

12-BAR BLUES Part 1

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Hello. This is the eleventh in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition. It is also the first of two podcasts on the blues, specifically 12-bar blues. What is the blues? Is it a form, a way of performing or a state of mind? Well, a case can be made that it's all these things and more. Maybe it sounds like this (PLAY FIRST FOUR BARS OF FIRST CHORUS OF "WEST END BLUES") or this (PLAY INTRO TO "I'M A STEADY ROLLIN' MAN") or this (PLAY "HOW BLUE CAN YOU GET" OPENING 15") or this (PLAY "CROSSROADS" 8"-19"). To presume to give a full history of a form of music so rich and complex that it spawned Delta blues, country blues, urban blues, Texas blues, Kansas City blues, West Coast blues, boogie-woogie, rhythm and blues, 8-bar, 12-bar and 16-bar blues, blues rock, jump blues and a whole host of other styles would be ludicrous even in TWO podcasts. However, I will try to make it a bit less ludicrous by giving a bit of historical background to provide a context for the development of this wonderful musical genre.

As a term equated with sadness or melancholy, the word "blue" goes back at least 200 years and probably much further. Blues as a form of musical expression evolved in the Mississippi Delta between the end of the Civil War and the end of the 19th century. While the exact origins of the blues are obscure, it was primarily vocal music, which showed its evolution from work songs, field hollers and shouts. If there was accompaniment, it was with any handy instrument, including those which were homemade. In its earliest manifestations it was simple harmonically, often using only one chord. Gradually three primary forms of blues developed, so-called 8- or 16-bar blues and the more common 12-bar blues, though blues songs created on the early single-chord model are still being written today. During the late 19th and early 20th century, text as well as musical elements of the blues began to take shape as something distinct and recognizable. Text became primarily an AAB form in each verse as in the first verse of "St. Louis Blues", written by W. C. Handy in 1914:

I hate to see that evening sun go down.
I hate to see that evening sun go down.
'Cause my baby gone and left this town.

The harmonic structure of the 12-bar blues started to solidify in its simplest form to the following: four bars on the tonic or keynote chord, two bars on the subdominant (that is, the chord built on the fourth step of the scale), then two more bars on the tonic, two bars on the dominant (the chord built on the fifth step of the scale) and two bars on the tonic (or one on the tonic and one on the dominant). (PLAY PROGRESSION.)

Does a 12-bar blues actually sound like this? Usually not, for several reasons, mainly to do with the African-derived approach to melody and rhythm which involves a flexible attitude toward pitch and pulse. Notes are seldom hit straight on, but are often slid into from above or below. Listening to blues performances, formally trained musicians arrived at something called a blues scale which uses three so-called "blue" or variable notes: the third, fifth and seventh steps of the scale and which sounds something like this. (PLAY BLUES SCALE.) However, in practice any pitch may be altered in some way. Let's listen to our first example, King Oliver's "West End Blues", as recorded by Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five in 1928. Here's the first time through the progression. (PLAY 13"-50") Note how the melody emphasizes the ambiguity between minor and major right off the bat with the first two notes of the tune. Notice also how some of the notes are just a little ahead of the beat or behind and are slid up to rather than hit straight on. Let's listen again. (PLAY 13"-50" AGAIN.)

Imagine this chorus played in straight rhythm and without the slides and perhaps you will realize just how important performance style is to blues or in fact any African-American-conceived music such as jazz, gospel or rhythm and blues.

“West End Blues” follows a convention established in the early years of New Orleans jazz at the beginning of the 20th century, namely, of one or more improvised solo passages, in this case first by Fred Robinson on trombone, played over the 12-bar blues progression. Let's listen and note how well the solo fits over the changing chords. (PLAY 50”-1' 24”.)

While in many ways “West End Blues” is fairly typical of a jazz approach to the 12-bar blues progression in the 1920s there are two features which set it apart at the time and made it one of the most influential pieces of American music in the first half of the 20th century. The first occurs in the third chorus in which Louis Armstrong singing and Jimmy Strong on clarinet engage in an echoing call and response duet. For those of you whose only exposure to Armstrong's singing is the gravel-voiced sound of “Mack the Knife”, “Hello Dolly” or “It's a Wonderful World”, all recorded late in his life, this sound may come as a real revelation to you as it did to me. (PLAY 1' 24”- 1' 59”.) While the first recorded instance of scat-singing, that is, vocal improvisation using only syllables, occurred two years earlier in Armstrong's recording of the song “Heebie Jeebies”, what we hear in “West End Blues” is both more serious and more accomplished. Armstrong didn't invent scat singing in all likelihood, but he was the first person to record it and the first who was highly proficient at it and as such had a great influence on the next generation of jazz vocalists like Ella Fitzgerald.

The second feature of the song which got everyone's attention was the introduction in which Armstrong improvised a solo which set the jazz world abuzz. While it was at odds with the rest of the song in terms of tempo and feel, its spectacular nature set it apart from any recordings which had preceded it. It was listened to, transcribed and imitated and set the standard for virtuosic solo playing for the next quarter century. Here it is. (PLAY FIRST 12”.) The piece finishes with a wonderful piano solo by Earl Hines and then a final chorus with the entire ensemble playing contrapuntally in traditional New Orleans style. This final chorus features Armstrong effortlessly holding a high C for the first 4 bars and yet making it seem lyrical, musical and easy. Check out the entire song. It's well worth it.

While a number of early blues recordings featured ensembles playing blues in early *jazz* styles, even those including female singers and band leaders such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, a type of blues much closer to the original model was alive and well at the same time. So-called Delta blues usually featured a single performer who often sang and accompanied himself on guitar. I used the word “himself” deliberately as almost all the recorded Delta blues musicians were male, including early greats such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Son House. These bluesmen were often musically illiterate semi-nomadic farm workers or other day laborers and as a result were often looked down on by jazz musicians, but their music has an emotional directness and simplicity which give it great power at times. Often these blues songs are sung over a single chord or an irregular number of bars, but I've chosen an example which is a true 12-bar blues for purposes of comparison. The song is “I'm a Steady Rollin' Man”, created and recorded by the legendary Robert Johnson. There is a story that Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for great ability on the guitar. While this virtuosity doesn't really show on the songs which survive on recordings, keep in mind that we only have a few dozen songs, each less than three minutes long, which were poorly recorded and that most of Johnson's renown came from live shows played in roadhouses in Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas.

There are several features of this song which we ought to notice. The first is the guitar work. Like many blues guitarists both before and since, Robert Johnson used the guitar simultaneously to provide a bass part and harmony as well as a melodic counterpoint to his singing. Although not the case on this song, guitarists often used a technique called “bottlenecking”, that is, using the neck of a bottle slipped over the ring finger and slid along the strings, to great effect. Let's listen to the introduction and first verse. Take note of the descending chromatic sequence in the guitar in the

introduction, the use of three chords in the verse and how Johnson fills in after each vocal line with a little guitar response. (PLAY OPENING – 37”)

The second feature to note is Johnson's singing. In its flexibility both melodically and rhythmically it is typical of Delta blues and all the music it influenced since. Note in particular how Johnson at times compresses the ends of lines for rhythmic variety and to give a slightly longer guitar break. Notice also the turns, swoops, hums, use of falsetto and other vocal elaborations he uses to give a simple melodic line variety and richness. Let's listen to the first verse again. (PLAY INTRO-37” AGAIN.)

Listening to this recording makes one think it was made much earlier than “West End Blues”. In fact, “I'm a Steady Rollin' Man” was recorded in 1937, nine years later. In many ways, Delta Blues remained almost unaltered in the years from World War I through the late 1930's, especially in the rural South. However, this most basic form of blues was about to change radically as did much of the life of many African-Americans. How did this happen and what are some of the ways rural blues turned into music that's more familiar to many of us today? Tune in next time and find out.