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Chapter 1: The Blues

A Brief History of the Blues

Without a doubt, the single style that has had the most influence in American popular music is the blues. Most historians agree that the blues originated in the Mississippi Delta region and was the result of a combination of influences, including work songs, gospel music, African music, and European musical instruments. The blues grew out of the cultural intersection of the African slaves and the new country and culture in which they found themselves. Most early blues was played and sung by one person playing a guitar, with the possible addition of a harmonica. Musicians like Son House, Bukka White, and the great Robert Johnson are examples of early blues musicians.

Starting in the 1920s, the African-American community began to migrate north, following the employment opportunities of the Industrial Revolution. As new recording and broadcasting technologies began to emerge, the blues started to reach a wider audience. When the electric guitar rose to prominence in the 1950s, the music took on a new and exciting character, and cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Houston, and especially Memphis and Chicago became new centers of the blues. With the sound of the electric blues, a new group of bands and players emerged. The new electric blues bands featured the addition of the electric bass and often included drums and sometimes saxophones. Guitarists like Muddy Waters, Son Seals, Buddy Guy, and B. B. King became blues stars, and their music influenced countless musicians in other musical styles. The sound of the blues is present (in some form) in almost all of American music and much of the music in the world. Its influence is clearly seen in rock, jazz, soul, funk, country, and even modern American classical music.

Every good blues band is anchored by a bassist who understands the importance and function of the bass line. Blues bass playing is deceptively simple, but the art of bass playing is personified in the great blues bassists playing behind the blues stars. Many of the most famous rock bassists like John Paul Jones of Led Zeppelin, Bill Wyman of The Rolling Stones, and Jack Bruce of Cream were deeply influenced by their careful study of the great bass playing on classic blues recordings.

In recent years there has been a wave of younger blues musicians who have carried the musical torch. Musicians like Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimmy Vaughan, Robert Cray, Keb Mo, and Shemekia Copeland (among many others) are continuing to carry the traditions of the past into the future.

To the right is a suggested listening list for all of the styles in this chapter. The bass players are indicated with an asterisk (*). In the chapters that follow, only bass players will be listed, unless otherwise noted.

Suggested Listening

- Delta, or country, blues: Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker
- Shuffle blues: Albert Collins, Freddie King
- Chicago blues: Buddy Guy
- Slow blues: Jerry Jemmott* with B. B. King
- Charleston rhythm blues: James P. Johnson, Duke Ellington
- Rock blues: Jack Bruce* (Cream)
- Texas blues: Tommy Shannon* (Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble)
- $\frac{12}{8}$ stop-time blues: Muddy Waters

Delta Blues

Early blues players like Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker generally played solo guitar. When their style of Delta, or country, blues is played by a band with a bass player, the bass line tends to be very simple with a strong beat. The following line is deceptively simple, but playing the right groove or feel takes real concentration. Try to give it a *backbeat*, which means to accent beats 2 and 4.

> = Accent. Play louder

♩ = 80*
A7

5

9

* This is a *tempo marking* and indicates the speed at which the music should be played. In this case, the music should be played at a rate of 80 quarter notes per minute.