

# International House of Blues Foundation (IHOBF) Blues SchoolHouse Timeline Overview

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*African Americans created blues music in the rural South of the United States in the late 1800s. Blues music grew out of and reflected the social conditions of African Americans at that time. While the subject matter and structure of blues music developed from experiences in the United States, the musical foundation of the blues is rooted in African culture.*

## **From Africa to America: A Cruel Journey (1500s-1800s)**

The continent of Africa has many countries and a diversity of musical and cultural traditions. While there are a wide variety of musical styles in Africa, there are some common characteristics of African music: it plays an important role in all aspects of life, it is participatory in nature and it is rich in complex rhythmic patterns. When the transatlantic slave trade began in the 1500s, people were taken by force from the African continent to provide labor for New World locations including South America, North America and the Caribbean Islands. The number of Africans taken from western and central Africa



*Artwork created by Millikan High School student Collin Jenkins as part of an IHOBF-Los Angeles Art Project.*

was high, given the proximity of these areas to the New World. Over the course of the slave trade (1500s – 1800s), millions of Africans were torn away from their homeland, families and friends. Their belongings and personal possessions were taken from them and they were transported on “slave ships” to the New World. The route that these ships sailed, the **Middle Passage**, was a long journey during which Africans were subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment. Chained below deck in crowded, unsanitary conditions, many died of disease and malnutrition on the journey. Those who survived were sold into slavery upon arrival to New World countries.

The story of the blues begins with the Middle Passage and those Africans who were brought to what is now the United States. They came with little except memories of their homeland and cultural traditions. They were sold into slavery frequently through auctions, where they were placed on auction blocks and treated like property. Friends and families were often separated; husbands were sold away from wives and parents were sold away from children. Enslaved Africans were forced to perform manual labor for no wages in a land where the people, language and culture were totally foreign. Their freedom was taken from them cruelly and unjustly.

## **Slavery in America (1600s – 1865)**

In this new and oppressive environment, Africans passed their cultural and musical practices from one generation to another through the **oral tradition**. Enslaved Africans continued their traditions in the few places they were allowed – the fields where they worked and the churches,

“steal aways” and other places where they gathered for religious or spiritual purposes. Their work songs set the pace and eased the pain of hard manual labor. Work songs also provided a form of communication. In many cases, enslaved Africans were not allowed to speak to one another while working. In religious settings, enslaved Africans created **spirituals** by adapting Christian hymns to their own experiences and musical styles. Through spirituals, they expressed their faith along with feelings of loss, longing for home and hope for freedom and better times. Spirituals such as “Wade in the Water” sometimes served to convey important information about how and when to escape. In these ways and in the oral tradition, African culture and music was kept alive through more than two hundred years of slavery.

### **Freedom and the Post-Civil War Period (1865-1900)**

In 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery. Freedom did not bring full equality, however, as African Americans continued to be subjected to discrimination, exploitive labor practices, Jim Crow legislation and violence in the form of beatings and lynching. Facing limited employment opportunities and lacking financial resources to purchase their own land, many freed African Americans became **sharecroppers**, farming the same land that they had worked during slavery. Sharecropping had its own set of hardships. In addition to unfair arrangements between landowners and sharecroppers, floods and insects were destroying the crops and the price of cotton was falling, driving wages down and keeping many in debt.

After slavery was abolished, more musical instruments (horns, pianos, drums, fiddles, banjos, and harmonicas) were available to African Americans. At this time, there was no set form for the blues. As African American workers cleared forests, built levees, lined railroad tracks, labored in mines, staffed riverboats and toiled as sharecroppers, they continued to use the call and response element of the work song. In church and other religious gatherings, **spirituals** were the most characteristic form of black religious music. Spirituals gave collective voice to African American sufferings and aspirations. Spiritual singing featured spontaneous and informal harmonies. It was rhythmic, highly participatory, and improvisational and also incorporated call-and-response singing. During these years, some African American singers began using a folk ballad style, a European-American narrative style of singing with the theme most often being a memorable event or figure in history. Europeans from England, Scotland, Ireland and France who had settled in America brought folk ballads with them. These European ballads or story songs became the prototypes for cowboy, lumberjack, farmer, frontiersman and other folk songs that were sung throughout the country about the major events and people of the times. By the late 1890s, a distinctive three-line ballad form had been developed by African American balladeers and was being put to good use in such memorable songs as “John Henry,” “Stagger Lee” and “Railroad Bill.”

### **The Blues Take Form: Country Blues & Classic Blues (1900-1930)**

In spite of the harsh conditions, African Americans experienced more freedom to travel, more control over their family and personal lives and greater freedom to create and perform music. During the years of slavery, songs had been primarily work songs, spirituals or simple songs accompanied by banjo that were played to entertain plantation owners and others. With freedom,

and increased freedom of expression, songs began to focus on all aspects of life: work, love, traveling, hope and survival. The guitar gained popularity and blues music was born.

The earliest form of blues was called country blues. It was largely a vocalized music based on the voice and its range. The first country blues musicians were mostly men. Some of the greatest early blues men were Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton and Son House. These musicians traveled from town to town throughout the South, carrying a guitar and sometimes a harmonica.

They played at **house parties**, on street corners and in **juke joints**. Occasionally, several musicians playing different instruments might get together and form a **jug band**. Their music told stories about their life experiences with passion and emotion – characteristics of blues music. Blues musicians and their music also had a sense of humor. Their stories could be about hard luck and make people laugh at the same time. In addition to providing entertainment, blues musicians lifted spirits and helped people through some very hard times. Because it was based on a different musical scale than western music, blues had a unique and different sound created by notes called “blue” notes. Country blues developed in three styles or traditions: Delta, Piedmont and Texas. Traveling blues men spread the blues throughout these regions of the South.

In addition to the country blues, a style of blues called classic blues was developing and gaining popularity. Sung mostly by women who performed with bands, it featured a larger number of instruments and more sophisticated lyrics than country blues. Many of the early women of classic blues came from the **vaudeville** tradition. They traveled from city to city and played in theaters, dance halls and sometimes in tent shows. Exciting performers with powerful voices, classic blues singers were the first to be recorded on **race records** with Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” in 1920. Recordings by classic blues women became popular and opened the doors for countless other African Americans to be recorded. Ma Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues,” and Bessie Smith, the “Empress of the Blues,” were among the best known classic blues singers. These women put the blues on the map and brought it to a national audience.

### **Spreading the Blues: The Great Migration (1910-1960)**

As blues music was taking form in these early years of the 1900s, times remained hard for African Americans in the South. In the North though, things were different. The economy was



*Artwork created by Millikan High School students Lauren Dominquez, Allissa Weinstein and Olivia Borda as part of an IHOFB-Los Angeles Art Project.*



*Artwork created by Millikan High School students Jennifer Mester and Lindsey Lucero as part of an IHOFB-Los Angeles Art Project.*

strong and labor was in great demand. In addition to higher wages, the North held the promise of better living conditions, better education and increased social and political freedom. Seeking an improved quality of life and more opportunity for themselves and their families, African Americans began migrating north to cities like St. Louis, Memphis, Chicago, Detroit and Kansas City. Others traveled west to places like Los Angeles. The Chicago Defender and other black-owned newspapers ran ads about jobs, housing and education opportunities and African Americans headed north in large numbers. An estimated two million African Americans left the South during the 1910s and 1920s. This movement, which continued through the 1950s, became known as the **Great Migration** and had a major impact on African American and American culture.

### **In the City: Urban Blues & Rhythm and Blues (1940s-1960s)**

Most musicians who arrived in the cities as part of the Great Migration brought and continued to play their country blues. In the city though, they discovered that African Americans had been developing preferences for other musical forms, such as jazz, that may have come closer to reflecting the social conditions and economic aspirations of those in the city. Delta and other country blues performers began to update and adapt their music to the urban surroundings. Various styles of urban blues emerged in different cities where African Americans communities had grown during the migration. Blues performers traded in their acoustic guitars for electric ones. More instruments were added. The music was amplified, intensified and accelerated.



*Artwork created by Millikan High School students Charity Beal, Alissa Mills and Erica Simanonok as part of an IHOBFLos Angeles Art Project.*

The urban sound that was developed in Chicago by blues musicians like Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters was the best known of the urban sounds and played a significant role in the development of rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll.

It was also during the late 1940s and 1950s that the musical community dropped the term "race records." As elements of blues, jazz, boogie-woogie and gospel merged, the blues updated its dance music and form. The sound was called rhythm and blues. It emerged from and reflected the optimism, vitality and pride of urban African Americans. Rhythm and blues songs like Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" and Little Richard's "Lucille" made people want to dance. Fats Domino became popular and musicians like Louis Jordan drove people to the dance floor with hits including "Caldonia," "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie,"



*Artwork created by Millikan High School students Gina Stine and Christy Labrador as part of an IHOBFLos Angeles Art Project.*

“Saturday Fish Fry” and “Let the Good Times Roll.” The music of female rhythm and blues performers like Little Esther (Phillips), Etta James, Dinah Washington, Ruth Brown and Lavern Baker was also inspiring people to dance and increasing the popularity of the rhythm and blues sound.

Rhythm and blues matured in the 1950s and became increasingly popular with both black and white audiences. By the end of the 1950s, rock ‘n’ roll had grown out of rhythm and blues as white youth discovered and gravitated toward black popular music. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, rhythm and blues remained popular and continued to express the optimism, vitality and pride of urban African Americans.

### **Inspired by the Blues: Soul, Funk and Rap (1960s-1970s)**

The 1960s was a period of social turmoil and protest in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement grew strong and African Americans were demanding equality in all areas of life. At the core of these activities was the need for social and racial justice. The music that emerged from African American culture during this period of time was called soul music. It was a combination of gospel and rhythm and blues. Gospel music was a form of music that had been thriving in African American communities. Gospel, which means “good news,” grew out of spirituals and blues rhythms and its message was spiritual and soul stirring. During the 1950s, vocalists started to blend rhythm and blues songs with gospel vocal styles. Groups like the Ravens and the Dominoes were among the first to have success with this approach. Other artists like James Brown and Ray Charles were also blending gospel with rhythm and blues and this music set the tone for soul music. Soul singers, including Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Gladys Knight and Marvin Gaye, all of whom had started singing in the church, took the sound beyond the church walls. Aretha Franklin, with songs like “Respect,” became the Queen of Soul. Different styles of soul emerged including the Motown sound and the Stax sound. James Brown, the “Godfather of Soul,” had his own unique style. Through their music, many soul artists expressed pride in their African heritage.



*Artwork created by Millikan High School students Richardo Oliveros, Sara Limon, Sotheo Ouch, Mike Reed, Owen Ludwig and Gerard Gatbonton as part of an IHOFB-Los Angeles Art Project.*

By the late 60s, the political climate in the United States had changed and for many the optimism of the 1960s was fading. The 1970s would bring spiraling inflation, recession, a changing labor market and increased opposition to affirmative action. African Americans, particularly those living in heavily populated cities, continued to experience inadequate schools, inadequate housing and limited employment opportunities. Popular music coming out of African American communities, including funk and rap, reflected the changing social and economic climate of these years.

The 1970s saw the rise of funk music. This music grew out of soul but put more emphasis on the beat. It was music for dancing. James Brown set the stage for funk, Sly Stone brought it center stage and George Clinton kept it alive. Rap also emerged in the 1970s. It grew out of the streets of New York but had roots in African, Afro-Caribbean and African American rhythmic styles. Rap combined rhythmic instrumental tracks with spoken words typically delivering in a rhyme form. The music rapidly attracted national attention and by the 1980s, rap had become a mainstream musical form.

**Continuing the Blues Journey (Blues music continues to influence the development of contemporary music into the new millennium, and to exist in its own form -- as blues music)**

Continuing the Journey: Rap, Rhythm & Blues, and Soul: Rap music grew into a mainstream musical and cultural form in the 1980s. The music evolved, too, as a new school of rappers began to experiment with technology by introducing the use of drum machines, synthesizers and samplers. Young rap and hip hop artists like LL Cool J, Run DMC, Public Enemy, and Queen Latifah found their voices and soon became internationally known. In 1986, the Beastie Boys album *Licensed to Ill* became the first rap album to hit #1 on the Billboard charts. Some music critics have referred to the late 1980s and 1990s as the “golden age” of hip hop for its innovativeness, diversity and significant influence on later music. In the early 1990s, two major styles of hip hop music emerged: West Coast and East Coast. West Coast hip hop was known for heavily sampling soul and funk songs, and it included gangsta rap, which spoke to the harsh realities of urban life and was performed by artists like Ice T, Dr. Dre and Ice Cube. East Coast hip-hop was known for its lyrical dexterity and complex wordplay, and it was performed by artists like The Notorious B.I.G., Jay Z and Nas. Another genre of rap, Southern hip hop or “Dirty South” rap, emerged in the 1990s and 2000s in cities like Miami, Atlanta and New Orleans. It featured elaborate production and lyrical content that drew on Southern culture and slang, and included artists like Arrested Development, Master P and Outkast. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, artists like Mary J. Blige continued to develop the sound by blending rap with rock, R&B, jazz and other musical styles.

As hip hop and rap expanded into America culture in the 1980s, R&B and soul were still going strong. Michael Jackson gained worldwide acclaim with his unique blend of R&B and pop influences, Whitney Houston redefined the R&B ballad and Prince combined R&B and soul with rock and jazz influences. In the 1990s, an updated form of soul music emerged, which some music critics have termed “neo-soul.” Neo-soul music took a more organic approach to music-making and recalled the soul music of the 1970s in that it featured live instrumentation, songs were written by songwriters instead of producers, and the lyrics often had a social message. Artists like D’Angelo, Maxwell, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Alicia Keys, and John Legend reflect this approach.

Some contemporary artists have found ways to incorporate more traditional blues influences into their work. Frequently, blues records are sampled in today’s rap mixes and re-mixes. For example, in 2004 rapper Nas’s single “Bridging the Gap” sampled music from Muddy Waters’ song “Mannish Boy.” Hybrid experiments combining older blues artists like R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough together with hip-hop loops and sampling have proven successful. Many

young artists remain very aware of, and seek to raise awareness about, the influence of blues and blues-inspired music on their history and music. As artist Erykah Badu put it in an interview following a guest performance in a 2010 International House of Blues Foundation Blues SchoolHouse Program: “The influence of blues is in my cells. It’s a big part of who I am. I am the blues.”

The music of contemporary rappers, rhythm and blues artists, and soul singers reflects the changing social, economic and political climate of the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. These decades were marked by increasing materialism and consumerism, heightened focus on celebrity culture, the growth of the internet and social media, and concerns about terrorism, foreign trade, U.S. involvement in war, and racial profiling within an increasingly complex global society. This period has also seen the American population become increasingly diverse, and, in 2008, the election of the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama. Throughout this time, blues-inspired music has continued to tell stories about everyday life, raise awareness about social issues, and give musicians a voice. And it all connects back to the blues.

Continuing the Journey: Blues Music: In the 1960s, blues music struggled to compete with the popularity of soul and rock ‘n’ roll music. However, in spite of the musical climate, a number of blues performers remained dedicated to the music and continued the blues tradition. Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Big Bill Broonzy, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King and others continued to record and perform in the United States and abroad. During these years, although blues faded in popularity with African American audiences, it became increasingly popular with white fans and musicians. The live performances and recordings by Muddy Waters and many others influenced a British blues movement in the early 1960s and a blues rock movement in the United States later in the same decade. British musicians and bands including the Rolling Stones (who took their name from a Muddy Waters song), John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers and Eric Clapton imitated and incorporated blues in their music. The blues rock movement grew in the United States, fueled by the music of Canned Heat, Johnny Winter, Jimi Hendrix and others. British blues and blues rock inspired popular interest in the roots of the music - and led to a folk blues revival where the acoustic music of Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Skip James and others was showcased. The blues revival in turn influenced the musical direction of many 1960s artists including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Taj Mahal, Bonnie Raitt and Richie Havens. And, during these same years, a second generation of urban blues was being played in Chicago by guitarists like Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Magic Sam and Freddie King who were taking the blues to another level. These artists, in turn, helped inspire the next generation of blues musicians, including Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray.

As the new millennium moves forward, the blues tradition remains alive and well. 2003 was designated the “Year of the Blues” by the United States Senate. Acoustic performers like Taj Mahal and Keb’ Mo perform elements of traditional blues with updated themes. Other performers fanning the acoustic blues flames include Guy Davis, Oakland’s Alvin “Youngblood” Hart and Corey Harris of New Orleans. Shemekia Copeland sings contemporary blues, Johnny Lang, Kenny Wayne Shepherd and Susan Tedeschi play rocking blues for younger audiences while blues legends like Buddy Guy and B.B. King play to blues audiences around the world. Through all of these years, the blues has continued to reflect social conditions and the realities of

everyday life with raw emotion and humor. The story of the blues is a story of sorrow and joy, good times and bad times, hope, faith, humor and most of all survival.