

Good research paper on folklore of early blues music

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Introduction

When we think of blues songs, we relate them to misfortunes, break ups or other bad events. This is because blues is known to have originated from a bad period. Delta blues or Mississippi delta blues is a musical form that emerged in early 20th century in Mississippi. However, this music originates from Africa since slaves were captured from Africa and forced to work in plantations in the South. Slaves used music as a way of escape from the torture and oppression they faced. Slaves would sing to their favorite delta blues as they work in the plantations. Slavery and religion seem to have inspired the development and subject of delta blues, as African- Americans turned to religion and music as an escape from the pains of slavery.

Traditions of delta blues

Just like any genre of music, delta blues had its traditions. Delta blues were like oral traditions, and they were passed to other generations by word of mouth from one performer to another. New performers would then add new stuff to the song and make it their own.

Guitar and harmonica were the primary instruments used in delta blues. Since delta blues was a genre of music for people who worked as slaves, they could easily carry guitar and harmonica to the plantation. Even the present blues performers, mainly use acoustic and national resonator guitar. Another tradition associated with delta blues is that they are identified by its highly rhythmic structure accompanied with strong vocals. Delta blues had simple lyrics, which is often repeated throughout the song. The lyrics of delta blues were personal, and they reflected on the struggles of African

Americans in the South.

Mississippi delta blues were about solo performances, which were accompanied by playing guitar or the performance antics. The performers were not skilled when it came to playing guitar since they would deviate from the formal 12-bar structure associated with blues performances. Place of performance of were informal, and performances took place without prior planning. Common venues of performances for delta blues were juke joints, plantations and street corners. “Juke joint” is a term that rose during the era of delta blues, it referred to makeshift structures that were used as venues for social events. Musicians copied songs from people who performed in juke joints. Musicians often left home for life on the road where they performed in different juke joints. Charlie Patton was the first delta blues musician to perform in juke joints, house parties and dances.

Founders of delta blues

Well known founders of delta blues include Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, and Son House among others. These musicians could perform solo or as a group. The performers often performed in camps, plantations, juke joints and rambling shacks. Over time, solo performers formed bands. Delta blue bands could be compared to early jug bands, since they both used guitars, banjos, harmonicas, fiddles and mandolins. Delta blues bands used everyday appliances as a musical instrument. Below are some of the important original delta blues musicians and some mythical characters that have inspired delta blues music.

Son House (Eddie) was a prominent delta blue performer, who was originally

a pastor. His music was influenced by his Baptist gospel beliefs. He was an intensive and emotional performer who was capable of moving crowds. He was influenced by Charlie Patton, but he developed his own distinct style. Son House went on a break from the music scene, but because of his talent researchers tracked him down, and he embarked on a second music career in the mid-1960s.

Willie Brown was a famous delta Blues artist born in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He was a skilled vocalist, and his talent was backed by his impeccable guitar skills. Brown often teamed up with other legends such as Charlie Patton and Eddie Son House in his performances. Eventually, Brown teamed up permanently with Son House before exiting the delta blues scene. Some of his songs include " M & O Blues" and " Future Blues". Brown passed away before the revival of blues in mid 1960s.

Folklore and major characters in delta blues

Robert Johnson is one of the well-known Mississippi Delta Blues performers. As Johnson was growing up, he watched delta blues legends such as Son House and Willie Brown perform. This inspired him to learn instruments. Eventually he ran into his legends, and he wowed them with his skills on various instruments. Because he mastered the instruments on a short period of time, there was a rumor that Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his impeccable skills. " Crossroads" is a famous term used to refer to the place where Johnson made his pact with the devil. According to delta blues folklore, the devil was waiting for Johnson at the river. The story seems unrealistic, but during that time religion and spirituality played a big role,

which is why people stuck with this story. Johnson had a deep tortured voice that evoked emotions from the audience, coupled with his mastery in guitar playing. Johnson developed a refined style of guitar playing that was based on three tunings; standard tuning, open G, and open E. He could also adjust his capo to adjust the key of the song. His guitar skills continue to wow people, yet no one can play guitar like him. He remains a source of inspiration and frustration to many, since nobody has ever grasped his guitar playing techniques.

Stagger Lee is another important character in delta blues folklore. He is a mythical hero in the delta blues folklore. His story is based on events when Lee Shelton, who was a taxi driver and a pimp, shot somebody, and was imprisoned for the rest of his life. Stagger Lee is a name associated with a tough guy. Stagger Lee went ahead and recorded songs in prison about his encounter with the man he shot. He wrote delta blues songs. This myth is an important myth in the history of delta blues as they are associated with people who show courage towards any adversity they face. Stagger Lee as a character has appeared in many blues songs even current ones.

John Henry is a character that has been featured in lots of delta blue songs. He was a steel driver who died while constructing a tunnel. He was a talented “ steel-driver”, such that he got into a competition with a steam powered hammer, only to win the competition and die afterwards. Many delta blues artists recorded songs of John Henry. John Henry’s story was viewed as a symbol of strength and endurance, which is a major subject in delta blues.

Lastly, “ John Hardy” is a delta blues song about a railroad employee who

killed a man during a craps game. John Hardy was charged with murder, and he was hanged. John Hardy was a poor and desperate man who carried two guns, and he killed a man who defeated him in a craps game. He faced his punishment with courage, and this explains why he is a subject in the delta blues.

Mississippi delta blues are characterized by certain intensity through its lyrics, and the way artists attacked the guitar and other instruments. The songs were about common problems of that time such as failed romance, hard life working in the Southern plantations, musings on salvation and damnation among others.

Historians have elaborated that delta blues started as work chants. They are described as sorrow slave songs as they expressed their frustrations. Slavery is a major theme in delta blues. People like John Hardy and John Henry were revered not because they were criminals, because they showed courage towards their adversities. Delta blues had a message of uniting and encouraging African Americans to be strong. The area where delta blues originated from in Mississippi was made up of many plantations. Wealthy white men hired other white men as overseers of the plantations to watch over the slaves who worked in the plantations. The overseers were harsh, and they would harass the slaves yet they did not have food.

Religion and slavery influence on delta blues

Religion is a big part of the delta blues tradition. Basically, the origin blues is Africa, and spirituality is a big part of African culture. The African concept of evil is seen in the delta blues songs. As the freed slaves became more

integrated with the American culture, they began attending church. They brought their musical style of clapping, stomping and high vocals to church which led to the development of a new musical style called Negro spiritualism. Negro spiritualism as a musical style strongly influenced delta blues.

Religion and slavery have greatly influenced folklores of the delta blues. Religion influenced how people viewed Robert Johnson. Just because he learnt how to play guitar, people associated his powers to the devil. Back then people were deeply spiritual, and religion determined their way of thinking. Churches were widespread in Mississippi Delta. Churches provided solace to African Americans as it assured them of a better future. People embraced religion seriously, and they would go for church camps, which were avenues for delta blues performances. The struggle between good and evil is evident in the delta blues songs. African Americans associated illnesses, bad thoughts, and obscenity as evil. Robert Johnson in his “ Me and the Devil Blues” sang about the fact that he felt that evil had power over his actions.

In conclusion, delta blues performers are legends in the African American community. Tales associated with them such as those of John Hardy and Robert Johnson made people view delta blues as spiritual and powerful kind of music. Delta blues acted as vessels of social changed, artists sang about the dilapidating social conditions caused by slavery. Blues also expressed their determination to conquer the difficulties, which is why people leaned on the religion. The history of delta blues is an interesting American folk tradition. Delta blues is deeply rooted in myths, legends and folk tales. Origin

of delta blues is a distinctive folk tradition, which has stood the test of time. Delta blues has inspired current music genres such as rhythm and blues and rock and roll, hence it an important part of American heritage.

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