

## What Is the Blues?

On a lonely night in 1903, W.C. Handy, the African American leader of a dance orchestra, got stuck waiting for a train in the hamlet of Tutwiler, Mississippi. With hours to kill and nowhere else to go, Handy fell asleep on a hard wooden bench at the empty depot. When he awoke, a ragged black man was sitting next to him, singing about “goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog” and sliding a knife against the strings of a guitar. The musician repeated the line three times and answered with his instrument.

Intrigued, Handy asked what the line meant. It turned out that the tracks of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, which locals called the Yellow Dog, crossed the tracks of the Southern Railroad in the town of Moorehead, where the musician was headed, and he’d put it into a song.

It was, Handy later said, “the weirdest music I had ever heard.”

That strange music was the blues, although few people knew it by that name. At the turn of the century, the blues was still slowly emerging from Texas, Louisiana, the Piedmont region, and the Mississippi Delta; its roots were in various forms of African American slave songs such as field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and country string ballads. Rural music that captured the suffering, anguish—and hopes—of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming, the blues was typically played by roaming solo musicians on acoustic guitar, piano, or harmonica at weekend parties, picnics, and juke joints. Their audience was primarily made up of agricultural laborers, who danced to the propulsive rhythms, moans, and slide guitar.

In 1912, Handy helped raise the public profile of the blues when he became one of the first people to transcribe and publish sheet music for a blues song—“Memphis Blues.” Eight years later, listeners snapped up more than a million copies of “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith, the first black female to record a blues vocal. This unexpected success alerted record labels to the potential profit of “race records,” and singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith began to introduce the blues to an even wider audience through their recordings.

As the African American community that created the blues began moving away from the South to escape its hardscrabble existence and Jim Crow laws, blues music evolved to reflect new circumstances. After thousands of African American farm workers migrated north to cities like Chicago and Detroit during both World Wars, many began to view traditional blues as an unwanted reminder of their humble days toiling in the fields; they wanted to hear music that reflected their new urban surroundings. In response, transplanted blues artists such as Muddy Waters, who had lived and worked on a Mississippi plantation before riding the rails to Chicago in 1943, swapped acoustic guitars for electric ones and filled out their sound with drums, harmonica, and standup bass. This gave rise to an electrified blues sound with a stirring beat that drove people onto the dance floor and pointed the way to rhythm & blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the electrified blues reached its zenith on the radio, but began to falter as listeners turned to the fresh sounds of rock ‘n’ roll and soul. In the early 1960s, however, as bands such as The Rolling Stones began to perform covers of Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf songs, aspiring white blues musicians in the United Kingdom helped resuscitate the genre. In the process, they created gritty rock ‘n’ roll that openly displayed its blues influences and promoted the work of their idols, who soon toured England to wide acclaim. Although happy to be in demand as performers again, many veteran blues musicians were bitterly disappointed to see musicians such as Led Zeppelin get rich by copping the sound of African American blues artists, many of whom were struggling to survive.

Today, 100 years after W.C. Handy first heard it, the blues no longer commands the attention it once did; to many young listeners, traditional blues—if not contemporary blues—may sound as strange as it did to Handy. But if they listen closely, they’ll discover a rich, powerful history of people who helped build America and created one of the most influential genres of popular music.