

CHAPTER 1

A History of the Blues

This is the story of the blues. It starts in the cotton fields of America's deep South and travels to Chicago, the West Coast, and other regions. The story describes how the blues inspired the creation of jazz, boogie woogie, R&B, and rock 'n' roll. Most importantly, it is a tribute to the men and women who made it all happen.

Since it was first "discovered," the blues has met with varying degrees of acceptance over the years. It has experienced a few heydays, both before and after World War II. At other times, it has been brushed aside out of interest for the latest fad. The blues has also enjoyed revivals, most notably in the '60s and again in the '80s. With the proliferation of musical styles, cultures, "vibes," and "scenes," along with the emphasis society has always placed on each of these factors, the blues has held up strong over the generations.

The blues, however, is not just "some other form" of music. The true essence of the blues packs an emotional wallop in the way it conveys knowledge and wisdom, heartache and suffering, truth and understanding, and painful advice, all by way of rhythm and sometimes dance. Jazz, rock 'n' roll, some folk music, pop, and several other styles can (and should) claim the blues as being the source of their true musical roots. Though these styles have come into their own, each with its own pack of loyal followers (as evidenced by clubs, record labels, festivals, books, movies, etc.), the blues is still here. It all began with the blues.

THE DAWN OF THE BLUES

The origins of the blues can be traced back hundreds of years. In fact, the earliest blues came from African slaves, who arrived by ship at the docks in Virginia as far back as 1619. Forced to endure many years of backbreaking labor on the farms and in the fields, the slaves wailed and moaned in pain and sang about their homeland. The slaves were not permitted to talk to one another while they worked, but they were allowed to sing, as the bosses discovered that their singing actually increased the slaves' productivity. Even after the slaves were freed, many black musicians continued to develop and perform the blues. By the earliest days of the twentieth century, these years of refinement and growth culminated into what we now know as the popular twelve-bar blues form.

Initially, the ones who popularized the blues and made it accessible to the public were the blues singers. One of the most highly regarded classic blues singers was Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, often referred to as "Mother of the Blues," due to her longstanding influence on other blues singers. She was quite possibly the first female singer to inject elements of blues into vaudeville and minstrel shows in the very early 1900s.

Mamie Smith, a black vaudeville and cabaret singer, had the distinction of making the first blues record, "Crazy Blues," for Okeh Records in 1920. The staggering success of this record (it sold over a million copies within a year of its release) inspired other record labels to record blues songs in an attempt to capitalize on this newly discovered musical style.

The greatest and most influential of all the classic blues singers was Bessie Smith, who established herself while touring with Ma Rainey's Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Considered a master of interpretation and phrasing in all moods—happy, sad, fast, and slow—she pleased her record-buying fans with practically everything she sang. At the height of her career, Bessie Smith (no relation to Mamie) was playing to packed houses throughout the South, as well as the North and the Midwest. Her record sales numbered in the hundreds of thousands and her earnings (in the 1920s, mind you) were in excess of \$2,000 a week! Often referred to as "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith became the most respected black singer in the country by the end of the 1920s, and the barometer against which virtually all future female blues singers were measured.