

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Memphis Minnie, Lead Belly, Bessie Smith, Blind Willie McTell

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## The Blues

**Vocabulary:** *note-bending, guitar, country blues, syncopation, call-and-response, finger-picking, harmonica, lyrics, jukebox*

When people use the term "the blues," it often communicates feeling sad or down. When someone says, "I'm feeling blue," it likely means that person isn't feeling too happy. But although the blues might describe a sad or down feeling, it is believed that the name for the music actually derives from the practice of playing blue notes. Blue notes are notes that "bend" or "slur" when they are played or sung, in a practice that is also called **note-bending**. Blues singers bend the notes with their voices, like a moan. Guitar players bend the strings when they play. Harmonica and other wind instrument players bend the notes by changing the airflow or the shape of their lips. This practice of note-bending creates blue notes, and the blues are full of blue notes.

**Charley Patton (April 1891–1934).** Born in Mississippi, Charley Patton was a singer, songwriter, and blues guitarist. He played guitar as a teenager and developed a country blues style that he learned from an old blues man. Charley expressed deep personal feelings through his music, which made for powerful performances. He was well-known in the Mississippi Delta region among African-American audiences, but he later toured and recorded his music and it spread his fame across America to a much larger audience. It is through his recordings that we can hear the original country blues style from the South. Some of his songs are "Banty Rooster Blues" (1929), "Pea Vine Blues" (1929), and "Mississippi Boweavil Blues" (1929).

## Country Blues

It is likely that the blues began in the plantation fields where slaves worked hard and relieved some of their discomfort through singing. The blues often express misery and despair.

After the slaves were freed, those who could play instruments found work on street corners, in clubs, and in "juke joints," where African Americans gathered to socialize. Early blues musicians played a rural or "country" style of blues music, usually on the **guitar**, piano, or banjo, sung by a solo singer. The music was simple and straightforward. Early blues singers often sang about loneliness or being hungry, brokenhearted, or broke. Their music came to be called **country blues**. "World of Trouble" is a country blues song by Memphis Minnie.

### **World of Trouble**

*Lyrics by Memphis Minnie*

It's a cold, cold morning,  
I was out in the rain and snow.  
It's a cold, cold morning,  
I was out in the rain and snow.  
Yes, in a world of trouble,  
I couldn't find no place to go.

The wind was blowing  
And the rain began to freeze.  
The wind was blowing  
And the rain began to freeze.  
So much of trouble,  
Lord, have mercy on me.

Standing on the corner,  
My friends all was passing by.  
Standing on the corner,  
My friends all was passing by.

**Memphis Minnie (June 3, 1897–1973).** Born Lizzie Douglas in Louisiana but raised in Mississippi, Memphis Minnie was a singer, songwriter, and blues guitar player. She played guitar and banjo as a child and ran away at age thirteen to become a blues singer in Memphis. Her country blues style showed strong rhythm playing and a tough singing voice. Her songs were about love, hard times, and a hard life. Memphis Minnie made many recordings and became well known in the Chicago blues clubs. Some of her songs are "World of Trouble" (1925), "When the Levee Breaks" (1929), "Bumblebee" (1929), "Chickasaw Train Blues" (1934), and "Me and My Chauffer Blues" (1941).

Well, I cried so much,  
Lord, I didn't have no tears to dry.

My brother, he's in trouble,  
My dad, he just broke jail.  
My man, he's in trouble,  
And the law is on his trail.

It's a cold, cold morning,  
And I'm out in the rain and snow.  
Yes, in a world of trouble,  
I had no place to go.

At the turn of the century (1900), as African Americans migrated north, country blues was heard by larger groups of people. From the Mississippi Delta region came Charley Patton, Son House, and Memphis Minnie. From Texas and Louisiana came Blind Lemon Jefferson and Huddie "Lead Belly" William Leadbetter. From Georgia, Blind Willie McTell and Blind Boy Fuller emerged.

Blues musicians often use syncopated rhythms in their music. **Syncopation** is when upbeats (weak beats) are accented (played louder) than the downbeats. Syncopated rhythms create excitement in a song and are very different from European-American rhythms, which tended to accent the downbeat (see the section on syncopation in Lesson 12).

**Blind Lemon Jefferson (July 1897–1929).** Born in Texas, Blind Lemon Jefferson was a singer, songwriter, and blues guitarist. Blind from childhood, he learned to play guitar at an early age and moved to Dallas, where he played on street corners for spare change. He performed in clubs and then traveled throughout the South playing for African-American audiences. He made close to one hundred recordings of his songs in his short life. Blind Lemon's music leaves us with a glimpse of the original country blues from the Texas-Louisiana region. Some of his songs are "Matchbox Blues," "Easy Rider Blues," and "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean."

**Blind Willie McTell (May 5, 1901–1959).** Born in Georgia, Blind Willie McTell was a blind guitar player, singer, and songwriter. He learned to play guitar from his mother when he was still a boy. After leaving home, he performed with traveling shows and carnivals, and later found work playing guitar at house parties and fish fries in Georgia. In this time he developed a syncopated finger-picking guitar style, influenced by ragtime music. After building a reputation as a fine guitar player, he recorded his music from 1927 to 1956. When not recording, Willie often played music on the streets of Atlanta for tips and spare change. Some of his songs are "Statesboro Blues" (1927), "Mama 'Tain't Long for Day" (1927), and "Broke-Down Engine Blues" (1929).

Early blues musicians also used **call-and-response** in their singing (a singer sings out the first line of a song and the guitar or another person's voice answers back). "Good Mornin' Blues," by Lead Belly, offers an example of this call-and-response style of singing in a blues song.

### **Good Mornin' Blues**

*Lyrics by Lead Belly*

Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?  
Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?  
I'm doin' alright, good mornin', how are you?

I lay down last night, turnin' from side to side, oh  
Turnin' from side to side.  
I was not sick but I was just dissatisfied.

When I got up this mornin' with the blues walkin' round my bed, ah  
With the blues walkin' round my bed.  
I wouldn't eat breakfast, blues was all in my bread.

Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?  
Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?  
I'm doin' alright, good mornin', how are you?

Words and music arranged by Huddie Leadbetter.  
Edited and new additional material by Alan Lomax.  
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**Lead Belly (January 29, 1885–1949).** Born Huddie William Ledbetter in Louisiana, Lead Belly was a blues guitar player, singer, and songwriter. He was born on a plantation, then moved with his family to Texas, where he grew up with an interest in music. His first instrument was an accordion, given to him by his uncle. He later learned to play the guitar, and by age twenty-one was making his living as a musician. He also worked as a laborer, picking cotton and working on railroad tracks. He spent seven years in jail before being pardoned after sending the governor a song that asked for the pardon. Record producers John and Alan Lomax discovered Lead Belly and began recording his music while he was still in jail. He went on to record hundreds of songs. Some of them are "Good Night Irene," "John Henry," "Bourgeois Blues," "Midnight Special," and "Linin' Track."



Lead Belly

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### Early Blues Instruments

At the turn of the century (1900), the guitar was the most common blues instrument. Besides strumming a background rhythm, guitar players used their fingers to pick the individual strings in a style called **finger-picking**. Blues musicians also used glass bottle-necks to slide up and down the strings to create note-bending.

Eventually, as other instruments were added, blues musicians formed "jug bands" and played lively, syncopated music on fiddles, guitars, mandolins, jugs, washtub basses, and washboards. Some played **harmonica**, using the instrument to imitate the human voice with bends and slurs.



**W. C. Handy (November 16, 1873–1958).** W. C. Handy, born in Alabama, was a blues singer and songwriter. His first musical experiences were in church, where he was attracted to the spirituals his friends and family sang. Early in life he studied music and played the cornet, and then performed in minstrel shows. In his travels he listened to the "Delta Blues" style of the South, and began composing his own blues music based on that style. His songs became popular, and over time he became known as the Father of the Blues. W. C.'s music helped bring the blues to mainstream audiences. Some of his songs are "Memphis Blues" (1912), "St. Louis Blues" (1914), "Yellow Dog Blues" (1914), and "Beale Street Blues" (1916).

### City Blues

By the 1920s, record companies began recording blues musicians, which helped make the blues more popular across America. At the same time, country blues musicians were moving to the cities and picking up city influences. The rhythms became stronger, louder, more driving. The lyrics became more sophisticated and polished. The musicians added more instruments and formed into groups. In the larger cities, like Chicago and New York, audiences were hearing a new kind of blues music that reflected these changes. W. C. Handy, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Robert Johnson were the most popular "city" blues musicians of this era.

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W. C. Handy

**Robert Johnson (May 8, 1911–1938).** Born in Mississippi, Robert Johnson was a blues guitar player, singer, and songwriter. He learned to play guitar as a teenager, imitating the styles of the old country blues musicians. During the Great Depression he traveled throughout the South, earning his living as an entertainer, performing at juke joints, country suppers, and levee camps. He also performed in the larger cities of St. Louis, Detroit, and Chicago. In his brief career he recorded twenty-nine of his own songs. Robert's music served as important inspiration to future blues and rock 'n' roll musicians. Some of his songs are "Walkin' Blues" (1936), "Come On into My Kitchen" (1936), "Crossroads Blues" (1936), "Ramblin' on My Mind" (1936), and "Sweet Home Chicago" (1936).



Robert Johnson

"St. Louis Blues," written by W. C. Handy, is one of the most famous city blues songs. The lyrics reflect the language style of African Americans of the era.

**St. Louis Blues (abridged)**

*Lyrics by W. C. Handy*

I hate to see de ev'nin' sun go down,  
Hate to see de ev'nin' sun go down,  
Cause ma baby, he done lef dis town.

## Lesson 13. Student Handout continued

Feelin' tomorrow lak Ah feel today,  
Feel tomorrow lak Ah feel today,  
I'll pack my trunk, make ma getaway.  
St. Louis woman wid her diamon' rings  
Pulls dat man roun' by her apron strings.  
'Twant for powder an' for store-bought hair  
De man I love would not gone nowhere.  
Got de St. Louis Blues jes as blue as Ah can be,  
Dat man got a heart lak a rook cast in the sea  
Or else he wouldn't gone so far from me.

*Spoken:* Doggone it!

Been to de Gypsy to get ma fortune tole,  
To de Gypsy done got ma fortune tole,  
'Cause I'm most wile 'bout ma Jelly Roll.  
Gypsy done tole me, "Don't you wear no black."  
Yes she done tole me, "Don't you wear no black."  
Go to St. Louis, you can win him back.  
Help me to Cairo, make St. Louis ma-self.  
Git to Cairo, find my ole friend Jeff.  
Gwine to pin ma-self close to his side.  
If Ah flag his train I sho' can ride.  
I loves dat man lak a schoolboy loves his pie,  
Lak a Kentucky col'nel loves his mint an' rye.  
I'll love ma baby till the day Ah die.

*Spoken:* Doggone it!

In the 1930s and 1940s, as more blues music was recorded and heard on the radio, it became more popular across America. Blues musicians added electric guitars, saxophones, drums, and electric bass to their music. Chicago blues developed in Chicago, and other blues styles were developing on the stages of New York.


**Ma Rainey (April 26, 1886–1939).** Born Gertrude Pridgett in Georgia, Ma Rainey was a blues singer. She was raised in a showbiz family that performed in minstrel shows and vaudeville. She was fourteen years old when she sang on the stage for the first time. When she married "Pa Rainey," she became "Ma Rainey" and the two formed a vaudeville song-and-dance act that toured the country. In their act they performed blues and popular songs. Ma Rainey, came to be known as Mother of the Blues. She recorded over a hundred songs and sang with jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson. Some of her songs are "Save 'Em Dry," "Jelly Bean Blues," and "Countin' the Blues."



## Lesson 13. Student Handout continued

**Bessie Smith (April 15, 1894–1937).** Born Bessie Anthony in Tennessee, Bessie Smith was a blues singer. As a young girl she sang on street corners for nickels and dimes; later she worked with a minstrel show as a dancer. She went on to perform in vaudeville and sang in clubs, tents, and theaters. At the height of her career, she made many recordings and performed in all the major cities, including Chicago and New York, as well as the small country towns of the South where she was raised. Known as the Empress of the Blues, she was a strong-willed woman who made her own decisions about her music and her career. Some of her songs are "Backwater Blues," "I Ain't Got Nobody," "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," and "Lost Your Head Blues."

After the 1940s, the blues entered a new era. With electric instruments and up-tempo rhythms, the music was more danceable and attracted larger audiences. As European-Americans began to play versions of the music, it attracted these audiences as well. Blues was played on **jukeboxes** and in dance halls. The music evolved into rhythm and blues, and rhythm and blues was the foundation for rock 'n' roll.

 CD track #22. Listen to Lead Belly sing and play "Good Mornin' Blues." Hear how he bends the notes with his voice on the word "do" in the sentence "how *do* you do."

*Song:* New words and new music arranged by Huddie Leadbetter. Edited and new additional material by Alan Lomax. TRO copyright © 1959 (renewed) Folkways Music Publishers, New York.  
*Recording:* "Good Mornin' Blues #2" by Lead Belly from the recording entitled *Bourgeois Blues: Lead Belly Legacy*, Vol. 2, SF 40045, provided courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. © 1997. Used by permission.

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**Bonus Challenge: Instrument Families** Read back through this lesson and list all the musical instruments mentioned, then divide them into their instrument family groups: chordophones, idiophones, aerophones, membranophones.

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