



The Blues

in the Arkansas Delta

Fun Facts About Helena

Spring 2000

The Blues is a feeling within a person

“Blues actually is around you every day. That’s just a feeling within a person person, you know. You have a hard time and things happen. Hardships between you and your wife, or maybe you and your girlfriend. Downheartedness, that’s all it is, hardship. You express it through your song.”

—Arthur Lee Williams, *Blues Harmonica Player*

Blues music, which comes from the Delta regions of Arkansas and Mississippi, is one of the most influential forms of American song during the 20th century. It is largely responsible for shaping much of America’s popular music, including contemporary rock, jazz, rap, and pop. While people of many backgrounds have contributed to the development of blues music, most historians agree that its origins are found in the struggles by African-Americans for freedom during **slavery** and the forced segregation of the 1800s and 1900s.



Blues music also evolved from African-American religious traditions. When Africans were brought to the United States as slaves, many were forbidden to express their beliefs or speak in their native language. Slaves used Christian music (commonly known as **spirituals**) to express feelings, to relay messages to other slaves, and to tell stories.

Blues music continued to develop during the post-Civil War. Although the Civil War ended slavery, it introduced another system of servitude called **sharecropping** in Arkansas and other southern states. A legal agricultural system, sharecroppers leased land from their former owners in exchange for farming opportunities. Most of the time, the former owners charged high prices for land, crops, and supplies. Ex-slaves and poor whites (who were also involved in sharecropping) were now engaged in a different type of economic slavery. An ex-sharecropper wrote about his experience:



“All right, you start picking cotton and about settling time you done picked out about twenty-five bales of cotton and go in to settle. He’d pop his finger on you when you walk in. [He’d say,] ‘Joe, I sat up all night trying to figure things out. Here you done made twenty-five bales of cotton. I just don’t want to tell you, Joe, hard as you worked. I don’t want to tell you...’ He’s setting at the table and ain’t got nothing on it but money. You think you gonner git it? Out of the question. He’d set there and he’d figure and figure, and when he git through, he’d pop his finger again. [He’d say,] ‘Looka here. If you’d have made one more bale of cotton, this is what you’d of had as your part. Joe, I just ain’t got the heart to tell you. How much you want to borrow?’ He’d loan you about twelve or thirteen hundred dollars. Now this thirteen hundred dollars what he loaning you, you done made that already, but he done popped his finger on it.”

These difficult economic conditions encouraged the unique expressions of hardship found in blues music. Talented blues singers would describe life conditions in a way that was both entertaining and meaningful for the African-American community. Sharecropping was often a topic for such songs; blues singers like Bessie Smith and Blind Lemon expressed the frightful conditions of Jim Crow segregation, oppression, and the need for change. As one person said, “[H]ad it not been for the blues, the black man wouldn’t have been able to survive through all the humiliations and all the various things going on in America . . . he had nothing to fight with but the blues . . . the blues is the facts of life.”

The Musical Forms of the Blues

Blues music is defined in a variety of ways. It is a style of jazz that evolved from southern, African-American **secular** songs. This music features a slow **tempo** played below **pitch**. According to Gilbert Chase’s *America’s Music*, the blues is defined as the following:

“The Blues consists of a (three line) twelve-bar pattern. Each line of the verse corresponds to four measures of the music. To express it in another way, there are two complete melodic statements (corresponding to the verse statement and its repetition), each ending on the **tonic** (or the third or fifth of the tonic **chord**). This is followed by the melodic “response” (corresponding to the third line of the verse), which also ends on the tonic.”

Blues music has a distinct pattern of repetition with one central theme or chorus. The chorus might change from time to time, but the main theme stays the same. For example, the following passage describes a gentleman that is overwhelmed by a woman. The songwriter repeats certain lines for emphasis:



Ethel Mae, Ethel Mae,
Darling, what are you trying to do?
Ethel Mae, Ethel Mae,
Darling, what are you trying to do?
You know well I love you.
Why don’t you let me be.

You’s my all-day study,
You is my midnight dream.
You’s my all-night study,
You is my midnight dream.
And I wonder, Lord, I wonder,
What is this woman done done to me.

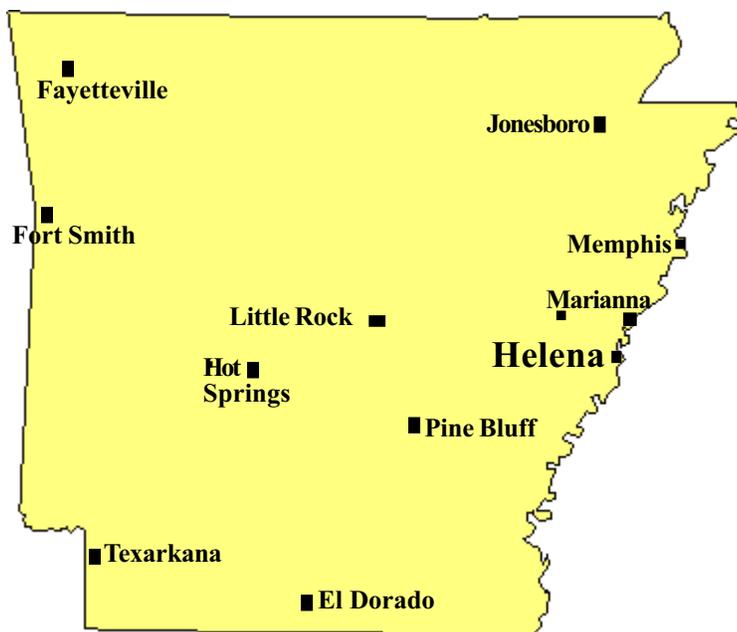
The following example is of a Blues singer speaking up for African-Americans and political exclusion:

In Washington they called me and I went.
I had to be a guest of the President.
He said “Come on in here, mighty glad you come in here.
I want you to help me run the Russians out the Western Hemisphere.”
I said “You can run the country, I’m gonner run the city.”
“Gonner be some changes, though, for the true soul brothers here.”
I had a dream, dream I had last night.
I dreamed I went to the UN and set the whole nation right.



Often used as a source for understanding the life and times of the working class African-American in the Arkansas Delta, blues music is a reflection of the social, economical, and political conditions of a people. It evolves as the people evolve. Blues music has always had a unique sound and pattern of emphasis that directly reflects the unique conditions and perspectives of African-American society in eastern Arkansas. In essence, to understand the blues is to understand the heritage and culture of the African-American man and woman of the Delta.

Arkansas State Map



Conclusion: Helena and the Blues

Helena, Arkansas was considered one of the hottest spots for the blues during the 1930s. Labeled “Lil’ Chicago”, the increase in blues music originating in Helena came from the public’s demand to hear the songs. In late 1941, Sam Anderson established the Helena Broadcasting Company and KFFA radio station. That same year the station began broadcasting the **THE KING BISCUIT TIME** program, which would become its longest running (and most well-known) program. Rice Miller (also known as Sonny Boy Williamson) and Robert Lockwood, Jr. were the **KING BISCUIT ENTERTAINERS**. They advertised King Biscuit Flour for the Interstate Grocery Company.

The success and popularity of **THE KING BISCUIT TIME** radio show sparked the creation of the **King Biscuit Blues Festival** in 1986. Specifically geared to generate tourism for Helena’s business district, it is considered one of the largest free blues music festivals in the nation. Typically, the festival attracts over 100,000 visitors every year. The radio program continues today, broadcasting live from Helena each Wednesday at noon, and is the longest running blues program in the nation.



King Biscuit Flour/Interstate Grocery Company



*Above: Sonny Boy Williamson and his band in a Helena studio. Courtesy Sonny Payne
Below: King Biscuit Time, broadcast live from Helena's Plaza Theater. Courtesy Sonny Payne.*

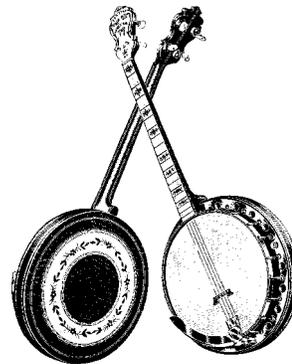
King Biscuit Blues Festival Photos



Live blues music for everyone to enjoy at the King Biscuit Blues Festival!



More music, food and fun at the Kings Biscuit Blues Festival!



Governor Huckabee helps out on bass guitar at the Festival!

