

# African american music

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AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC Could you imagine African American culture without music? This question is rather rhetorical. Floyd defined African-American music as music that emanates directly from the black experience in America, descending from the calls, cries, hollers, spirituals, ragtime, and blues of the slavery and post-slavery periods. This genre includes jazz, rhythm and blues, black gospel, and all the forms to which these genres have given birth (Floyd, 232). Interestingly, no one knows exactly when the blues or jazz music began. “ When asked about the origin of blues, old-time fiddlers in New Orleans replied, the blues? Ain’t no first blues! The blues always been” (Southern, 332).

Historically, through their indigenous music of their homeland, slaves brought many characteristics of blues, ragtime, and jazz music. Even though those persons could not bring their instruments and familiar possessions from their country, they did bring music in their hearts and minds. For them music served as a way of life in Africa, for celebrations and rituals. For work, pleasure, and freedom in America, the slaves adapted a new kind of music, developing a new culture for themselves by combining parts of the American culture with African culture. The new music of work songs, shouts, hollers, cries, and moans, evolved into the blues, happy and sad songs. The blues led to ragtime, and eventually combined both, blues and ragtime and other characteristics into jazz. “ Some time around the turn of the nineteenth century, a growing body of musicians in New Orleans played a type of music that can only be described as blues” (TedGioia, 13).

As an oral tradition and a distinctive song form that not only served as a musical expression, the blues also served a social expression. Blues evolved

during the 1900s, and reflected the isolation of blacks in American society. Black Americans, forced to live outside the dominant culture in difficult situations, developed their own culture. They found within the difficulties and pain of their experiences the materials for a rich and vital music (Brooks, 51). “ The term ‘ blues,’ was often used to refer to any sad or mournful song. As such, blues stands as one of the most frequently misused terms in music. For a contemporary musician, the term ‘ blues’ refers to a precise twelve-bar form that relies heavily on tonic, dominant, and subdominant harmonies” (Gioia, 13.) The blues vocal line made use of an altered scale in which the third, fifth, and seventh often lowered to a semitone. Vocalists singing these altered tones, called blue notes, would use their voices to whine, moan, speak, or growl, thus expressing the pain of sadness, loneliness, or the good feelings of joy (Southern, 336).

Among the whole plethora of influential and fruitful blues composers and musicians, Muddy Waters (1915-1983) is acknowledged by critics, performers and aficionados as one of the most important blues musicians in the postwar era. After spending the early years of his life as sharecropper in Stovall, Mississippi, Muddy moved to Chicago in 1943, formed his own band, and acquired enormous popularity among black listeners both in the Deep South and in the northern industrial centers (muddywaters. com, 2010). His recording for Chess Records in the early 1950s established the “ Chicago Sound,” an ensemble style that he and other black musicians developed by amplifying the rural blues of Southern black culture. Ten year later, these same recordings inspired a group of British blues musicians (known collectively as the London Rhythm and Blues Revival) who went on to exert a

profound influence on American popular music during 1960s (muddywaters.com, 2010). With the rise of British blues, Waters began performing at folk and rock festivals throughout the United States and in Europe. He subsequently made several records with younger Chicago and British musicians, however, none of these records match the strength of musicianship shown in his early Chess releases which set the standard to this day for postwar ensemble blues.

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