

The Blues – A Primer



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The Blues – A Quick Primer

Why The Blues?

To answer that, I'm first going to make a quick declaration – this was not written by Artificial Intelligence. It was written by me, Russell “Hitman” Alexander, a real person doing real writing.

And that is also the answer to “Why The Blues”. Yes, AI can generate a reasonably good blues song – I've tried it, just to see. But even if it sounds right, and the lyrics work (they often don't, but that's just for now), and the computer generated vocals sound sincere – it's a fake.

It's fake because it's not based on personal experience. It doesn't ring true. It's like someone who has never loved writing a love poem, which may sound right but you know it's not real. And when **you're** in love, you want something real to describe it.

But Is It The Blues? It's Not Sad!

Blues can be happy, angry, silly, drunk, sober, frustrated, liberated, all the variations of human experience. If you're having a rough time, you might want to hear something sad, or you might say “hell with that” and want something upbeat and encouraging. The blues has all of that, in many different styles that are all considered blues:

Acoustic blues (think Robert Johnson or Son House)

Electric blues (think Stevie Ray or Johnny Winter)

Rock blues (Joe Bonamasa, Albert Lee, Robert Cray, and though I don't see it, White Stripes)

Swing blues (Texas Alexander, Tiny Bradshaw)

Boogie blues (George Thorogood, BB King sometimes, Elmore James)

Funky blues (Buddy Guy sometimes, The Meters, Delbert McClinton)

Slow blues (Etta James, Koko Taylor)

Latin blues (Albert Lee sometimes, Louis Jordan sometimes)

Now, **those listed names are just the very tip of the iceberg**, and are by no means the only examples or even the best examples. Blues has been around, in the form that we recognize, for well over 100 years. Lots of amazing musicians, many that you probably never heard of.

And that's ok, because no matter what genre you like, there are going to be incredible writers, singers and musicians who you aren't going to be familiar with. Especially now, with the glut of music available on your phone, computer, car, tv, etc. You just can't keep up. But it's really about the music, and what hits you.

Confession Time

There's a lot of blues I don't like. Boring, done a million times, nothing interesting. Just rehashed stuff that often pales beside the original songs. And the same is true for jazz, heavy metal, folk, rock – you get the idea. Just because it falls under a category you like doesn't mean you like **everything** in that genre. Even some artists I like will have songs I love and others that are just ok. Find what moves you, ignore the genre label, and enjoy what it brings to your life.

Where Did It Start

I'm going to suggest a wonderful book for you if you're interested in the history of the blues – *Whose Blues*, by the wonderful musician Adam Gussow. Here's a link to Amazon (I might get a referral fee if you use this link, btw):

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1469660369/ref=nosim/tag=alexanderit0f-20>

Or, it may be in your public library. But I warn you – if you get it from the library, you may end up buying it anyway! It's that good.

The phrase “the blues” probably originated with the 17th-century English expression “the blue devils,” for the intense visual hallucinations that can accompany severe alcohol withdrawal. Shortened over time to “the blues,” it came to mean a state of agitation or depression. “Blue” was slang for “drunk” by the 1800s. The link between “blue” and drinking is also indicated by “blue laws” that still prohibit Sunday alcohol sales in some states.

By the turn of the century, a couple's dance that involved slowly grinding the hips together called “the blues” or “the slow drag” was popular in Southern juke joints. A rural juke would be jammed on weekends with couples getting their drink on, doing the pre-coital shuffle to the accompaniment of a “bluesman” on guitar.

The popular story of where the blues in America began involves cornetist/bandleader WC Handy, called “The Father Of The Blues” (and he gave himself that name in his autobiography, just to make sure it stuck). In 1903, possibly 1904, Handy – who wanted to be the black John Phillips Souza – was dozing at a train station in Tutwiler, a small town in Mississippi, when he was woken up by a strange music. In his own words:

“A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags, his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly:

‘Going where the Southern cross’ the Dog’

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.”

This was just the start of a long journey for Handy, who went on to write one of the most recorded blues songs in history – *St. Louis Blues*. He actually wrote and/or arranged dozens of songs. Was he really the “Father Of The Blues”? That's doubtful, the same way that neither Bill Haley or Ike Turner were the “Father of Rock and Roll” – there was

too much that came before them to claim that title¹. But he sure helped put blues on the map!

That's Not Blues!

What makes a song “the blues”? Are the Rolling Stones blues? How about White Stripes? Was Mike Bloomfield or Rory Gallagher “authentic” blues? What about Jimi Hendrix when he played “Red House”, or Joe Bonamassa? Our own group, The Hitman Blues Band, plays what we call “Modern Blues”. Is that “real” blues?

In every genre, there's always somebody who wants to be an authority, and does so by calling out what he/she feels is false. These self-appointed Guardians of Purity won't hesitate to tell you what's good and what's trash.

Hell with them.

Music is, above all, communication. If a song hits you on a certain level, it's doing its job. And if **you** feel it's the blues, then it's the blues. Nobody can make that decision for you. Is Ornette Coleman really “jazz”? Is Led Zeppelin really metal? It's up to you, and nobody else.

So What Are Blues Artists Everyone Agrees On?

Let's break it down to a timeline of the blues. Remember, this isn't a “Who's Who”. I'll be leaving out a **ton of deserving artists**. And the more I go through the years, the more upsetting it is that I have to leave out people who are just as influential and important as those I'm leaving in, but this isn't a book (there's plenty of those) about **everybody** in the blues.

Let's begin with early blues,

1910 through 1929.

Marion Harris – the first “superstar” of the blues

Ma Rainey – “The Mother Of The Blues”, who influenced generations of singers, including

Bessie Smith – called “the Empress Of The Blues”

Mamie Smith – recorded the groundbreaking “Crazy Blues”, among other hits

Now, we've just touched on that era. “But what about men?” you might ask? Glad you brought it up!

Blind Lemon Jefferson – called “the founding father of Texas Blues”

Charley Patton – a superstar in the blues in the 1920's. Influenced bluesmen from Son House to Stevie Ray. He lived a rock star lifestyle, too.

Lonnie Johnson – created a whole new style for blues and guitarists in particular.

There are SO many more, but that might get you started to see if you enjoy it.

1930 through 1939

Robert Johnson – you know the name. Why did he become so popular, years after his death? Because he combined a lot of blues styles from older players, and his music became available to British musicians through 1961's "King Of The Delta Blues Singers"

Son House – called "The Father Of Folk Blues", House was a huge influence for Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, among many others.

Big Bill Broonzy – along with classics like "Key To The Highway" Broonzy wrote many blues standards and became one of the founders of the Chicago blues style.

Memphis Minnie – Influencing artists like Big Mama Thornton, Jefferson Airplane and Led Zeppelin, Minnie was described as "the most popular female country blues singer of all time"

Leadbelly – known for his using a 12 string guitar, he wrote such tunes as "Irene Good Night" (later covered by The Weavers), he deeply influenced everyone from Bob Dylan (who credits him with Dylan's getting into folk music) to Nirvana, as well as starting the British skiffle revival.

1940 – 1949

Tampa Red – he could have been included in the previous years, but his 1949 hit "It Hurts Me Too" was covered by another legend 8 years later, Elmore James. His slide playing influenced countless guitarists.

Louis Jordan – while recognized for a specific style of swinging jazz more than blues, Jordan set the foundation for rhythm and blues.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe – with her distorted guitar, expert playing, witty lyrics and enthralling voice, Tharpe influenced Elvis, Johnny Cash, Little Richard, Meatloaf, Tina Turner, Chuck Berry – you get the idea.

Muddy Waters – although he had a lot of hits in the 1950s, his first big hit came in 1948 with "I Can't Be Satisfied" and "I Feel Like Going Home". He went on to create one of the most acclaimed blues groups in history.

1950 – 1959

There are so many artists to list, it's impossible to choose. I'll just get five of them, but it could just as easily be fifty and still wouldn't scratch the surface.

B.B. King – Starting with "3 O'Clock Blues" when he was 27, BB was off and running with hit after hit. His 1964 "Live At The Regal" is considered one of his best recordings by many, including King himself. The people he influenced are too numerous to try listing.

Elmore James – Almost everyone is familiar with his version of "Dust My Broom", a takeoff of Robert Johnson's classic. He also covered "It Hurts Me Too", and wrote "The

Sky Is Crying”, “Shake Your Moneymaker”, and many others. He influenced everyone from BB King to Frank Zappa with both his single string work and his iconic slide.

Big Mama Thornton – Yes, she had the first hit recording of Hound Dog three years before Elvis did his watered-down version. But she also wrote and recorded “Ball and Chain”, covered by Janis Joplin, who was a huge fan. Listen to her versions to see why.

Ruth Brown – Not only an incredible singer, but an activist for musician’s rights and later an actress/comedienne, she had hits like “Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean” and “I Don’t Know”. During the 50s, “In the South, Ruth Brown is better known than Coca-Cola.”

Howlin’ Wolf – with his distinctive voice, his imposing physical presence, and his emotion drenched performances, it’s hard to understand why it took until 1951 for Wolf to start his climb to fame. But at least it came, and quickly after that, with the help of Willie Dixon penned songs like “Moanin’ At Midnight” and “Smokestack Lightning”.

Muddy Waters – Howlin’ Wolf’s “rival” (Willie Dixon wrote for both of them), Muddy had hits with “Mannish Boy”, “Hoochie Coochie Man”, “Rollin’ Stone”, and his signature cover of “Got My Mojo Workin’”.

1960 – 1969

Eric Clapton – deeply influenced by American blues artists, Clapton managed to combine Chicago blues with rock in a way that flowed without being forced. His playing influenced future generations of guitarists. Although he changed genres frequently, he always went back to the blues during his long career.

Johnny Winter – with his electrifying style and consummate knowledge and respect for the blues, Winter brought electric blues to a whole different level. If he made mistakes on his recordings, he often kept them in to “keep it real”.

Albert Collins – Although his first recording (“Freeze”) was in 1958, it was in the 60s that Collins came into his own. With the release of “Frosty” in 1964, he influenced the Vaughn brothers (Stevie Ray and Jimmy), Robert Cray, and many others. His stage show, including walking the crowd with the help of a **very** long cord, became legendary.

Michael Bloomfield – Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Electric Flag, Al Kooper, Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan – Bloomfield’s blues drenched guitar was a compelling presence. The “Super Sessions” album is considered a must have by blues aficionados, for good reason.

Freddie King – “Have You Ever Loved A Woman” and the classic “Hideaway” would have been enough to cement King into blues history. But add in “The Stumble” and other songs like “Going Down”, and you understand why he helped shape the sound of groups from the Grateful Dead (according to Jerry Garcia) to Jeff Beck.

Duane Allman – a master of the slide guitar, but Duane was a multi-talented musician who was a session musician at the legendary Muscle Shoals studio. His slide playing influenced generations of musicians, which continues to this day.

1970 - 1979

Many of these artists had releases before the 70s (some quite a long time before!), but they gained more prominence during that decade. This, despite the avalanche of rock, progressive rock, funk and punk. Disco – which almost ended up destroying the music business in many ways, still couldn't douse the light of the blues.

Bonnie Raitt – while her breakthrough album “Nick Of Time” wasn't released until 1989, her first hit was a cover of “Runaway” in 1977 got her a national spotlight. As her career still continues, she has been an inspiration to many guitarists both male and female, and her attention to a variety of blues styles means she never gets stale.

Bobby Rush – despite being part of the Chicago blues scene as a teenager in the early 50's, it wasn't until 1971 that Rush had a breakout song, “Chicken Heads” (revived 30 years later as part of the movie “Black Snake Moan”) Still performing as of 2024, he is pure energy as he plays solo to large audiences, walks the crowd, and sells the blues in a way that's impossible to forget.

George Thorogood – with his group “The Destroyers”, Thorogood introduced an entire generation to an amped up version of blues classics, sometimes combining tunes and other times just playing them in a totally different feel from the original – but still blues. His popularity led to a rediscovery of the blues and enhanced it's timeless popularity.

1980 - 1989

The Blues Brothers – no, they weren't a traditional blues group. But Dan Akroyd teamed with John Belushi, and their shared love and respect for the blues led to an enduring classic movie – still popular over 40 years later – that brought the blues into massive public focus. Using original artists, including Matt “Guitar” Murphy, John Lee Hooker, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and many others, it ignited a huge interest in the blues.

Stevie Ray Vaughn – of course, he's going to be in this list. After what he considered a disastrous debut performance at Montreux, he got a call from David Bowie offering him a studio session on “Let's Dance”. His sound on his short solo was so striking that no less than Eric Clapton said that when he heard it, he pulled his car over and said “I have to know who this guitar player is today. Not tomorrow, but today.” It was this kind of reaction that shot Vaughn into national attention, especially when he quit Bowie's tour just before it started. His subsequent rise to fame and unique sound kept the interest in the blues going strong for decades to come.

Robert Cray – his 1986 hit “Smokin' Gun” opened the door for the already successful Cray to reach a much larger audience. As with the previous two entries, it only sustained the revival of the blues, which was now encompassing “traditional” acoustic blues, Chicago blues, West Coast blues, Texas blues, and more.

Note that many of the bands mentioned previously were still going strong, still releasing music, and labels like Alligator, Rounder, and Blind Pig were very busy putting blues acts in front of millions of fans.

1990 – 1999

Buddy Guy – kept on a very short leash in the 1960s by his record company, Chess Records, Guy still managed to become well known for his work as a guitarist sideman and influenced many musicians and vocalists. However, he didn't get to record his breakthrough record "Damn Right I've Got The Blues" until 1991. Eric Clapton called him "the best guitar player alive". His singing style is no less intense. He could easily have been listed in the 60's section as well.

Jeff Healey – blinded just before turning one by a rare cancer, Healey found his own unique way of playing. Combined with his soulful voice and encyclopedic knowledge of the blues, the 22 year old had a hit with "Angel Eyes", appeared numerous times in the movie "Road House" (as the house band), and reinvigorated the concept that exceptional musicianship knows no physical limitations.

Kenny Wayne Shepherd – feeling he wanted to carry on the torch of the tragically deceased Stevie Ray, Shepherd was keeping the blues fresh, as well as attracting a younger audience. He continues to tour.

Jonny Lang – with the help of Buddy Guy, he reached a wide audience and continued to spread appreciation of the blues.

Keb' Mo' – playing since the early 70s, Keb' Mo' released his first album in 1994. His presence at various festivals and charitable events has brought even more appreciation for Robert Johnson style blues, as well as the other varieties of blues he performs.

And That Ain't All

There's Joe Bonamassa, Kingfish, Larkin and Poe, and tons of other artists that have appeared since 2000. And more coming every day, like (shameless plug here) the Hitman Blues Band.

Some are just rehashing what others have already done, making no improvements. Others bring a fresh interpretation to blues standards. Still others are writing new, inventive songs that are blues based without sounding like retreads. There may be a lot of crap out there, but there's also a lot of fantastic music.

Now go out and listen!

Note:

1. If you want to hear some of what came before the 50s, I strongly advise you to buy the collection "The History Of Rhythm And Blues, 1942 – 1952". The booklet that comes with it is worth the price all by itself. You can find it at www.rhythmandbluesrecords.co.uk