

The Blues

by Amanda Dargan and
Steve Zeitlin

The blues has its beginnings in African American folk traditions and music. From its origins in the plantation culture of the rural South, the blues continued to develop in the inner-cities of the North and the Midwest - such as Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis - where many African Americans from the South migrated after the 1890s.

The classic blues stanza consists of three lines of verse. The first line presents a statement that is repeated in the second line, with greater or lesser degrees of variation. The third line offers a rhymed response, often resolving the issue raised in the first two lines. The first blues song is often attributed to W.C. Handy, who wrote "St. Louis Blues" in 1900, but the blues grew out of older forms such as field hollers and call-and-response religious music. Some of the earliest blues songs were recorded from sharecroppers in the late 19th Century.

In 1936, Kokomo Arnold sang a blues song about the boll weevil, an insect that devastated the cotton crop in the South earlier in the century:

Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left
us in an awful fix,

Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left
us in an awful fix,

Done et up all our home, left us nothin'
but the sticks.

As more and more African Americans moved north from rural areas to cities in what has been called "The Great Migration," blues lyrics began to reflect the urban experience, giving rise to what became known as "urban blues." This blues song by Little Bill Gaither and Big Bill Broonzy, recorded in Chicago in 1941, is an example:

I used to live in New Orleans, it's been
a good many years ago,

I used to live in New Orleans, it's been
a good many years ago,

But since I been up North I been
sleepin' on the barroom floor.

I been on relief in Chicago and soup
lines in Kokomo,

I been on relief in Chicago, and soup
lines in Kokomo,

But I'm going right back down South
where I don't be driven from door to door.

The blues have become a synonym for a certain kind of sad and melancholy feelings - although the range of blues music is much greater than that. We can't reexperience what the great bluesmen like Lightning Hopkins and Big Bill Broonzy lived through the Great Migration. Listening to their music may be the closest we can come to understanding that experience. But those feelings of melancholy characteristic of so many blues lyrics are something we all understand, and know intimately.

What are the blues? As Louis Armstrong said about jazz, cousin to the blues, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."

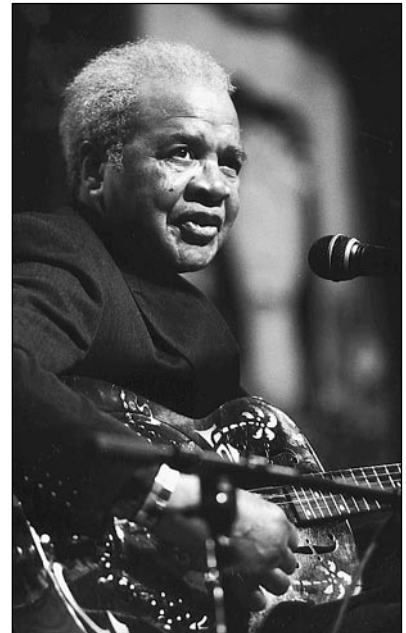


Photo by Martha Cooper

*Carolina Slim sings the blues at
The People's Poetry Gathering*