The Blues in American Culture

The blues with its pulsing rhythms, melodic hooks, aching harmonies, vivid images, timeless stories, and exciting performance practices is America's basic musical language. Our most popular musicians today have their roots in the blues. Just think of Prince at the Superbowl in 2007. Prince danced freely in the rain with his guitar, like a "blues man" overcoming sorrows by turning them into song, leaning on the beat to make the whole thing shake, and stirring strangers to feel the same, maybe to move and sing along.

American blues represents the spirit of America. For a hundred years, at least since the sheet music publication of W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," it has swept through the nation and encircled the globe inspiring popular music throughout the world. The story of how it came to be, and what the blues signifies in American culture, goes back further than a century. By examining the history of the blues it is apparent that it is a clear reflection of our nation's story, both its highs and lows. It has become a foundation for many forms of popular art and entertainment besides music, in the United States and abroad.

Music, throughout the history of the United States, has been one of the primary methods by which people of our nation, representing so many diverse ethnic and ancestral backgrounds, have built a common culture. Music derived from African traditions - drumming, chanting, five-tone (pentatonic) scales, vocal and tonal effects, and instruments such as the banjo and the diddley bo - have been every bit as influential as music of classical European origin. We can see in jazz, America's original art form, a blending of the musical traditions of Africa and Europe.

But the blues is unique to the way African-Americans arrived, survived, and finally thrived in the U.S. While the music remains a special link to Africa, all Americans value it. The blues originally evolved in the southern states out of slaves' work songs, field hollers, and plantation dances. As it became popular with the paying public, the blues was quickly recognized and transformed from a back porch and picnic pastime to an income-producing profession. "Crazy Blues," Mamie Smith's hit record of 1920 that was reported to have sold 75,000 copies in the first month of its release, is proof of its popularity. Blueswomen like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith who sang the classic blues of the '20s, and bluesmen like Charlie Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson, traveling singing guitarists in the Mississippi Delta and American southwest, became popular throughout the nation. Specialty record labels, music venues, and tour circuits were the result of Americans' appetite for the blues.

Records and radio afforded blues musicians a much broader notoriety than otherwise possible and established a pattern embraced by all subsequent folk-rooted American music. Jazz improvisation, gospel vocalizing, country and western favorites, R&B, and rock 'n' roll for sock hops, street-corner soul serenades, deejay mixing, and poetry slams have followed the blues' model of starting as homegrown crafts and becoming extremely popular commercial forms. Audiences today enjoy the specific musical and lyrical bits, chorus formations, and stage styles that were born of the blues. It's not farfetched to propose that the blues is the keynote of the American soundtrack, the dominant pitch of our country's popular music history.

Certain distinct characteristics of the blues are easily identified in other types of music. There's the strong beat that is exciting at very slow and very fast tempos and can anchor complex interactions with other

beats. There are the well-defined, cyclical chord patterns that allow for almost infinite variations and adaptations. There are the standard rhyme schemes and repetitions of lyrics that tell a story, reflecting common occurrences of daily life and the ways we truly talk. There is the blues' representation of the performer's extreme emotional states from sad and mournful to excited and cheerful. And there's the audiences' preference for artists whose expression seems real to their our personal experiences.

The goal of the blues entertainer is to interact with the audience so that everyone can be involved and take part in the party. This goes far beyond commercial pop music and has its influence in theater (August Wilson's plays), religious music (gospel founder Thomas "Precious Lord" Dorsey began as a blues pianist recording as "Georgia Tom"), film and TV themes (such as the opening music for "The Sopranos"), and classical composition (William Russo wrote a blues symphony, recorded by conductor Seiji Ozawa). The blues also shows up in comedy when the Blues Brothers discover America by visiting Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown; and, Dave Chappelle opens his cable TV show with a guitar and harmonic riff reminiscent of the great Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry's blues guitar and harmonica duo of the 1940s and '50s. The blues has even become valuable in advertising, as when a highly regarded, earthy blues elder like B.B. King testified about the merits of a blood sugar meter for diabetics.

Pop music stars have continually drawn from the basic approach of early blues artists. Stars including Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross, Cassandra Wilson, Macy Gray, Missy Elliott, Mos Def, and Nas have all come to convey the blues' values. They have used approaches devised by the earliest practitioners of the blues as a way of appealing to different audiences in different circumstances and at different times.

It should be no surprise that the blues has spread around the globe. There are blues bands in Scandinavia, Japan, and Australia. Brazilian musicians Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso know the blues. Ali Farka Toure of Mali in West Africa played the blues as if he'd learned them from John Lee Hooker. There's something about the blues that's recognizably honest and enduring. The blues arose from the struggles of people trying to find themselves, and perhaps make their fortunes in America. That struggle is the American story, told wherever Americans and American culture go. No wonder it's most convincingly, compellingly told to the strong beat, the straightforward tunes, and the dynamic chords of the blues.

Questions for consideration:

1. What are some of the current representations of the blues, the music, the musicians or the musical contexts, in advertisements, on television, or in other mass media? What does mass media use the blues to signify?

2. In what ways are your favorite rap, hip-hop, country and/or rock songs like the blues? In what ways are they different?

3. How do the electric bands of the urban blues and the solo or duo performers of the rural blues demonstrate differences between the cultures of big cities and agricultural regions?

4. Can you hear the emotions sung of in the blues in music from Eastern or Western Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and Central America, Africa or the Middle East? Is the emotional "story" told in those musical examples similar or different than in the blues?