

## *The Roots of Jazz: African and Early American Music*

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*Jazz began as a mixture of many types of music. Its origins came about through a blending of the musical cultures of West Africa and Western Europe. In this unit, we will examine some of the precedents for jazz such as traditional African musical practices, early African-American styles, the blues, and ragtime.*

Jazz began through an acculturation of two very diverse musical cultures; the powerful drumming and vocal practices of West Africa, and the traditions of Western European music. West African musical concepts were brought to the New World by slaves and were assimilated with European music.

European music contributed specific styles and forms including church hymns, marches, waltzes, various folk and dance music, theatrical music and light opera, “classical” piano music, and the European theoretical concepts of harmony and form.

Among the African musical characteristics that survived in the New World were vocal styles that included a great freedom of vocal color and pitch bending, a tradition of improvisation, and call and response patterns. African instrumental music contributed vital rhythmic practices, most importantly, syncopation.

African influenced elements of popular music that contributed to early jazz include the banjo music of vaudevillian minstrel shows, Latin American music (which was heard in many Southern port cities such as New Orleans), black church music, the barrelhouse piano styles of tavern musicians, and marches played by brass bands after the American Civil War.

The blues, an integral part of jazz, developed from slave music such as the work song and field holler, and by the sacred spiritual. The blues reflected the problems caused by the ex-slave’s disenfranchisement from mainstream American society.

Near the end of the 19th century, another influential genre emerged – ragtime. This music combined the syncopated rhythms of African music and African-American banjo music with the harmonies and formal patterns of European march and dance music.

The merging of these multiple influences into jazz is difficult to reconstruct. Most of early African-American music is based on an oral tradition and was not written down. In addition, the developments of early African-American music occurred before the phonograph could provide valuable aural documentation. In addition, there was practically no scholarly research done before the 1920s by authors or formal musicologists.

In traditional West African cultures, music plays an important part of everyday life. It is a “functional” social activity where everyone participates; men, women, adults, and children. Music often accompanies daily activities and is often religious and ceremonial. Almost all musical traditions are passed down by

word of mouth, preserving tribal traditions. Music is also used as communication: An important African musical concept is “whatever can be spoken can be played on a musical instrument.”

### *General Characteristics of African music:*

- A fundamental and steady beat (or pulse).
- Complex and syncopated rhythmic patterns.
- Repetition and layering of contrasting rhythmic patterns, often with improvised variations resulting in polyrhythmic textures.
- Melodies based on five-tones also known as pentatonic scales.
- A great use of flexibility of pitch and call and response, especially in vocal music.

All of these musical characteristics can be heard in the recording of “Afa,” a traditional song of the Ewe people who live on the Atlantic coast of Africa. This improvisatory performance starts with a male lead singer – the complex rhythms of the melody that he sings follows the natural rhythms of speech. The tones he sings are based on five pitches (a pentatonic scale). Then, a group of singers join in and respond to his vocal phrases. This constant back and forth is known as call and response. Also notice the subtle sliding from note to note by all of the singers, an example of flexibility of pitch. Several different drummers and percussionists enter playing a variety of hand and stick drums, shakers and cowbells. Each of these musicians play their own repetitive rhythmic pattern but are constantly adding their own improvised variations. This dense polyrhythmic texture is characteristic of most African instrumental ensemble performances. *[Listen to “Afa” by the Ewe People of Ghana and Togo]*

Another demonstration of the unique African characteristic of call and response can be heard in “A Chant from West Africa (Tah-boo)” by American folk singer Ella Jenkins. *[Listen to “A Chant from West Africa (Tah-boo)” by Ella Jenkins]*

When Africans arrived as slaves in the New World, they were denied musical instruments or any type of musical expression. One reason was that most slave owners knew the African concept “*whatever can be spoken can be played on a musical instrument.*” At first, plantation owners didn't allow talking or singing while working in the fields, but by the 17th-century, many slave owners found that singing by these laborers helped production. This singing became an important means of expression and communication for many slaves. The most important musical form that developed is called the *work song*.

The work song is an improvised song sung by a group of field slaves featuring a “call” by the song leader and a “response” by the other members. The rhythms correspond to the rhythms of the task at hand.

An example of a work song, “I’ll Be So Glad When the Sun Goes Down,” was recorded in the 1950s at the Parchman prison farm in Mississippi by American folklorist Alan Lomax (whose father John Lomax was the first to do scholarly studies on the roots of African-American music). This expressive work song accompanies the task of repetitive manual labor. Lomax writes, “The hoes rise and fall together on the main beats. The men sing with savage abandon, forgetting where they are, giving themselves up to the splendid force of cooperative labor.” This song also gives the listener a glimpse at what African-American music may have sounded like before Emancipation. In addition to the obvious call and response patterns and flexibility of pitch, the song leader is “making up” the personalized lyrics as the

song progresses based on the task at hand, his crime, and about a woman he knew before entering prison. *[Listen to “I’ll Be So Glad When the Sun Goes Down” by Ed Young and a group of prisoners in Mississippi]*

During the early 1800s, there was a major movement by Protestant missionaries to Christianize slaves in the South called The Great Awakening. During this period, many slaves were introduced to European harmonies and other musical practices through Protestant hymns. When the first independent black churches were formed, blacks began incorporating African vocal techniques to these European hymns – thus, the birth of the spiritual. Spirituals were songs based on bondage themes from the Bible and individual salvation.

The recording of the spiritual “One of These Days” is a fine example of the blending of these diverse musical cultures. Songs like these are based on European harmonies, chord progressions, and a basic strophic song form, but now with African elements introduced, such as call and response, flexibility of pitch, and performed in an improvisational manner. Many believe that the rhythmic lilt we call swing-feel began with this music based on hand clapping on beats 2 and 4. *[Listen to “One of These Days” by Willis Proctor & the Georgia Sea Island Singers]*

After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which outlawed slavery in America, life did not improve much for most African-Americans, particularly those in the South. There were few professional outlets for black entertainers except for vaudevillian minstrel shows. Minstrel shows featured a variety of theatrical, musical, and comedic performances. Troupes traveled throughout the South, usually performing in tents or on makeshift outdoor stages. The music played at these events featured numerous African-like percussion instruments, a fiddle (violin), sometimes a piano, and the banjo. Derived from the West African instrument the “banjer,” the syncopated rhythms played on a banjo had a strong influence on later African-American styles, including ragtime and early jazz.

The blues first emerged during the post-emancipation period in the rural areas of the South. The blues had direct impact on the earliest jazz bands and as jazz developed, the blues became the “heart of jazz” and the emotional link that ran through all subsequent styles of jazz.

The blues was derived from the work songs from slavery and the spiritual. It is a visceral, personal, and spontaneous expression. The earliest blues styles (called country blues) emerged in the Mississippi delta region and in Eastern Texas by men singing and accompanying themselves on guitar. The lyrics of the early blues songs often spoke of love and of the hardships of life in the South through the use of metaphors and symbolism.

In 1926, folklorist John Lomax was responsible for the first country blues recording. Lomax brought the legendary Texas blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson into the recording studio where he performed a blues song taught to him by another legendary blues performer Huddie Ledbetter (also known as Leadbelly). “Black Snake Moan” with its loose performance and sexual imagery is typical of blues songs performed during the late 19th-century. Many of the symbolic terms used in the early blues became a part of mainstream American slang (terms such as “Mama,” “Baby,” or “Honey,” to signify a lover). Blind Lemon Jefferson strums chords on the guitar and also “responds” to himself with improvised guitar

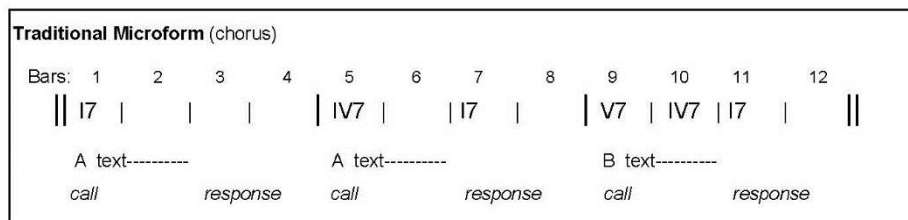
flourishes. A major characteristic of the blues is the AAB poetic form. *[Listen to “Black Snake Moan” by Blind Lemon Jefferson]*

In 1910, the Memphis trumpet player and bandleader W.C. Handy took the blues beyond its previously strictly oral tradition by writing down and eventually publishing his original blues compositions. The “Beale Street Blues,” “Memphis Blues,” and “St. Louis Blues,” became the models for the blues format. A standardized musical form (a 12-bar structure with a now established chord progression) became critical in all subsequent blues styles, including the urban blues styles of “classic” blues, boogie-woogie piano, Chicago blues, rhythm and blues, and in jazz.

In Learning Unit 1, we saw how the 12-bar blues uses the chorus format. This is demonstrated in a recording by T-Bone Walker of the blues classic “Call It Stormy Monday.” There are 4 choruses with a 2-bar introduction.

When you listen to the song, try to count the 4-beat measures. The tempo is quite slow, about 66 beats per minute (slightly faster than 1 second). Below is a diagram of the standard 12-bar blues form. The roman numerals represent chords and harmonies as they occur in specific places in the form. But pay particular attention to how the trumpet, tenor saxophone, piano, and T-Bone Walker’s electric guitar respond to each lyrical phrase in a spontaneous vocal-like manner. Try to listen for the three four bar phrases in each chorus that make up the 12-bar blues form. During T-Bone Walker’s guitar solo, notice how he is bending certain pitches and sometimes sliding around from pitch-to-pitch; this is the African vocal characteristic of flexibility of pitch. *[Listen to “Call It Stormy Monday” by T-Bone Walker]*

#### The 12-Bar Blues



T-Bone Walker is believed to have been the first bluesman to use an amplified acoustic guitar and became the model for early electric guitar players. Walker’s style influenced blues players like B.B. King, Albert King, and John Lee Hooker, and rockers such as Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Jimi Hendrix.

## Ragtime

With its distinct syncopated rhythms, ragtime had a direct impact on the development of early jazz. Ragtime got its name from an un-named newspaper reporter describing the “ragged sound” of this music which he had heard featured at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893. This lively music became incredibly popular, especially in northern cities, and was a favorite genre in hotels, saloons, and brothels.

Although the label was often put indiscriminately on many types of popular music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, what we think of as ragtime is a specific solo piano style developed by many gifted composers and performers who carried the music to a highly artistic level. During the early 20th century, many ragtime pieces were adapted by improvising jazz bands. Later, improvisation, not present in ragtime piano music, began to gain importance as the style was fused with early jazz, and culminated in what was to be known as “stride” piano.

### ***General Characteristics of Ragtime:***

- A strong influence of European “classical” music as it is fully composed and notated with no improvisation or influence of the blues.
- The use of traditional European harmonies.
- Most often in 2/4 meter reflecting its influence from march music.
- The left hand is an almost constant 8th-note alternation of low bass notes and chords emulating banjo rhythms.
- The right hand plays syncopated melodies based on 16th-note subdivisions.
- A standardized sectionalized form, each section being 16-bars in length.

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was the most famous composer and performer of ragtime. Known as the “King of Ragtime,” he composed numerous successful ragtime compositions including the “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), “The Easy Winners” (1901), “The Entertainer” (1902), “Gladiolas Rag” (1907), “Pineapple Rag” (1908), and “Magnetic Rag” (1914). In addition to the sheet music publications of his ragtime compositions, Joplin made numerous piano rolls for player pianos which helped spread the popularity of the music. [\[Listen to “Maple Leaf Rag” by Scott Joplin\]](#)