A Study of Blues Music in African American History

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Overview

Music is my history. It tells me who I am. If I do not look at songs and say "This is me," I have lost myself.... Your history-who you are-where you come from-is in the music.... We make music to help us remember our history.

(Sicangu elder, 1996)
“Our songs are our history. If we do not have our songs, we do not know where we are or where we have been. We don't know how to remember what has happened to us.” (Sicangu elder, 1996) People all around the world are always impressed by the excellent talent of singing and dancing of African American people. Meanwhile African Americans are also very proud of their contributions to the music. For African Americans, music contains their history, culture and spirit. Therefore, in this project, we are going to learn some history about one of the most important styles of African American music—Blues.

Beginning in the 16th Century, Africans were enslaved and brought to the new world. Separated from their languages and history, African Americans somehow managed to preserve something of their culture through the only medium available to them: music, originally limited to voice and rhythm (with and assist from the banjo, derived from African instruments), and closely associated with dance. The history of this blending and changing of the various cultures of Africa in an utterly new context is obscured by time...
and a lack of records.

Blues music is the name that given to both a musical form and genre that is primarily created by the African-American communities within the Deep South of the United States. It started in the nineteenth century and continued to make its way to the future. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these coalesced into the quintessential African American music: “blues songs seem to turn up everywhere in the Deep South more or less simultaneously—in rural areas, small towns, and cities such as New Orleans and Memphis” (Evans, 2006). Often the blues were sung by a single individual, accompanying himself on a guitar. Most blues music is characterized by the song’s melancholy and sadness. People listen to blues music when trying to relax and unwinding from the noise of our busy lives. Though it can be a song for sadness, it can also be relaxing due to its soft and mellow rhythms. However, Blues music has more to the song than just expressing sadness. It can be a song about grief, loss, broken heart, lost love, infidelity, pressure with work, and
everyday struggles. It depicts the life of people that are emotionally struggling on something. Usually, when we listen to songs we can relate to at the moment, it can be our favorite song. This is why the most famous songs are the ones that have their own story, which people can much relate to when we are listening. Blues music was adopted from work songs, spirituals, chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads (Rahn, 1997). This music genre can range from the country music to its urban form. This music genre can be anything from jazz, rock and roll and rhythm blues by following a chord progression as the twelve-bar blues chord.

John Jackson (1999), from Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, described blues and other dance music together: “Blues is music that everybody sat on their front porch after work hours and weekends, and they wasn’t doing nothing but to maintain their own self ...... And it’s some people, I reckon, says it makes them sad, and I don’t know what it does or not. I know I get a great feeling, and a happy felling from the blues.” Ellis (1997) said, “Blues makes you happy sometimes, makes you sad sometimes’ cause it’s a living thing.” West Virginia-born Nap Turner (2001) stated, “a lot of the young people say, ‘I don’t want no blues.’ Because they think that the only thing it’s about is sadness. But it’s not. The blues talks about everyday living, things that happen every day. Like they got an old blues song…”

As the twentieth century began its march into an era marked by massive technological and social changes, the blues was beginning to catch on among rural
African Americans as a musical style that reflected their way of life and entertained them (Pearson, 2003). Tent shows traveling throughout the South featured blues musicians on mandolin, guitar, banjo or harmonica. W.C. Handy, a black orchestra leader and music teacher, helped bring the blues to a wider audience with the publication of compositions for small string orchestras. In New Orleans, musicians took the blues and applied piano, horns and European musical training to sow the seeds of jazz. The city of St. Louis has its blues, which incorporated ragtime music; Memphis blues is based on the music of jug bands and vaudeville performers.

Country and blues music at this early phase were closely related. Jimmie Rodgers, one of the fathers of country music, was known both as "The Singing Brakeman" and "The Blue Yodeler." He played acoustic guitar-based blues songs.
intermixed with European Alpine yodeling. Bill Monroe, the inventor of bluegrass, credits black musicians who played near his boyhood Kentucky home with teaching him about the blues (Pearson, 2003). Their lessons gave him a special edge that set his group apart from other country and hillbilly acts.

Beginning in 1910 and stretching into the 1930s, America’s first Great Migration took place. The rapidly industrializing northern states began to experience a labor shortage at the same time that the sharecropping system of the South was beginning to break down due to a series of natural disasters and economic turmoil. Pro-segregation Jim Crow laws and the rise of violent attacks on African Americans by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan also encouraged many blacks to leave their country roots and their debts behind (Evans, 2006). Though the welcome from working class whites was not always warm and the living conditions were often cramped and cold, 1.6 million southern blacks bet their futures on the factories of northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit and New York. It was in these cities that black musicians developed the jump blues, a precursor to rhythm and blues. This style was upbeat with danceable, driving rhythms and less emphasis on lyrics. It appealed to newly urban audiences who were ready to shed their ‘down home’ pasts. Even with the addition of piano and horn sections, it wasn’t always easy to be heard over raucous nightclub partiers. It was time for the blues to electrify. Waters had been a farmhand and juke-joint operator in Clarksdale, Mississippi before moving to Chicago in 1943, during the second wave of the Great Migration of rural
blacks to the North (Evans, 2006). He was a country blues player but when he plugged in and turned up, the rural-urban bridge was crossed. His cutting, amplified guitar sound appealed to the city dance crowd, while homesick transplants from the country could relate to his deep, heart-aching lyrics. His harmonica player Little Walter would come to spawn countless imitators (Evans, 2006). Popular radio shows, records and tours brought his style to a much wider audience than had ever heard the blues before. The blues was losing its status as regionally-appreciated black folk music and becoming an internationally-recognized American invention that would change the face of popular music in the next half of the century. As African Americans urbanized en masse and white audiences began to turn on to this black music (as they had with jazz in the 1920s), a coming together/clashing of cultures was inevitable. White musicians such as Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins adopted the moves, style and feel of "rhythm & blues" artists such as Ike Turner, Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Rock & roll was born kicking and screaming.

In the 1960s, middle class, urban blacks with a growing awareness of and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement began to see the blues as less relevant to their lives, leaning instead toward the sounds of rock & roll.

Sleepy John Estes
of soul music and rhythm & blues (Pearson, 2003). At the same time, however, the Delta was being rediscovered by British rockers and the burgeoning folk-music scene, who idolized the aging players as the creators of a truly unique and powerful form of music. American rock & roll in the 60s was beginning to fade, just as young Brits were shining the spotlight on Chicago masters such as Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters, and on country pickers like Sleepy John Estes.

African American music has been an amazing cultural achievement, synthesizing African and European culture, often under extreme circumstances. Throughout its history, the music has re-warded its creators, but has rewarded those who borrowed from it and translated it to mainstream society far more, at least from a financial point of view. From a cultural point of view African American music has greatly enriched not just American but global society.
**Supplemental Activities**

*Activity #1—Time Line*

Students should create an extensive time line of the history of Blues Music between 1950 and present. In addition to the general time line, students should also mark events in US History and major events during this time period.

*Activity #2—Songs*

Students should choose a Blues song they like and write a brief introduction of this song, like its author, theme and story behind the song. Students should also discuss with the classmates in class and express their feelings and thoughts.

*Activity #3—Research Paper*

Compare and contrast two songs, styles or artists, and write a paper with at least five secondary sources on the similarities and differences of the chosen works.

*Activity #4—Movie*

Choose one or two movies about the history of Blues for the students to watch such as Cadillac Records or The Blues. Have the students write a review of the movie. Topics include but are not limited to the following: comments, thoughts, reflections etc.
Bibliography


