” Joplin published the tune soon after moving to Sedalia, Missouri, a railroad town in the middle of the state, and it became a smash hit. “Maple Leaf Rag” fueled the popularity of ragtime, which in turn helped develop America’s taste for the syncopated or “ragged” rhythms that would soon infuse jazz. Although “Maple Leaf Rag” employs a commonly used ragtime form with four themes (AABBACDD), it was also innovative in its much bolder use of syncopation than earlier rags of the late 1890s. When musicians began adding syncopated rhythms similar to the ones found in “Maple Leaf Rag” to popular songs and blues tunes, they called it ragging, and it became one of the essential elements of early jazz.

0:00	First theme (A) played twice
0:44	Second theme (B) played twice
1:26	Recapitulation (repeat) of A theme
1:47	Third theme (C) played twice
2:28	Fourth theme (D) played twice, song ends

**KH**  
**ALL RIGHTS**  
**RESERVED**



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Study Questions

### African Music and the Pre-Jazz Era

1. What are some important ways that the musical traditions of Africa and Europe are different?

---

---

---

2. In what ways was the performance of traditional African music changed when Africans were brought to the New World as slaves?

---

---

---

3. Describe the musical and poetic formulas of the blues.

---

---

---

4. Describe how ragtime evolved and some reasons why it became so popular.

---

---

---

5. What are the positive and negative legacies of the minstrel show?

---

---

---

6. Explain the differences between spirituals, the blues, and ragtime.

---

---

---

---

7. How are the blues and ragtime different in terms of their African and European influences?

---

---

---

---

8. Name and describe three common characteristics of African music.

---

---

---

---

9. What impact did the Christian church have on the music of the slaves?

---

---

---

---

10. Why did the field holler, ring shout, and the work song survive in the New World?

---

---

---

---

KH  
ALL RIGHTS  
RESERVED