

Fall 2017

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Recommended Citation

Weiler, Emily , "The Roots and Impact of African American Blues Music" Whitworth University (2017). *African American History Since 1865: HI 241*. Paper 1.
<https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/hi241/1>

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Emily Weiler

The Roots and Impact of African American Blues Music

It's not very common that one associates music legend Elvis Presley with an African slave on a journey through the Middle Passage. However, they are connected in more ways than probably assumed. The relationship between these two, however, is the history and evolution of the blues, a musical style that has transcended folk, jazz, rock and pop music to remain a strong musical influence nearly a century after its official beginning. From Elvis, Aretha Franklin and Jimi Hendrix, to John Lennon and Led Zeppelin, blues music has, in some way or another, worked its way into the musical style that has shaped the success of these popular performers and many others. The early African American musical style of blues was the most impactful element of the music scene in the 1960s and 70s through its influence on some of the most famous black and white musicians in history.

The beginnings of blues, along with all other forms of African American music, can be traced back to the era of the slave trade starting in 1619 and ending in 1809. (Weissman 6) During this period, many west Africans were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, a journey known as the Middle Passage, and sold into slavery. It has been recounted that slave ship captains would encourage slaves to sing and dance in hopes that the exercise would keep them alive until they arrived. (Rublowksy 140) In this way, many African musical traits were brought to the Americas on slave ships and eventually became the foundations for many of the most popular African American musical genres including the blues.

Rooted in African tradition, many spirituals, work songs and hollers, now more often referred to as slave songs, became the foundations for the blues. The basic blues melodies were most commonly derived from several traditional spirituals (Brooks 52) and field hollers, solo songs sung to communicate or express feelings to others, (Burnim 82) containing lyrics that reflected the work of the slaves. These spirituals and work songs such as, "This Ole Hammer," "Hoe Emma Hoe" and "Chained to the Land" were performed to distract and entertain one another all while increasing work efficiency. The lyrics of

these songs shared many of the same qualities that were later found in the earliest songs considered to be blues. (Zanzig) The earliest forms of blues reflected feelings of despair, sorrow and many other moods of the singers. (Roach, 50) The continual development of this musical style until the turn of the 20th century resulted in the first written and recorded appearance of blues music in America.

The beginning of the blues musical style is theorized to be around the middle of the 19th century, though due to a lack of a written account of early blues songs, the official beginning cannot be determined. (Brooks 51) Many African blues musicians believe that “Joe Turner” was the first blues song written between 1892 and 1896. (Weissman 19) Traditionally, the blues structure was free to interpretation by the individual performer until W.C. Handy, a musician and composer, began the practice of notating blues music with his first publication in 1912 entitled “Memphis Blues.” (Brooks 53) Following his first song in 1912, Handy went on to compose and publish countless other blues songs that became known as “classic blues.” Blues quickly gained popularity as many white vocalists and jazz bands began performing and recording this new type of music starting in the 1920s.

In the early parts of the 20th century several African Americans became popular blues artists. The first folk blues star was Blind Lemon Jefferson, a Texan who eventually became a successful recording artist and musical composer for Paramount. (Weissman 47) Another popular artist, Robert Johnson, a well “accomplished guitarist and composer as well as a mesmerizing vocalist” recorded only 29 songs in his short career. (Salaam) However, his songs became standards in the acoustic country blues repertoire that were performed and recorded long after his death in 1938. In the classic blues style, African American artists such as Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and the “Empress” of the blues, Bessie Smith, rose to fame as female band leaders and song writers. (Salaam)

Moving farther through the 20th century, blues music began being sold to a vast African American market and thus took on the name rhythm and blues (R&B). This new wave of blues music saw the rise of many stars including Muddy Waters and BB King, who would later influence some of the biggest names of the 1960s and 70s. They began the incorporation of electric guitar and other instruments into their

blues sound, that eventually became the foundation for many of the most famous rock and roll musicians in music history. In the words of Muddy Waters, “The blues had a baby and named it rock and roll.” (Moore 124)

Rock and roll stars began appearing on the music scene in the late 1940s to early 1950s, many of whom, including Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry, derived their core sound from the R&B style. (Keil 64) As rock and roll developed in the 60s and 70s, it saw the rise of some of the biggest music names in history. Bringing this new musical style to light was “The King of Rock and Roll,” Elvis Presley. He first introduced the world to his “Rockabilly” music style on his original record in 1954. “Rockabilly” was considered to be a white, southern, black-inspired, blues and country fusion. (Salaam) Incorporating aspects of the country blues style from folk blues artist Robert Johnson and having been a huge fan of R&B music, Presley used the Afro-American music to inspire his own music, and even included recordings of his favorite R&B songs on several of his first records. (Weissman 74) Some of the songs that he included in his albums and live performances initially came from artists such as Willie Mae Thornton (Rockwell) and Charles Brown (Palmer) as well as many others. Elvis Presley has been deemed responsible for bringing back the blues after the R&B style started to dwindle in popularity. Though there were still many popular blues musicians performing at the time, Elvis’ music reached a much broader audience and sparked more interest in the blues from younger audiences. (Burnim 110)

Elvis Presley was not, however, the only famous musician of the 60s and 70s to take inspiration and influence from African American blues. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, fans of the blues genre, were members of a blues band named Blues Incorporated. They later went on to create their own blues-rock band, named the Rolling Stones. Even the band name was inspired by the blues, having come directly from Muddy Waters blues track “Rollin’ Stone,” (Keil 48) Mick Jagger and John Lennon, of the Beatles, have both acknowledged that their music was heavily shaped and defined by African blues music (Saakana), while rockabilly star Carl Perkins also demonstrated heavy blues influence in his musical style by featuring guitar as his lead instrument. Even the English rock band Led Zeppelin, which helped pave

the way to the heavy metal genre, was stylistically founded on the music of American blues. Beginning in 1970, the band recorded several original blues tunes written by blues artists including Robert Johnson, which helped spark a new blues revival in Britain. (Weissman 115)

During the same period, there were many famous black musicians that had been influenced by blues just as much as the rock and rollers of the time. During the 1960s, two new forms of blues-influenced music, Soul and Psychedelic blues, began to surface. Soul music, especially, was an offshoot of the R&B and was dominated by black performers until the late 60s. (Sonnier 86) Many soul singers including Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge and Otis Redding became popular on the soul musical charts. But, perhaps, the biggest names in soul were James Brown and Aretha Franklin. James Brown, known as Soul Brother Number One, was a popular R&B artist before it became soul music. At the start of the 60's James Brown was a "household name in black America." But because of a switch in popularity towards British rock and roll, he realized he had to switch his music style in order to reach both black and white audiences and maintain his status on the charts. (Sonnier 86) His soul style was heavily influenced by his experience with R&B, as well as classic blues, gospel and African American folk music. James Brown was considered a revolutionizer of music by many other artists of the time, thanks to his new and upbeat musical style, his incomparable talent for live performance, and his overall unwillingness to conform to anyone else's vision for his career, other than his own.

Aretha Franklin, born in 1942, was raised on traditional black gospel and blues music. As she grew older she became fond of performing R&B music and developed a unique style that well represented the traditional blues performer. But after signing with Atlantic Records in 1966, Aretha's eyes were opened to the world of Soul. Having been raised on classic blues, her voice always retained the "blues-drenched soul" that rocketed her to fame through the 1960s. But it was her "gospel-influenced, bluesy delivery," that helped her soul music climb the music charts, capture the industry as the most charted woman in the history of R&B and Soul, and earn the title of the "Queen of Soul." (Sonnier 87,88)

In the mid-1960s, along with the soul explosion, Psychedelic blues began to sprout on the music scene. This new style was a combination of the hard guitar style of rock and rollers as well as the urban blues settings of artists like BB King and Muddy Waters. Jimi Hendrix is the musician accredited with “bridging the gap” between the two styles. (Sonnier 87) He was introduced to the electric blues of the Chicago scene as a young boy, and in 1961, after being discharged from the army, moved to Nashville and worked as a musician in local blues bands. Along the way he worked with artists BB King and James Brown, and by 1966 had his own group in Europe and gained popularity among white and black listeners. His musical training was primarily in blues style and he used that influence to fuel his fame all over the world. Along with Jimi Hendrix, there were other guitarists who appeared in the 1960’s such as Eric Clapton, John Mayall and Jeff Beck, who were also inspired by, and played the songs of, many famous bluesmen. At the same time, there was a return to blues by famous white pop artists like Janis Joplin, who took inspiration from Bessie Smith, and Johnny Winter, who recorded the songs of Muddy Waters and others. Several older blues musicians, especially BB King also experienced a resurgence in musical popularity during the 1970s as white audiences developed an attraction to the “purity and warmth of blues music.” (Sonnier 88) Many believe that a majority of the popular music that surfaced before and during the 1970s was blues-influenced in one way or another.

From its origins as an entirely black musical entity, to becoming a music genre that was widely appreciated by all, blues music has evolved from slave songs and folk blues into rock and roll and soul to become the most influential musical style, not only of the 1960s and 70s, but of much of the 20th century and beyond. Having an impact on many of the most famous artists to ever live, blues was used and adapted in many more ways than ever imagined by the very first blues musicians of the early 1900s. Surviving amidst jazz, rock and pop, blues music withstood the test of time to become an influential part of popular music even a century after it was first created. The lasting influence of blues in the music of many of the most famous musicians in history, still carries on in the ears of their audiences and the music of today.

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