

# **The Blues and Gospel Music**

## **Introductory Essay**

Charles F. McGovern, Associate Professor of American Studies and History, Director of Graduate Studies - American Studies Program, College of William and Mary

If American music is unique, it is largely due to its bedrock foundation of blues and gospel music, two forms of music that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Anchoring the sounds of African America, these styles underlay the musical innovations of the century: jazz, rhythm and blues, rock, soul and hip hop. They are known and cherished around the world and in every corner of the U.S. It would be impossible to imagine American music without them.

The story of black music is also the tale of the enduring social struggles of American history. Blues and gospel, the secular and sacred songs of everyday black folk, are both bound up in sorrow, loss, despair, hope, redemption, resilience and dreams. While remaining recognizable over many decades, the spirit and musical forms of these styles have influenced much of the American music that has followed. The “blue notes” that are characteristic of the form became prominent in country music, rock and roll and jazz. The simple 12 bar A A B form of blues became the template for the first rock and roll songs, from “Good Rockin’ Tonight” to “Rocket 88” to “Hound Dog” to “Johnny B Goode.” And the world wide interest in American blues inspired such musicians as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and others abroad to not only take up their own instruments, but to re-influence American popular music, borrowing the beat, the form and the sound of the blues and infusing them with new sensibilities.

Blues greats such as Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Memphis Minnie, Muddy Waters, Son House, T-Bone Walker, and BB King, and gospel stars such as Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Gold Gate Quartet, Sam Cooke, the Staple Singers and Clara Ward all occupy prominent places in the pantheon of great American artists. Their music marks one of the great contributions of Americans to world art. But, like other folk art forms, blues and gospel came from the experiences of everyday life.

“The blues was born behind a mule,” said the great Mississippi Delta bluesman Muddy Waters. Blues and gospel music originated in the oppressive experiences of African Americans in the post-emancipation South. When the United States Congress ended Reconstruction in 1877, the political gains and civic protections African Americans had gained after the Civil War were suppressed, and millions of blacks were economically and politically disenfranchised. In the cotton South, African Americans endured harsh conditions: an endless cycle of debt in farm tenancy and sharecropping, peonage, curfews, and lynchings. The daily humiliations of Jim Crow and the constant threat of violence made life difficult and often dangerous. Those who migrated to northern cities in great numbers after 1910 faced different difficulties: segregation, substandard housing, subsistence wages, second class status and discrimination. But rural or urban, African Americans wrought their lives in music that stemmed from their daily experiences.

Blues music characteristically features musical tones that differed from the Western diatonic scale (do re mi). The blues features notes that fall between the intervals of the scale, microtones that flattened the pitch of conventional music, creating powerful tensions and resolutions. The blues also feature a heavily accented and often irregular beat. Simple blues forms follow an A A B structure over twelve bars; a form that has become the bedrock of jazz, pop, country and rock and roll over the years. Blues music drew on numerous African American sources. In Southern plantations, lumber camps, prisons and fields, black work songs, field hollers, chants, and ballads all combined to shape a unique new music with strong ties to African antecedents.

Blues songs first emerged in the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont Southeast, Texas and Appalachia, around the turn of the twentieth century. Soon after, urban-based blues appeared in cities such as Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, New Orleans and New York. Itinerant songsters, stage artists, vaudeville singers and schooled musicians all performed blues using the brass and string instruments of marching bands and orchestras. But whether with the simplest of instruments - a one string “diddly bo” or “quills” cut from sugar cane, or on guitars, pianos, and brass, blues musicians played a variety of styles that captured sadness, elation, resignation, despair and hope, perhaps more evocatively than any other form of indigenous music the U.S had yet witnessed.

Among the most powerful resources that sustained African Americans through adversity and difficulty was strong religious faith. The “sorrow songs” sung in slave times gave birth to religious songs known as spirituals. After emancipation, black religious music - dignified, respectable, and powerful - galvanized audiences around the world thanks to the touring of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1920s storefront churches throughout black America had moved away from the staid spirituals to an unrestrained, emotive and fervent form of religious music, often sung and played by the whole congregation instead of a choir. In the 1930s Thomas Dorsey, a former blues musician, married a blues sensibility to religious themes, pioneering the style known as gospel music. With such collaborators as Sallie Martin, Willie Mae Ford Smith and Mahalia Jackson, the sounds of Gospel resonated in black churches throughout the U.S.

Blues and gospel proved empowering for the artists who made the music as well as the audiences who embraced it. Many of the traveling blues artists of the 1920s and 30s eagerly took to that life as one of the few alternatives to the heavy and unremunerated labor of farm or factory. Similarly, women found a prominence and influence in gospel as singers, choir leaders and composers that gave them a say equal to the male preachers who dominated black churches. Gospel gave black women a public prominence in church that they seldom enjoyed elsewhere in black America. Music offered freedom to those who pursued it - the promise of freedom and money.

Blues artists became heroes and legends in the black community. One of the most enduring tales concerns the elusive bluesman Robert Johnson. Johnson’s music was so powerful, many of his listeners believed the myth that he had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for it. Similar tales of other musicians made clear that African Americans saw music as a spiritual, deeply powerful art. Such tales resonated with African stories and myths kept alive in the black community, and were embraced as well by a wider world

eager to understand the source of blues music's appeal. Similarly, gospel music's deep connection to religious faith often transported both performers and audiences: trances, speaking in tongues and ecstatic emotional outbursts often accompanied the gospel music and services. This music could and did change lives.

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gospel and blues music gained acceptance around the world. The revivals of the 1950s and 60s introduced new audiences to the work of forgotten musicians from decades earlier. Since then, scholars, fans and audiences have engaged in a permanent revival, with a continuing round of festivals, new film, radio and recording projects, to preserve the music of the past and document current practice for the future. And while newer styles emerge and hold commercial interest for a time, blues and gospel remain the bedrock of black music.

## Humanities Themes

**Blues as an expression of social conditions.** From the earliest days, the blues offered deeply felt, graphic expressions of African Americans' exploitation and their determination to survive.

**Blues, Gospel and economic freedom.** Both the blues and gospel offered performers, composers and entrepreneurs an alternative to the harsh manual labor conditions of plantation, lumber, and factory. Performing and composing enabled scores of African Americans to earn a greater degree of self sufficiency and autonomy than if they had remained in other work.

**Gospel music and women's empowerment.** Their participation and leadership in gospel music allowed women much greater power and authority in the black churches that were otherwise the domain of male preachers.

**Blues and American folk tradition.** With its strong rooting in folk tales, myths and legends, the blues is one of American's most distinctive and enduring folk forms, one that has survived and thrived into the present.

## Discussion Points

1. Both blues and gospel sprang from the everyday experiences of black Americans, secular and spiritual. How does the story of how both types of music originated support or deny this idea? Is it true today?
2. Other than lyrics, do you hear meaningful differences between gospel and blues? Which is more powerful to you?
3. Why did some religious people find gospel music "sinful" in the music's early days?

4. Based on the stories of the musicians you met in the film, how did the spread of gospel music through churches provide women performers new opportunities? How did it challenge their traditional place in their communities?
5. What is the difference between the Delta Blues and the blues heard in cities like Chicago? How did the music of early blues pioneers -- Leadbelly, Son House, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson – impact the blues you might hear today? Can you trace blues rhythms and styles in other musical genres of today, such as rock or country music?
6. Both blues and gospel are quintessential “American” musical forms. Yet both are widely recognized and popular around the world. Why do you think this is true? What characteristics of these two kinds of music could be called universal?
7. Listeners and practitioners both often refer to blues along with gospel as “soulful” music. What does that mean to you? Why is “soul” so important for those who create and embrace the music?