

Music 131: The Blues From the Delta to Chicago

Spring 2020; Justin London, Instructor

Class “Meeting” Times
M, W: 1:50 pm-3:00 pm CDT
F: 2:20 pm -3:20 pm CDT

Online office hours: Thurs via appointment
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Required Books, Recordings, and Materials

Francis Davis	<i>The History of the Blues</i>	ISBN-13: 978-0306812965
Elijah Wald	<i>Escaping the Delta</i>	ISBN-13: 978-0060524272
Robert Johnson	<i>The Complete Recordings</i>	ASIN: B004OFWLO0
Muddy Waters	<i>His Best: 1947 to 1955</i>	ASIN: B006Q9JZVE

--> Get these recordings via Amazon/iTunes; do not rely on YouTube or Spotify

Additional readings (PDFs) and recordings (mp3s) are on the course Moodle page, along with many pages of course handouts (mostly song lyrics). If possible, PDFs of readings and lyrics should be printed out, so you can annotate them while you listen.

What This Class is About

In Music 131 we will trace the historical path of the guitar-based blues from the Mississippi delta region during the 1920’s to Chicago and Memphis in the 1950’s. Robert Johnson and his music serve as the focal point of the course: where did his music come from, and where did it go (and most especially how did it get to Muddy Waters)?

Along the way we will ask: How does one talk about the musical structure of the blues? What were the first commercial blues songs, who made them, and what were their antecedents? What were the conditions that allowed the Delta Blues to flourish in the 1930s? Who was Robert Johnson and what is special about his music? What happened when the blues left the Delta? What role did radio and recordings play in the formation and transmission of the Delta blues? How can we understand Muddy Waters’s (and Elvis Presley’s) transformation of the Delta blues?

DISCLAIMER: This course is **NOT** a comprehensive history of the blues. Not even close. For example, we only skim the surface of the Chicago blues scene in the 1940s, say nothing about the blues in Jazz and Country music, and say very little about the great Chicago blues artists from the 60s and beyond. But after taking this course you will have a better sense of how to talk about blues history, style, and performance, the relation between an artist's life and work, artistic influence, and so forth—at least that is the course's intention.

Moodle and the Course Syllabus

The course syllabus gives detailed information about each unit/topic the course will address. Primary and secondary learning goals for each unit are given, along with the readings we will be using and the assignments for each unit. Each unit will also involve audio (and occasional video) podcasts, links to web resources, and a set of mp3 listening materials and PDFs of their companion lyrics. These can be found on the course Moodle page for each unit. These are subject to change (additions, deletions, substitutions) as the term unfolds and as the course requires. As noted in other materials, the course is designed to work, for the most part, in a wholly asynchronous manner, though hopefully we will be able to do more and more activities via Zoom as the course unfolds.

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Assignments and Assessment

As this course is being offered online, assignments and assessments will be a bit different this term. Assignments are in three categories:

- Participatory assignments (worth 20% of your total grade) involve “hands on” activities that in other years would have been done in class (tracking rhythm and verse structure, writing your own blues lyrics, describing the voices of classic blues singers, etc.). These are weighted equally, and each is graded pass/fail. To pass these assignments you must turn them in on time, and fully completed. Your “percent complete” for participatory assignments will be used to calculate a percentage grade.
- Formative Assignments (worth 40% of your total grade) will typically be short (1-2 page) papers, approximately one each week, though some will involve other activities (e.g., sorting out clusters of similar songs). These will be weighted equally, and each is given a letter/percentage grade (90-100 = A; 80-90 = B, etc.).
- Summative Assignment/Final Exam (worth 40% of your total grade) will a final “take home” project. It will involve documenting and discussing the influence of Robert Johnson on Muddy Waters, along with a few additional short essays. These will be launched in the final two weeks of the class, and then treated as a take home exam/project, hence due at the very end of the exam period.

Assessment will also be more than a bit different this term, as all courses are going to be graded on S/CR/NC basis. As you can figure out from the distribution/weighting of grades with each of the three types of assignments outlined above, you will need to complete the summative assignment in order to receive an S or CR in the class. I hasten to add that successful completion of participatory and formative assignments will be very helpful in preparing you for the final summative assignment.

Your final grade will be calculated using the following formula:

$$(\text{Participatory \% complete} \times 20) + (\text{Formative Avg.} \times 40) + (\text{Summative grade} \times 40) = \text{Total \%}$$

As per college guidelines, the grade of an “S” represents a C- or better; the cutoff here is 70%; a grade of “CR” represents a grade of D (between 60-70%), and NC is for grades less than 60%.

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Unit-by-Unit Syllabus

Unit 1: Meet the 12-Bar Blues

Primary goal:

- To become familiar with the basic organization of blues lyrics, rhythm, and harmony, and to be able to recognize both the basic AAB lyric in relation the standard 12-bar harmonic framework.

Secondary Goals:

- Be able to conduct along to music with 4-beat meter.
- Be able to hear harmonic changes in relation to the 12-bar pattern.
- Become familiar with some of the common lyric formulas used in the blues.
- Become familiar with common variants of the AAB lyric organization and 12-bar harmonic patterns.

Readings

- Kernfield & Moore (Grove Encyclopedia): “Blues Progression” (PDF)
- Jeff Todd Titon, “Formulaic Structure in Blues Lyrics” (PDF)
- Blues Form (Wikipedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues#Form>

Assignments

Participatory:

- Compose a four verse blues lyric in accordance with formulaic constraints.

Formative:

- Transcribe and annotate the lyrics to B.B. King’s “How Blue Can You Get”

Unit 2: What is a Blues Song? The Origins of the Commercial Blues

Primary Goal:

- To understand the messy origins of the blues, as well as the musical and commercial landscape in which the first commercial blues songs appeared.

Secondary Goals:

- Becoming familiar with the Vaudeville tradition.
- Wrestling with the problems of “African” origins/roots of the Blues, as well as the blues as “Folk” music.

Readings & Other Information Sources

- Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, Chapters 1 and 4
- PBS Special on Vaudeville
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=15&v=vNTbJi8rc1Q&feature=emb_log_o
- W.C. Handy, *The Father of the Blues* (excerpt) (PDF)
- Kubik on “Sources, Adaptation, and Innovation” (PDF)

Assignments

Participatory:

- Rate a set of songs as to which ones are most “Bluesy”

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Formative:

- Two-page essay: Evaluate the claim that W.C. Handy is the “Father of the Blues”. In what sense is this true, and in what sense is it false(?).

Unit 3: The Blues Take Off in the Roaring 20s

Primary Goal

- To understand the first flourishing of the commercial blues in the work of the classic blues singers of the 1920s, most especially Bessie Smith.

Secondary Goals

- To be able to hear the nuances of the singers’ vocal technique, and be able to describe the differences between singers.
- To have a sense of the developing market for regional and non-mainstream music, most especially “Race” and “Hillbilly” music.

Readings

- Davis, *History of the Blues* Chapters 1 & 2
- Wald, *Escaping the Delta* Chapter 2
- Barker & Taylor, “T.B. Blues” (PDF)
- Miller, *Segregating Sound* Chapters 6 & 7 (PDF)

Assignments

Participatory:

- One-paragraph descriptions of the voices of selected blues singers.

Formative:

- Two-page essay: Recount the ways in which Ralph Peer was involved in the development of Race and Hillbilly music in the 1920s, and how this was related to his business model for monetizing the regional music markets.

Unit 4: The Downhome Blues of Robert Johnson

Primary Goal:

- To situate the music of Robert Johnson: who were the main influences on his songwriting, guitar playing, and singing, as well as to appreciate the finer details of his composition and performance.

Secondary Goals:

- To understand how Delta blues guitarists made use (and re-use) of stock melodic and accompanimental patterns.
- To understand how self-accompanied musicians can manipulate musical form in ways the ensemble musicians cannot.
- To develop tools and vocabulary for documenting and discussing musical influence.
- To understand how the market for “Downhome” music developed in the depression era.

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Unit 4: The Downhome Blues of Robert Johnson

Readings

- Davis, *History of the Blues*, Chapters 3 & 4
- Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, Chapters 5 & 6

Assignments

Participatory:

- Sorting out the song clusters in Robert Johnson's music (a musical treasure hunt)

Formative

- Four-Page Paper: Describe and document the influence of Lonnie Johnson on Robert Johnson's composition, singing, and guitar playing

Unit 5: The Dissemination of The Blues on Records and the Radio

Primary Goal:

- To understand the modes of transmission of popular music from the 1920s through the 1950s, and the influence of technological change on the way music was composed, produced, heard, learned, and spread.

Secondary Goals:

- To have a basic grasp of the development of phonograph, recording, and radio technologies, and their influence on how the Blues was performed and heard.
- To understand the Chicago blues music scene before, during, and immediately after WWII.
- To have a basic understanding of the techniques used in playing the blues harmonica.

Readings

- Wald, "The Record, The Song, and the Radio" (PDF)
- Wald, *Escaping the Delta* Chapter 12
- Palmer, "King Biscuit Time" (PDF)
- Rowe, "The Aristocrat of Records" (PDF)
- London, "Ephemeral Media and Sonny Boy Williamson's 'Little Village'" (PDF)

Assignments

(none)

Unit 6: Muddy Waters Brings the Delta to Chicago and Plugs It In

Primary Goal:

- To understand how Muddy Waters took the Downhome Blues music from the Delta (most especially that of Robert Johnson), and, working with his fellow musicians at Chess Records, transformed it into the iconic Chicago Blues of the 1950s and 1960s.

Secondary Goals:

- To understand the operation of an independent record label after WWII.

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- To understand the basic issues of music copyright in both the case of specific Blues music creators and sellers, as well as in the broader context of musical as a cultural product.

Unit 6: Muddy Waters Brings the Delta to Chicago and Plugs It In Readings

- Davis, *History of the Blues*, Chapter 7
- Willie Dixon, *I Am The Blues* (excerpt, PDF)
- Rowe, “The Aristocrat of Records” (PDF)

Assignments

- Begin work on summative project, a documentation of Robert Johnson’s influence on Muddy Waters.

Unit 7: Did I Forget To Mention Memphis? (apologies to David Byrne)

Primary Goal:

- To take a look at the multiple strands of influence that went into the create of Elvis Presley, which include Country/Bluegrass, Rhythm & Blues, and the Delta blues (Robert Johnson, yet again).

Secondary Goals:

- None

Readings

- Robert Palmer, “Memphis” (PDF)
- Davis, *History of the Blues*, Chapter 8
- Guralnick, “That’s Alright” (PDF)

Assignments

- Continue work RJ/MW project.