

The Blues

The blues is a music steeped in tradition which grew out of African spirituals, worksongs and field “hollers” sung by African-American slaves in the deep South. These songs were passed down orally, and in the late 1800s they collided with American folk and country from the Appalachians, forming new hybrids in each region.

Nurtured in the rural areas and juke joints in towns of the Mississippi Delta, the Delta blues subsequently spread to cities like Memphis, and, eventually, as populations of African-Americans moved north up Highway 61 from the cotton fields and sharecropping farms of the Delta to the factories of northern cities like Chicago and Detroit, the blues found a home in these urban environments. During the late '40s and '50s, in the clubs of these cities, musicians found it necessary to amplify their instruments to be heard above the crowd. Chicago in particular became a hotbed for many of the great electric blues legends, and what is now referred to as the “Chicago Blues” was developed in these postwar years, taking Delta blues guitar, fully amplifying it and putting it into a small-band context. One of the effects of electrifying blues was to allow guitarists to experiment with longer sustaining notes. Adding drums, bass, and piano (sometimes saxophones) to the basic string band and harmonica aggregation, the genre created the now standard blues band lineup.

The blues has been one of the most influential forms of music of the twentieth century, contributing to almost all forms of popular music including jazz, country, and rock 'n' roll. Most blues feature simple structures (usually three chords and 12-bar cycles) that are open to endless improvisations, both lyrically and musically. Because of this, most of the great blues artists have distinguished themselves by their improvisational prowess or by stamping the music with their own unique personal style.

Key Artists and Fundamental Albums:

1) Robert Johnson (b. May 8, 1911; d. August 16, 1938; Prewar Country Blues, Delta Blues)

Little is known of Robert Johnson's life, and the circumstances of his death at 27 remain shrouded in mystery (allegedly involving a pact with the Devil). Recording a mere 29 songs in his brief life, he has become the most celebrated, mythic figure in the history of the blues. A master blues-poet, he wrote such immortal songs as “Love In Vain”, “Cross Road Blues”, “Sweet Home Chicago” and “Ramblin' On My Mind”. Accompanying himself on guitar, Johnson brought a new rhythmic vitality to the country blues, adapting from piano players the boogie bass line he played on the bottom strings of the guitar. Many of the best modern blues guitarists trace their roots to Johnson's guitar style. But perhaps the real power of Johnson's songs is that they represent the bare essentials that reside at the heart of all blues: That these harrowing recordings reflect a pain that can be heard and felt just as strongly more than 60 years later, and that one can draw strength from that expression – *is* the very essence of the blues.

King of the Delta Blues Singers (1966)

The Complete Recordings (1990) (2 CD box set)

2) Muddy Waters (b. April 4, 1915; d. April 30, 1983; Chicago Blues)

Muddy Waters played the Delta blues in his native Mississippi before moving to Chicago in 1943 where he established himself as a pioneer and leading exponent of the Chicago electric blues style. In the late '40s and '50s, Waters practically invented the bold, swaggering Chicago sound with his bombastic vocals and strident slide guitar technique, influencing whole generations of blues and rock musicians. His proud "I'm a man" stance and lyrical bragging can be seen in today's rap and hip-hop artists. Among his many blues classics are "Rollin' Stone", "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man", "Got My Mojo Workin'" and "Mannish Boy".

His Best 1947-1955 (1997)

3) John Lee Hooker (b. August 17, 1920; Delta Blues, Folk Blues)

Known as "The Hook," John Lee Hooker is one of the most original blues voices in the history of the genre. Leaving the South in the '40s, Hooker dominated the Detroit blues scene in the years following World War II. Known for his dark, swampy vocals, hypnotic, one-chord rhythmic guitar, and foot-stomping accompaniment, Hooker brought the sonic mystique of the Delta to the electric blues. With his primitive and timeless grooves influencing countless blues and rock artists, "The Hook" is one of the few remaining living links between the pre-war blues tradition and the development of rock 'n' roll.

Hooker N' Heat (1991)

The Best of John Lee Hooker 1965-1974 (1992)

The Best of Friends (1998)

4) B.B. King (b. September 16, 1925; Classic Delta/Chicago Blues)

Universally hailed as the reigning "King of the Blues," the legendary B.B. King, perhaps more than anyone else, popularized the blues for audiences around the world. His classic "The Thrill Is Gone" has become one of the most famous blues songs ever. One of the most important electric guitarists of the last 50 years, King's fluid playing is equal parts passion and sophistication. His trademark left-hand trill technique and his innovative blend of Delta blues, gospel, and jazz have influenced two generations of blues and rock

guitarists. Having taken the blues from the Delta to the city, and then to the world, B.B. King has earned the title “Ambassador of the Blues.”

Live at the Regal (1965)

King of the Blues (1992) (4 CD box set)

Blues on the Bayou (1998)

5) Buddy Guy (b. July 30, 1936; Chicago Blues)

A Louisiana native, Buddy Guy surfaced in Chicago in 1957 where his career began to take shape. Accordingly, Guy stands as a link between the original Chicago electric blues and the flashier sound of modern blues and blues-rock. With his trademark fervent guitar showmanship and energetic live show, along with an evocative vocal style that's nearly as distinctive as his fiery fretwork, Guy has been an influence on many blues and rock acts from Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page, to Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray.

Damn Right, I've Got the Blues (1991)

The Very Best of Buddy Guy (1992)

6) Etta James (b. January 25, 1938; Soul Blues, Classic Female Blues)

Etta James has been called “the greatest of all modern blues singers.” Her emotionally charged vocals and robust eroticism were evident from her very first hit, 1955’s “Roll With Me Henry”. She had success on the pop/R&B charts in the early '60s with lush ballads such as “Trust In Me” and later with Memphis-style romps like “Tell Mama”. Yet James’ powerfully clear and soulful voice always carried a bluesy tinge, cutting through to a song’s emotional core. As a strong blues diva, she laid the groundwork for later singers like Janis Joplin and Bonnie Raitt. Etta James will always be one of the premiere Ladies of the Blues.

Mystery Lady - The Songs of Billie Holiday (1994)

The Essential Etta James (1994)

Her Best (1997)