

## African American Music

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The term African American music encompasses a vast array of musical styles. It reflects a mixture of European and West and Central African traits. African American music incorporates an African conceptual approach into a European American musical infrastructure to produce music with a distinctive aesthetic. The combined cultural influences contributed to the development of spirituals, blues, gospel music, jazz, rhythm and blues, soul music, and rap music.

### 19th Century

The music of blacks during slavery integrated their African heritage and the Judeo-Christian ethic. African American musical traditions began to emerge as an identifiable entity in the latter half of the 18th century, with the development of the sacred form of music known as the spiritual. Spirituals were sung in both religious and nonsacred settings. The use of the spiritual reflects the African ideal that while sacred song allows one to communicate with the other world, it may also address matters of the present world.

One combination of song and movement that developed during slavery was known as ring shouts, or shout spirituals. These were a form of musical and religious expression performed primarily "after service" in praise houses or after a formal religious event. The music was call-and-response oriented; accompaniment included singing, hand clapping, foot stamping, and thigh slapping. Shout music came from a body of spirituals and/or hymns used primarily for religious expression. The music was drawn from remnants of African melodies, single lines from hymns or folk spirituals, and songs reflecting significant events in the lives of participants.

Spirituals developed in northern independent black churches during the 18th and 19th centuries. Freedmen utilized the singing style and the practice of mixing movement with the music found in the South, but modified them to suit their specific needs. Spirituals were adapted from other hymnals, taken from folk and popular songs, or were new tunes composed to accompany text. Richard Allen's hymnal, published in 1801, used all of these techniques. Allen modified some hymns by adding supplementary lines, refrain lines, and choruses to ensure full participation of the congregation.

Philadelphia minister Charles Albert Tindley continued the tradition of Richard Allen. By the early 1900s, Tindley wrote more than 45 hymns, including "Stand By Me," "We'll Understand it Better By and By," and "I'll Overcome Someday." In the late 19th century, arranged spirituals appeared. George L. White, a young white teacher at Fisk University, developed a repertoire of classical music and musical forms that originated during slavery but were changed to reflect the different circumstances under which these former slaves lived. He gave his students musical training and formed the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who began touring in 1871. This started a musical tradition in historically black colleges and universities.

Prior to the mid-19th century, European American and African American musical traditions rarely interacted. Some of the exports by whites of African American culture did not present positive images. Minstrels--white performers in blackface--would provide imitations of slave

singing and dancing. The minstrel show developed in the latter half of the 18th century, but did not gain widespread popularity until 1843 when the Virginia Minstrels performed in New York City.

### Rise of the Blues

The blues is rooted in religious songs, field hollers, shouts, work songs, and game songs. The form gained currency during the postbellum era. The subject matter bears similarities to songs found in the Caribbean and Africa, indicating a close kinship to traditional African songs of gossip, complaint, and/or recrimination. As the blues evolved into a musical form, it developed specific characteristics and features, although some blues did not adhere to a strict structural format. By the 1920s, the country blues style of a singer accompanying himself on an acoustic guitar had developed, as exemplified by performers such as Robert Johnson. The Mississippi Delta was the cradle of country blues.

By the 1920s, a style known as classic blues was being performed exclusively by women such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Sippie Wallace. The women singing classic blues initiated a vocal style whose musical qualities capture the essence of the sacred and the secular in the form of blues, jazz, and gospel. Classic blues cross-bred the rural Southern styles long associated with males, with the style of Northern females who tended toward gospel and religious music. Vaudeville was also an influence.

In February 1920, Mamie Smith made the first blues records, on the Okeh label. Later that year, she recorded "Crazy Blues," which sold 75,000 copies in its first month, reaching black and white audiences. Buoyed by the success of these records, Okeh established its "race records" or "race music" division. Mamie Smith represents the entrance of African American women into the world of professional entertainment, and helped bridge the gap between the southern styles that came with the immigrants, and the northern tradition already in place. She was also the first to reach white audiences with music originally from the black community. During the Depression race records, in conjunction with the jukebox, breathed new life into the hard-hit record industry.

As African Americans migrated north in the 1930s and 40s, they carried the blues traditions with them. The country blues became more sophisticated, reflecting the urban lifestyle of most blues musicians. Blues was now performed by small groups, with drums, electric guitar, and bass, along with the harmonica, and occasional piano. These changes modified country blues to a style called rhythm and blues (R&B).

Different geographical areas developed unique R&B styles. The Chicago style was linked directly to the Mississippi Delta through artists such as Muddy Waters, Elmore James, and J. B. Lenoir. Memphis developed a style that is a synthesis of musical influences. B. B. King, a prime example of the Memphis sound, transformed country blues by adding amplified guitar, piano, drums, and horns; the use of ninth chords; rarely using his guitar as a percussive instrument; and singing his lines rather than the half-speak, half-sing style common in the Delta/Chicago tradition.