

Blues Musicians

Name _____

Form _____

Blues is the traditional music of the Afro-American people. It was usually accompanied by acoustic instruments such as the guitar and harmonica. It owed much of its origins to the rhythms and sounds, such as “call and response” method of singing, which the African slaves brought from their homeland. In blues, the “call” is made by the singer who sings the first half of each line. The “response” or answer is made by the guitarist or other instrumentalist.



Both vocal and instrumental styles in blues music make extensive use of the bending or slurring of certain notes. These are the so called “blue” notes which produce the characteristic jarring sound of the blues. Blues singing is often a high pitched wailing sound charged with emotion.



Blues songs were often stories about love and sex and characters in trouble such as the traditional ballad “Frankie and Johnny”.

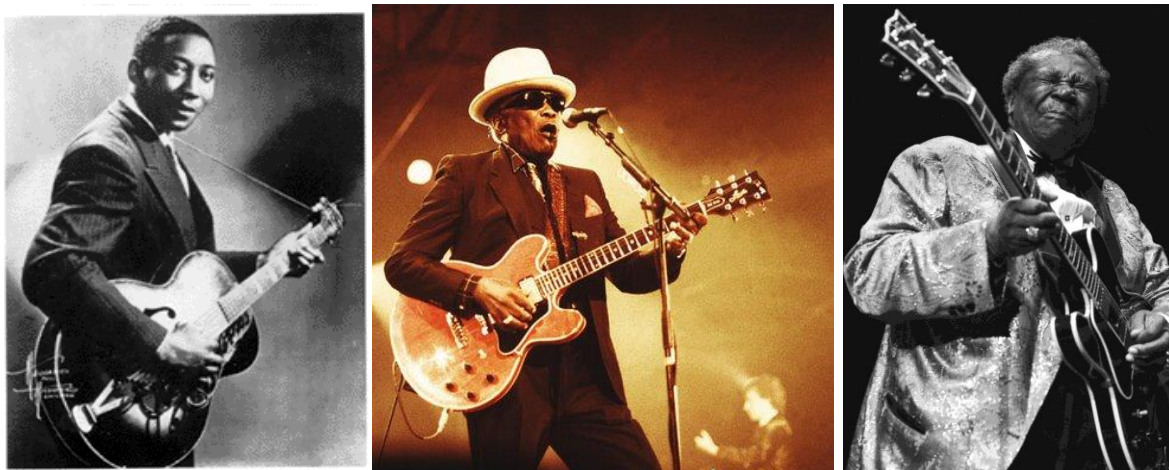
By the 1920’s two distinctive blues styles had emerged – country and city blues. Country blues developed in the rural areas of the Mississippi Delta and Texas. Robert Johnson (pictured left) from the Mississippi Delta was a passionate singer and brilliant guitarist whose recordings have inspired many a blues guitarist ever since.

The city blues was a more sophisticated sound often backed by a piano or a complete band. Some of the best singers were women such as Bessie Smith (pictured right). Her version of the “St Louis Blues” was delivered in a powerful emotionally charged manner.

During the 1940’s and 1950’s blues adapted itself to modern city life by becoming louder and fiercer. This new type of blues was called “rhythm and blues”. All the instruments were amplified and the lead singer or guitarist was usually accompanied by a backing group.



Rhythm and blues performers included Muddy Waters (left below), John Lee Hooker (centre below), BB King (right below) and the British guitarist Eric Clapton.



Muddy Waters achieved early success with the hit “I Can’t be Satisfied”. By 1955 he had produced nine hit records. In 1962, John Lee Hooker reached the charts with his hollering sound “Boom Boom”. Eric Clapton helped spread blues music by a mixture of traditional songs and his own pounding numbers such as “Layla”.

Through the influence of rhythm and blues, much of the structure of pop music today has been shaped by the blues music of the early twentieth century.

Exercises

1. Write a sentence about each of the following blues musicians – Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Eric Clapton.
2. Where did the call and response type singing come from?
3. Explain how blues musicians use the “call and response” style in their performances.
4. Copy out this sentence and fill in the blanks:-
In blues music there is much b_____ and s_____ of p_____ notes which produces a j_____ sound. Singing consists of high pitched w_____ charged with e_____.
5. Name some of the subjects covered by blues singers.
6. Name one traditional blues band.
7. Describe the differences between country and city blues.
8. Write two or three sentences describing the difference between **blues** and **rhythm and blues**.
9. Look carefully at the pictures of John Lee Hooker and BB King above. Try to describe the expressions on their faces.