

Southern Roots: The Blues and R&B

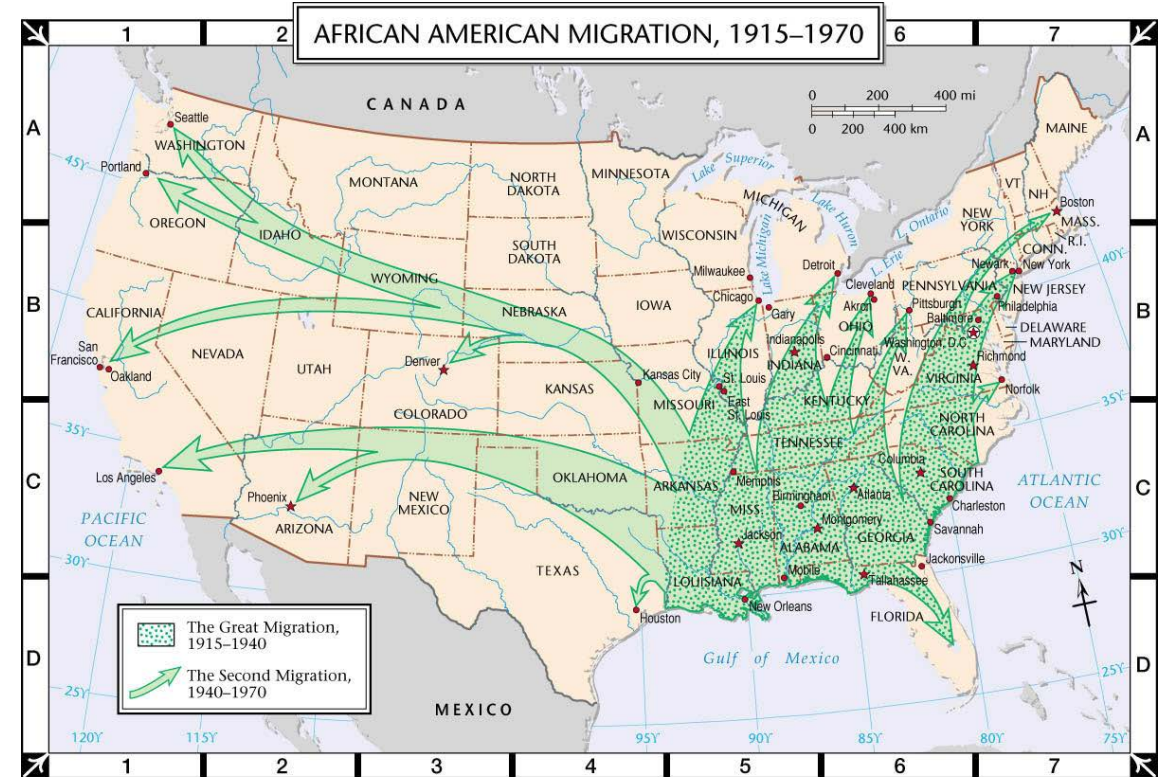
MUSC-21600: The Art of Rock Music

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31 August 2016

Black Popular Music of the Early 20C

- Begins largely outside of mainstream pop
 - Exception: popular blues
- By mid-century, becoming more integrated
 - The Great Migration
- “Race” music (1920s–late 1940s)
 - Popular music marketed to black urban audience
- “Rhythm and Blues” (late 1940s–)
 - Regional black radio (1950s)
 - New R&B indie record labels
 - Sun (Memphis), Chess (Chicago), King (Cincinnati), Atlantic (New York)
 - Bottom line: R&B synthesized southern folk traditions and urban experience



The Blues

- Genre = type of music defined by a shared tradition and set of conventions
 - Conventional categories (higher and lower order)
- Basic traits
 - Form: 12-bar blues, often with aab phrasing
 - Blue notes: lowered scale degrees 3, 7; flat inflections; slides
 - Call and response (between voice and instrument)
 - Vocal quality: rough, gritty
- Popular/classic blues
 - Black female singers
 - Bessie Smith, “Empress of the Blues”
 - Composed sheet music (like in Tin Pan Alley)
 - Texture (= combination and relative hierarchy of timbres)
 - Jazz piano or small combo
 - Tame lyrics, often topical to South
 - Ex. “Back Water Blues” (Bessie Smith, 1927)



Sheet music for "Back Water Blues" (Bessie Smith, 1927). The tempo is marked J=120. The music is in 4/4 time and consists of three lines of a 12-bar blues structure. Each line includes a vocal melody and guitar chords (C, F7, C).

1. When it rains five days and the sky turns dark as night...

when it rains five days and the sky turns dark as night...

there's trou-ble tak - in' place in the low-lands at night...

LABBÉ

The Blues

- Rural/country/Delta blues
 - Black male singers
 - Many from Mississippi Delta
 - Improvised tradition
 - Texture: solo vocals and guitar accompaniment
 - Bottleneck for slides
 - Raw lyrics, often autobiographical
 - Rhythmic vitality
- Robert Johnson (1911–1938)
 - Hugely influential on blues revival in 1960s U.K.
 - Life shrouded in mystery and legend
- “Cross Road Blues” (Robert Johnson, 1936)
 - 12-bar blues (aab lyrics + harmonic changes), but flexible phrase lengths
 - Rhythmic sophistication
 - Emphatic strumming prefigures electric guitar styles in rock
 - Expressive intensity of guitar, voice
 - Ambiguous lyrics with emphatic sense of emotional, spiritual loneliness



Jump Band Music

- Also: jump blues
 - First commercially viable category of R&B
 - Flourished just after WWII
 - Roots in swing band music of 1930s, 1940s
 - Downsized swing band: rhythm section (bass, piano, drums) and saxophone (or brass)
 - Fast tempos, swung/shuffle beat
- “Choo Choo Ch’ Boogie” (Louis Jordan, 1946)
 - Stylistic mix
 - Itinerant train rider (country)
 - 12-bar blues (blues)
 - Texture, shuffle beat (swing band)
 - Boogie-woogie piano (country, jazz)
 - Fast, repeated pattern in left hand (bass notes)



Urban Blues (R&B for the Grown-Ups)

- Muddy Waters: from Mississippi Delta to Chicago
- Chess Records (Chicago) and Willie Dixon
- Chicago (Electric) Blues
 - Texture: small group points toward core rock band
 - Drums, rhythm guitar, piano + electric lead guitar
 - Also amplified harmonica ("blues harp")
 - Lyrics oriented toward black adults
 - Drawing on rural culture of South or urban experience in North
 - Rough-edged emotional directness (growls)
 - Raw, technically unsophisticated sound
 - Example: "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man" (Muddy Waters, 1954)
 - Modification of 12-bar blues: 8 + 4 + 4
 - Lyrics: supernatural sexual prowess drawing on rural black culture of South
- "Hound Dog" (Big Mama Thornton, 1953)
 - Rough, raspy vocal quality
 - Blues-style guitar rhythms, emphasizing blue notes
 - Laid-back rhythmic feel (loose hand-clap backbeat)
 - Lyrics: playful, sexually charged; empowered woman and good-for-nothing man



Latin American Influences

- “Bo Diddley” (Bo Diddley, 1955)
 - Distilled song to its rhythmic essence
 - Dispensed with 12-bar blues form
 - Flexible, irregular phrase lengths
 - No harmonic changes!
 - Influential on early rock, British blues revival
 - Latin American influence
 - Bo Diddley beat
 - 1 a (2) & (3) & 4
 - Or: 3+3+3+(2)+2+2+(2)
 - Derived from clavé beat (3+2, 2+3)
 - Emphasized by maracas
 - Thick, reverb sound
 - Lyrics: play on nursery rhyme “Hush Little Baby”



Doo Wop (R&B for the Kids)

- Doo Wop (vocal harmony groups)
 - Smooth, four-part vocals (lead sings falsetto)
 - One-hit wonders
 - Lo-fi sound: distorted, poorly balanced, ragged recordings
 - Sign of energy and vitality
- “Have Mercy Baby” (Billy Ward and the Dominoes, 1952)
 - 12-bar blues
 - Driving beat
 - Gospel singing style
 - Clyde McPhatter