

Building the Blues

Whether vocal or instrumental, the sound of the blues is unmistakable. A musical response to the experiences of African Americans in the rural South during the time of slavery, blues music recognizes injustice, pain, suffering or the loss of a loved one (blues can also be happy, as we'll learn about later!). The blues was born out of the traditions of spirituals, field hollers, work songs and gospel hymns. It is the foundation of jazz and an inspiration to rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, country music and a large portion of today's popular music!

HISTORICAL PROFILE: **W.C. Handy**

Composer, arranger and conductor William Christopher "W.C." Handy was born in Florence, Alabama, on November 16, 1873. He worked as a school teacher and band leader after attending an agricultural and mechanical college in Huntsville, Alabama. From 1903 to 1921, he conducted his own orchestra. Handy was an active composer in the days when ragtime was evolving into jazz, and he used elements of the blues in his music. His best-known compositions are "Memphis Blues" in 1911 and "St. Louis Blues" in 1914. One of the first people to write down and publish blues music, he is often called the father of the blues. W.C. Handy died in New York City on March 28, 1958.



Robert Johnson

Activity

Fill in the blanks in the statements below with the appropriate word from the list. Some words may be used twice.

**Resolves | Four | Restates | Twelve | Resolution
Three | Major Scale | Eight | States | Response**

1. The blues is most often played in a _____ bar form.
2. _____ is the number of chords in a basic blues.
3. The blues uses the device of call and _____.
4. The blues is made up of _____ sections of _____.
5. The first vocal stanza _____ a problem.
6. The second vocal stanza _____ the problem.
7. The third vocal stanza _____ the problem.
8. A major scale is made up of _____ notes.
9. Call and response is similar to conflict and _____.
10. A _____ is made up of a specific pattern of whole-steps and half-steps.

Vocabulary

Bar	Scale
Blues	Stanza
Chord	Twelve-bar blues
Call and response	Form
Measure	

The Foundation of the Blues

A major scale is made up of 8 notes that form a specific pattern of whole-steps and half-steps: w-w-1/2-w-w-1/2 (by starting on any note and following this pattern, you can play a major scale!). A basic blues is made up of three chords based on the 1st (I), 4th (IV) and 5th (V) notes of a major scale. These chords are arranged in a specific pattern, which form the twelve-bar blues, one of the most common musical forms!



1 2 3 4 I	2 2 3 4 I	3 2 3 4 I	4 2 3 4 I
"My dog ate my homework and now I gotta stay after school"			
5 2 3 4 IV	6 2 3 4 IV	7 2 3 4 I	8 2 3 4 I
"My dog ate my homework and now I gotta stay after school"			
9 2 3 4 V	10 2 3 4 IV	11 2 3 4 I	12 2 3 4 I
"He's the world's smartest dog, but he treats me like a fool"			

ACTIVITY: Listen Up

Listen to the following two musical examples and follow along with the charts below. Even though they follow the same basic structure, not all blues are exactly the same. See if you can come up with some differences between the two as you listen, but don't lose your place!

EXAMPLE 5.1: "HOMEWORK BLUES" FORM: 12-bar blues

WHERE YOU ARE	INTRO (2)	1 ST CHORUS (12)	2 ND CHORUS (12)	3 RD CHORUS (12)	4 TH CHORUS (12)	5 TH CHORUS (12)
WHAT YOU ARE HEARING	Piano	Melody Piano and Voice	Melody with Stop Time	Piano Solo	Piano Solo	Melody with Stop Time

EXAMPLE 5.2: "BISTRO BLUES" FORM: 12-bar blues

WHERE YOU ARE	INTRO (12)	1 ST CHORUS (12)	2 ND CHORUS (12)	3 RD CHORUS (12)	4 TH CHORUS (12)	5 TH CHORUS (12)
WHAT YOU ARE HEARING	Melody	Saxophone Solo	Saxophone Solo	Trumpet Solo	Trumpet Solo	Melody