

## Blues Glossary

**AMPLIFICATION** The act of increasing the magnitude of a signal without altering any of its other qualities, or the use of a device (amplifier) that does this. Important in the transition from acoustic blues, where amplification was rarely used in live performance, to electric blues, where performers began using amplifiers.

**BEALE STREET** Located in Memphis, Tennessee, Beale Street was the central street in what was considered by many to be the capital of black America in the early 20th century.

**BOOGIE-WOOGIE** A particular style of jazz/blues piano, typically played at a rapid tempo, in which the left hand maintains a repeated rhythmic and melodic pattern in the bass and the right hand handles improvised variations in the treble.

**CALL AND RESPONSE** A musical term referring to the alternation between two musical voices in a song, particularly that between a solo singer (the "call") and a group chorus (the "response").

**CHICAGO BLUES** What is now referred to as the classic "Chicago blues" style was developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s by artists who fully amplified the Delta blues and put it into a small-band context. Adding drums, bass, and piano (and sometimes saxophones) to the basic string band and harmonica aggregation, the style created the now standard blues-band lineup. The form was (and is) flexible to accommodate singers, guitarists, pianists, and harmonica players as featured performers in front of the standard instrumentation. \*

**COUNTRY BLUES** A catch-all term that delineates the depth and breadth of the first flowering of guitar-driven blues, embracing solo, duo, and string-band performers. The term also provides a convenient general heading for all the multiple regional styles and variations (Piedmont, Atlanta, Memphis, Texas, acoustic Chicago, Delta, ragtime, folk, songster, etc.) of the form. \*

**DELTA BLUES** The Delta blues style comes from a region in the southern part of Mississippi, a place romantically referred to as "the land where the blues was born." In its earliest form, the style became the first black guitar-dominated music to make it onto phonograph records back in the late 1920s. \*

**ELECTRIC BLUES** An eclectic genre that embraces just about every kind of blues that can be played on an amplified instrument. It is typically played on the electric guitar, but can also be performed on the bass (usually a solid body Fender-type model, but sometimes merely an old "slappin'" acoustic with a pickup attached), harmonica, and keyboard instruments. \*

**FIELD HOLLERS** A class of rural African American vocal performance enacted by an individual (as opposed to a group) while engaged in manual labor, unaccompanied by any instrument. Field hollers are generally slower and much less rigid in musical form than group work songs, combine lyrical phrases common to the community with individual interpretations and improvisations, and are most often lamenting or sorrowful in subject matter.

**GREAT MIGRATION, THE** A mass movement during the first half of the 20th century, during which millions of African Americans from primarily rural locations in the Southern United States moved to urban locations, particularly in the North. The migration occurred in two major waves, each centered around the World Wars, during which a great need for industrial workers arose in Northern (and later, Western) cities.

**GRIOT** A West African performer who perpetuates the oral traditions of a family, village, or leader by singing histories and tales. Griots typically perform alone, accompanying themselves on a stringed instrument, and are considered by many musicologists to be a critical African root of the solo acoustic blues that developed among African American communities during the early 20th century.

**JIM CROW** A term arguably arising from a minstrel performer of the early 19th century, "Jim Crow" more generally refers to the laws and regulations that arose in the South following post-Civil War Reconstruction. Through the mandated segregation established by these laws, African Americans were systematically prevented from achieving economic, political, and cultural power and equality.

**JUMP BLUES** An up-tempo, jazz-tinged style of blues that first came to prominence in the mid-to late 1940s. Usually featuring a vocalist in front of a large, horn-driven orchestra or medium-sized combo with multiple horns, the style is earmarked by a driving rhythm, intensely shouted vocals, and honking tenor saxophone solos—a combination of elements that prefigures rock 'n' roll. \*

**MAXWELL STREET** From the early 1900s until its relocation in the mid-1990s, the weekend open-air market along Chicago's Maxwell Street was a frequently changing urban milieu where one could find everything from used and new merchandise to food, religion, and live music. It was a particularly important location for new immigrants to the city seeking employment, entertainment, and the familiarity of customs and people from "back home."

**MEMPHIS BLUES** A strain of country blues all its own, Memphis Blues gives the rise of two distinct forms: the jug band (playing and singing a humorous, jazz style of blues using homemade instruments) and the beginnings of assigning guitarists solo (lead) and rhythm parts, a tradition that is now part and parcel of all modern-day blues and rock 'n' roll bands. \*

**ORAL CULTURE** Conventionally, "oral culture" is understood to mean any and all traditions that are sustained within and between generations strictly through the spoken (as opposed to written) word, such as stories, tales, and songs.

**RACE RECORDS** A term used by major and independent record labels from the early 1920s until the early 1950s to designate albums recorded by African American artists. The term itself was not used pejoratively, but rather to distinguish records that could be more readily marketed to an African American audience.

**SHARECROPPING** An agricultural system common in the post-Civil War South, in which tenants worked pieces of land in exchange for a portion of the year's crop or revenue. For their work on the land, the tenants were supplied living accommodations, seeds, tools, and other necessities by the landowner, who was invariably the bookkeeper and proprietor of the local commissary as well.

**SIGNIFYING** The act of using secret or double meanings of words to either communicate multiple meanings to different audiences, or to trick them. To the leader and chorus of a work song, for example, the term "captain" may be used to indicate discontent, while the overseer of the work simultaneously thinks it's being used as a matter of respect.

**SLIDE** A method of playing guitar whereby the player uses either a tube placed over the finger (such as a bottleneck), or a flat-edged object (such as a knife blade) to press down the strings of the guitar. The resulting sound wavers and fluctuates, and can include tones that cannot be produced in the conventional manner, where fingers are used to depress the strings.

**URBAN BLUES** This term has two pervasive definitions. Originally it was used to describe the more sophisticated sentiments of the blues style in contrast to the more rural style of country blues. As time went on, it also came to describe blues music with lyrics that captured city life—its opportunities as well as its grim realities.

**WORK SONGS** A probable root of the blues, work songs were extensively documented by folklorists during the early portions of the 20th century, although their roots arguably go as far back as West Africa. Work songs help synchronize the rhythm of group tasks, with a single leader calling out a line that is then copied or responded to by the group (see "call and response"), typically in time with their work motion (e.g., chopping with an axe or digging with a shovel).

**[Want to know more? Visit <http://www.pbs.org/theblues> for an expanded glossary.]**

\* Erlwine, et al., eds. *All Music Guide to the Blues*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1999.