



Summer Term, Week 1, Lesson 1
Popular Music

The Blues

Name:

Listen to *St Louis Blues*, sung by Bessie Smith and featuring Louis Armstrong on trumpet, recorded in 1925.

What other instruments do you hear?

What sort of mood do you think the song creates, and how is this mood created in the music?

Can you work out what metre this song is written in?

HINT: A waltz, for example, basically consists of a heavy beat followed by two lighter beats. So we say that a waltz is in triple metre – one strong beat followed by two weak beats, then repeated. Does that pattern match this? If not, what pattern does?

The first section consists of two verses. How many bars long is each verse?

HINT: If you identified the metre as, for example, having three beats in each bar, how many of these groups of three does each verse occupy?



The origins of the Blues

The first Blues singers were African Slaves. Their music grew out of the despair of slavery. To help them understand their situation they made songs together. They did this to keep their spirits up when they were doing hard manual labour such as picking cotton. A lead singer would sing a line and then a chorus would answer.

Even after their release the slaves were still held down by appalling poverty, and deprived of any kind of privilege. For many this 'freedom' was worse than the slavery. When the slaves were set free in 1865, they faced poverty and homelessness. The nightmare of slavery was over, but black people were often denied jobs and mistreated in other ways, as this song tells us:

*I been hurt an' mistreated
'till I done made up my mind.
I been hurt an' mistreated
'till I done made up my mind.
Gonna leave dis ol' country
An' all my troubles behind.*

The classic blues verse lasts twelve bars - the 'twelve-bar blues'. Whatever tune is used, the harmonies stay more or less the same. This means the tunes can often be quite similar; it also means that they can be easily improvised.

Read the text above and then, under the heading 'The origin of the Blues' on a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions using complete sentences:

1. When were black American slaves set free?
2. Give two reasons why after their release many black Americans found life more difficult?
3. What did Blues songs express?
4. How many bars is the classic Blues?
5. "A lead singer would sing a line and then a chorus would answer". What is the name of this musical device? Where have we seen it being used before?
6. What does 'improvisation' mean?

Discuss the following questions:

1. What do you notice about the language used in these Blues lyrics?
2. How are these lyrics structured? Think about repetition, rhyming patterns, etc. How many syllables per line?

Now, under a new heading 'Blues Lyrics' on the same sheet of paper, write your own blues lyrics. If you finish quickly, try and write a second verse.



TASK 4: Modern Blues

From the beginnings of the Blues style in the early 20th century, the genre continued to develop and grow in popularity. Listen to *Groaning the Blues*, a song composed by Willie Dixon and recorded by Otis Rush in 1957.

*I'm so tired of moaning, trying to groan away my blues.
I'm so tired of moaning, trying to groan away my blues.
I keep weeping and crying every time I think of you.*

*I would rather die of starvation, perish out in the desert sun,
I would rather die of starvation, perish out in the desert sun,
Than to think of some other man holding you in his arms.*

*My heart gets so heavy, lord I shakes down in my bones.
My heart gets so heavy, lord I shakes down in my bones.
I cant hurt a murderer, oh lord, but I'm forced to weep and moan.*



Otis Rush has a distinctive vocal style. What features of this style do you particularly notice?

What instruments can you hear in this clip?

Often, contemporary musicians will record/perform a piece written earlier by another musician/group - this is called a 'cover'. Watch this clip (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxTWQD91b5c>) of the same song, but performed here in 1995 by guitar legend, Eric Clapton. What **similarities** do you notice between these two interpretations of the same song?

What **differences** do you notice?

Which version do you prefer and why?

If there is time at the end of the lesson, watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRnKZ9vqy-g&fmt=18>