

Mississippi, the 2000 Hollywood movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* featured a sound track with many bluegrass stalwarts, including Appalachian-born southerners Ralph Stanley, Norman Blake, and Emmylou Harris, and led to great success for the genre. The sound track resulted in the popular music world acknowledging Stanley's stature as a living legend and spawned multiartist tours and album projects. It also proved a shot in the arm for country music artists such as Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton, who were attempting to return to their acoustic roots, and encouraged others such as Patty Loveless to follow suit.

Despite these varied progressive and commercial currents, bluegrass, even in the commercial market, has continued to experience traditionalist revivalist trends, which have reminded listeners of the music's regional southern and Appalachian roots. In the 1980s, it was the Johnson Mountain Boys and the Bluegrass Album Band that led the return-to-roots movement. In the 21st century, genre stalwarts Del McCoury, Ricky Skaggs, and a rejuvenated Ralph Stanley have brought back the traditional sounds to the music's now-expanded fan base.

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## Blues

In the 1890s several new musical forms arose in the black communities of the southern and border states. Among the most important of these forms were ragtime, jazz, and blues. The generation that created this new music had been born in the years immediately following the Civil War, the first generation of blacks that did not directly experience slavery. As this generation reached maturity in the 1890s, there arose within it a restlessness to try out new ideas and new courses of action. New economic, social, and political institutions were created to provide a network of mutual support within the black community in the face of a hardening of discriminatory patterns of race relations and Jim Crow legislation. Pentecostal denominations with a more emotional style of worship arose to meet the spiritual needs of many who were trying to improve their lot in life and cope with problems of urban migration, industrialism, and unemployment.

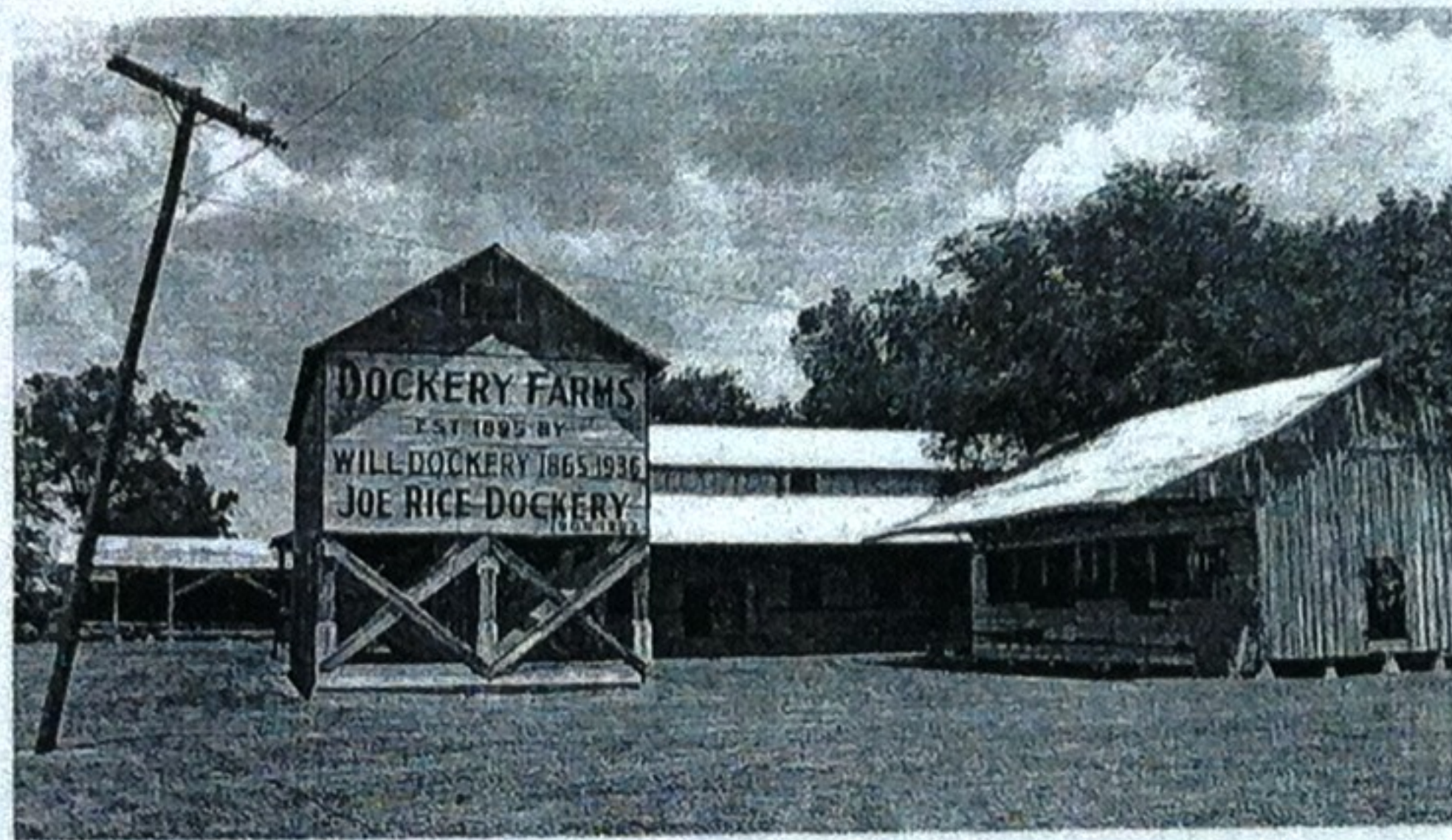
These social changes were reflected in new developments in the arts at all levels—formal, popular, and folk—and in none of the arts was the ferment as

intense as in music. In border states like Missouri, Kansas, and Kentucky, where blacks had greater opportunities to obtain formal training in music and were exposed to a variety of popular and even classical music forms, they created ragtime. At this same time, the first stirrings of jazz were heard in southern cities along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, particularly in New Orleans. Blues, on the other hand, was created in the rural areas and small towns of the Deep South, particularly in the areas of large plantations, such as the Mississippi Delta, and in industries that required heavy manual labor—mining, logging, levee and railroad construction, and freight loading. Those who sought work as sharecroppers and harvesters on the plantations and in the other industries were hoping to escape the drudgery and hopelessness of life on tiny plots of worn-out farmland and earn some cash for their labor. With little education or property and no political power in a completely segregated society, they often encountered intolerable working conditions and moved frequently from one plantation or job to another.

Out of this dissatisfaction arose the blues, a music that reflected not only the social isolation and lack of formal training of its creators but also their ability to make do with the most basic of resources and to survive under the most adverse, oppressive circumstances. Blues drew from Western formal music in only the most superficial ways; instead it almost entirely came out of elements taken from the existing black folk music tradition. Until quite recently, blues was not fully accepted by mainstream America as a distinct major musical form. Instead it tended to be viewed as a rather simple and limited, though at times charming and powerfully expressive, type of music, suitable mainly as raw material for jazz and rock and roll or some other more complex popular music. In the history of these other types of music, blues was viewed as one of the "roots."

Blues introduced a number of new elements into the American musical consciousness. The most novel in its initial impact, and now one of the most pervasive elements in American popular music, is the "blue note." Blue notes generally occur at the third and seventh degrees of the scale, though sometimes at other points as well, and can be either flatted notes, neutral pitches, waverings, or sliding tones occurring in the range between the flat and natural of these degrees of the scale. Another primary musical characteristic is the role of the accompanying instrument as a second voice. The musical accompaniment in blues is not simply a rhythmic and harmonic background to the singing. It constantly interacts with, punctuates, and answers the vocal line. Finally, blues introduced a new realism combined with greater individualism into American popular song. During the 1890s most popular songs were either humor-

*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Vol. 12 = Music; Bill C. Malone, Charles R. Wilson, eds. 2008. Me*



Dockery Farms, established in 1895, once employed bluesmen Charley Patton, Son House, and Howlin' Wolf and is considered by many to be the place where the Delta blues was born (James G. Thomas Jr., photographer, University of Mississippi)

ous, sentimental, or tragic, dramatizing unusual or exotic situations. The "coon songs," which depicted black life, generally portrayed either nostalgic scenes of the old plantation, romantic love, absurd humor, or stereotypes of black character. Blues, on the other hand, dealt with everyday life and met its subjects head-on in an open-ended celebration of life's ups and downs. Although blues focused on relationships between men and women, it did not avoid commenting on such subjects as working conditions, migration, current events, natural disasters, sickness and death, crime and punishment, alcohol and drugs, sorcery, magic, the supernatural, and racial discrimination. As a secular music, blues generally avoided making religious statements, although it might ridicule preachers and discuss the temptations and powers of the devil, and as a highly individualistic statement it seldom mentioned family and organized community life other than as the immediate context of the dance or party where the music was performed. Blues developed an extraordinary compactness of form and startling poetic imagery in order to make its points on a broad range of subjects.

The basic vocal material for early folk blues came from "hollers," which were sung by workers in the fields and in other occupations requiring manual labor. Hollers were sung solo in freely embellished descending lines employing blue notes and a great variety of vocal timbres. The words tended to be traditional commonplace phrases on the man-woman relationship or the work situation,

with successive lines linked to one another through loose thematic associations and contrasts. Hollers appeared to be a direct reflection of the singer's state of mind and feelings poured out in a stream of consciousness. This type of singing had existed long before the 1890s. It was noted by observers during the slavery period and has clear parallels in some singing traditions in Africa and other African American cultures. But it was in the American South that these free, almost formless, vocal expressions were set to instrumental accompaniment and given a musical structure, an expanded range of subject matter, and a new social context. Solo religious expression, such as chanted prayers and sermons, undoubtedly also influenced the vocal component of early blues.

The accompaniment was most often played on instruments that had been rarely used in older forms of black folk music—the piano, the harmonica, and especially the guitar. For the guitar, unorthodox tunings were often used to obtain drone effects. The technique of bending strings helped to achieve blue notes, and sometimes the player would slide a knife, bottleneck, or other hard object along the strings to produce a whining tone, a technique adapted from African stringed instruments. At times, the performer established a simple rhythmic pattern behind the singing and then answered the vocal lines with short repeated melodic or rhythmic figures on the guitar. Blues of this sort is basically an instrumentally accompanied holler, and it allows much of the vocal freedom of the older type of song to be preserved. A few rural blues singers still compose and perform blues in this manner. Other performers, however, saw the need for greater structure in their blues and began to fit the vocal lines taken from hollers to existing harmonic patterns. Usually these patterns accommodated stanzas of 8, 12, or 16 measures, but the blues singers left space at the ends of their lines for the instrument to answer the vocal.

The pattern that emerged by the early 20th century contained three lines of four measures each. The second line repeated the first, and the third line was different but rhymed with the first two. The lines began with harmonies in the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords, respectively, but always resolved to the tonic. This now-familiar 12-bar AAB pattern was derived from 3-line patterns found in such folk ragtime tunes as "Bully of the Town" and blues ballads like "Stagolee" and "Boll Weevil." Blues singers slowed the tempos of these tunes and left room at the ends of the lines for their instrumental response.

As the blues spread in the early 20th century, local and regional performance traditions developed in different parts of the South. At the local level, performers would share a repertoire of traditional verses and melodic and instrumental phrases, combining and recombining these endlessly and often adding further musical and lyrical elements of their own creation to form blues

that sounded original yet familiar at the same time. Within broader geographic regions, the performers generally shared an overall musical stylistic approach and sometimes variants of certain songs in their repertoires. For instance, in the Mississippi Valley and adjacent areas, the folk blues was the most intense rhythmically and emotionally, more modal and less harmonic in conception, often structured upon short repeated melodic or rhythmic phrases, and tending to extract the maximum expression from each note. Variants of tunes like "Catfish Blues" and "Rolling and Tumbling" are familiar to many blues singers throughout this region.

In Texas, the guitarists often set up a constant thumping rhythm in the bass, while treble figures were played in a rather free rhythmic style in response to vocal lines that tended to float over the constant bass rhythm. From Texas guitarists like Aaron "T-Bone" Walker came the contemporary style of electric lead guitar playing, in which the guitar lines often seem to float over a steady rhythm supplied by the other instruments in the band. In Virginia and the Carolinas, as well as in some parts of Georgia and Florida, another style developed, featuring lighter, bouncier rhythms, virtuoso playing, a harmonic rather than modal conception, and a pervasive influence of ragtime music on the blues. In whatever region the early folk blues was performed, the contexts were usually the same. Generally this music was played at house parties; in roadhouses called juke joints; at outdoor picnics for dancing; and for tips from onlookers on sidewalks, at railroad stations, on store porches, and wherever else a crowd might gather.

In the first decade of the 20th century, professional singers in traveling shows began to incorporate blues into their stage repertoires as they worked in the towns and cities of the southern states. W. C. Handy, at that time the leader of a band sponsored by a black fraternal organization in Clarksdale, Miss., encountered folk blues and was so impressed by the music's appeal to both black and white audiences that he began to arrange these tunes for his own group of trained musicians. His success led him to Memphis, and there he published his first blues in sheet-music form in 1912. Other blues songs were published that same year, and soon a flood of new blues compositions appeared from southern songwriters, both black and white, drawing on the resources of folk blues. The songwriters considered folk blues as raw material to be extensively reworked and exploited.

At first the general public perceived blues as a novel type of a ragtime tune with the unusual features of blue notes and three-line stanzas. The professional singers were generally women accompanied by a pianist or a small jazz combo. They performed in both the North and the South in urban cabarets and vaude-

ville theaters and sometimes in traveling shows that visited smaller southern towns. This professionalized type of blues first appeared on phonograph records by black singers like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, and Ida Cox, beginning in 1920. By 1926 the record companies began to record folk blues artists, mostly male singers playing their own guitar accompaniments, like Blind Lemon Jefferson from Texas, Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson from Mississippi, and Peg Leg Howell and Blind Willie McTell from Georgia. By the end of the 1920s the companies were also recording many boogie-woogie and barrel-house pianists, such as Pinetop Smith and Roosevelt Sykes.

String bands, brass bands, and vocal quartets had incorporated blues into their repertoires by the first decade of the 20th century, but by the late 1920s there had arisen new types of ensembles created mainly to perform blues. Perhaps the closest to folk blues were the jug bands, which generally consisted of a guitar and harmonica supplemented by other novelty or homemade instruments, such as jugs, kazoos, washboards, and one-stringed basses. Jug bands were recorded in Louisville, Cincinnati, Memphis, Birmingham, and Dallas, and similar kinds of "skiffle" bands existed in many other cities and towns in the South and the North.

The combination of a full-chorded, rhythmic piano and guitar playing melodic lead lines also became popular at this time. The chief exponents of this style of blues were pianist Leroy Carr and guitarist Francis "Scrapper" Blackwell, who were based in Indianapolis. Pianist Georgia Tom (Thomas A. Dorsey) and guitarist Tampa Red (Hudson Whitaker) also made many popular recordings at this time, often performing "hokum" blues, which contained humorous verses and double entendre refrains. Various combinations of stringed instruments, as well as jug bands, also performed hokum blues. By the mid-1930s blues bands not uncommonly consisted of a string section made up of blues musicians and a horn-and-rhythm section made up of artists with a jazz background. One of the most popular of such groups, the Harlem Hamfats, featured trumpet, clarinet, piano, guitar, second guitar or mandolin, string bass, and drums.

The continuing influence of jazz and the rise to prominence of the electric guitar served to reshape the sound of the blues in the years following World War II. Small "jump" bands of jazz-influenced musicians became popular in the late 1940s and 1950s, often performing a mixture of blues and sentimental popular songs. Folk blues guitarists in the rural South became converts to the new electric guitar, and a new type of blues combo appeared, consisting usually of one or two electric guitars, bass, piano or electric organ, drums, and sometimes an amplified harmonica. This type of blues reached its peak of develop-

ment in Chicago in the 1950s with the bands of artists such as Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) and Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett), both originally from Mississippi.

A synthesis of the hard down-home style of blues and the sophisticated jump blues was achieved by Aaron "T-Bone" Walker from Texas and B. B. King, a Mississippian who had moved to Memphis. Both men had strong roots in the folk-blues tradition and had learned to play electric lead guitar fronting a large band of trained musicians. Their vocals were delivered in an impassioned shouting style, showing the influence of gospel singing. This type of blues, developed by Walker in the 1940s and brought to its peak of development by King in the 1950s, remains the most popular blues style.

By the 1960s many white performers in the North and West had begun to identify themselves as blues artists. Southern whites were slower to join this movement, perhaps only because blues already pervaded such established forms as country music and rock and roll. By the 1970s, however, there were plenty of southern white blues performers. Blues clubs and festivals and blues societies, with predominantly white participation, proliferated in the South throughout the rest of the 20th century, reflecting an ongoing national and international blues revival and the institutionalizing of the blues. By the end of the century, there were probably more whites than blacks in the South who identified themselves as blues performers. This development has not resulted in any major new style of blues, but it has led to an exploration and highlighting of older historical as well as more contemporary styles pioneered by black performers.

Blues has had a history of its own, but it has also had a profound influence upon other types of popular music in the 20th century. When popular blues began to be published in 1912 and performed by trained musicians, it was perceived as a new type of ragtime tune with a novel three-line verse form and the exotic element of blue notes. The use of blue notes not only helped to loosen up the formalism of ragtime but also soon paved the way for improvisatory jazz performance. The bulk of the repertoire of the early jazz bands consisted of blues tunes and ragtime tunes incorporating blue notes. The blues form has continued to be a staple for jazz compositions, and whenever jazz has seemed to become overly sophisticated, one usually hears calls for a return to the blues.

In the years before World War I, southern Anglo-American folk musicians began performing blues learned from black musicians. By the 1920s, "hillbilly" artists from all parts of the South were recording the blues. Beginning in 1927, Mississippi singer and guitarist Jimmie Rodgers popularized a distinct type of blues by combining folk blues learned from black artists with a yodeling refrain derived from black field hollers and German-Swiss yodeling that had been

popularized on the vaudeville stage. Over the years, blues has given to varieties of country music, such as western swing and honky-tonk, not only the blues form but the qualities of improvisation and greater realism as well.

In the 1950s blues-influenced country music combined with black rhythm and blues to produce a new form of music, which came to be known as rock and roll. The blues form and blues instrumental techniques were very prominent in most rock-and-roll styles through the 1960s and have continued to be important factors in this music's development up to the present. Blues gave rock and roll not only an important verse form but also its basic instrumentation and instrumental technique, as well as a frankness in dealing with themes of love and sex, which proved attractive to an adolescent audience.

Finally, blues could even be said to have influenced gospel music. Thomas A. Dorsey, generally considered the "Father of Gospel Music," was a former blues pianist and songwriter. By the early 1930s he was composing gospel songs that used blue notes and showed a greater individualism and worldliness in their themes. Although gospel has seldom used the blues verse form, it has shown blues influence through its use of blues tonality and emphasis on the individual.

Most Americans today are probably more familiar with blues-influenced music than they are with blues itself. Nevertheless, blues is still a thriving form of music, existing in a variety of styles. In the South there are still excellent solo performers of folk blues, and small combos featuring electric lead guitar perform regularly in black communities in the region, as well as in northern and West Coast cities. Blues can be heard today in forms close to the earliest folk blues, showing that it is still in touch with its roots, and within modern jazz and rock and roll, showing the enormous impact it has had over the last century.

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