

# Popular music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries

The Blues



# The blues

- # Blues music started in the southern, slave areas of America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was a kind of folk music that expressed the feelings and fears of African-Americans, and the conditions in which they lived.
- # Later, blues music spread to the cities, and became associated with the poor, unfortunate homeless – or, as in many popular lyrics, unfortunate in love!
- # Blues music is raw, full of emotion, typical of its humble roots.
- # Originally, blues songs were performed by a solo singer, usually accompanied by an instrument that could provide simple harmony, such as a banjo, guitar or piano.



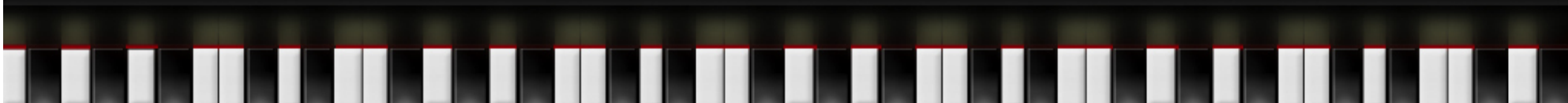
# 12-bar blues

- # The 12-bar blues forms the basic structure upon which blues pieces are composed and performed.
- # It is based on a pattern using three different **chords** with a steady four beats to each bar.
- # In a major scale, chords built on the first, fourth and fifth notes of the scale (I, IV and V) are all **major** chords.
- # These are often known as the **primary chords**, because between them they include all the notes of the scale.



# Activity

- # Try playing the 12-bar blues on a guitar or keyboard.
- # Sometimes **seventh chords**, particularly G7 are used.
- # Try playing the triad, and then adding the 7<sup>th</sup>.
- # Listen to the difference.



# 12-bar blues structure

- # In a 12-bar blues structure, these chords are played in a set order. A typical 12-bar blues chord structure is:

C ///	C ///	C ///	C ///
F ///	F ///	C ///	C ///
G ///	F ///	C ///	C ///

- # The dashes after each chord indicate that the chord is played four times in each bar to a **crotchet** beat.
- # The 12-bar blues is repeated for each **verse**.
- # Repetition is an important feature of popular music, because it meant that untrained composers and performers could quickly and easily learn the music, then **improvise** over the basic structure.



# Blue notes

- # A melodic feature of blues is its use of **blue notes**.
- # These are **chromatic** notes, usually **flats** (lowered by a semitone.)
- # In a C blues scale, the blue notes might be E flat, A flat and B flat.
- # When added to the melody, these blue notes add a bitter quality, particularly when they clash, or are **dissonant** with the harmony.
- # This adds an expressive quality which stems from the origins of the blues.



# Rhythm

- # As we have already learnt, blues music has a steady four-beat rhythm.
- # However, this does not mean every note has to be a crotchet.
- # A characteristic of blue rhythms is the use of syncopation, which adds a spiky 'off-beat' feel to the music.



# Instrumental and vocal techniques

- # Blues lyrics are expressive and emotional.
- # They tell of hardship and bad luck.
- # To add this expression in the music, singers and instrumentalists often *slide* between a blue note and an ordinary note of the scale (e.g. E flat to E natural).
- # This produces an effect similar to sighing in human speech.
- # Singers and instrumentalists may also add **vibrato** to add a 'trembling' emotional quality to the sound.





# Listening activity

- # Listen to 'Careless love blues' sung by Bessie Smith and try to pick out the following features:
  - # Steady four-beat rhythm (noticeable in the piano chords)
  - # An instrumental introduction
  - # A **verse** based on the 12-bar blues
  - # The use of **vibrato** and **slides** in the vocal and instrumental parts
  - # Short melodic **phrases** (sung by Bessie Smith) which are repeated after an instrumental link, helping to build up a memorable melody line
  - # An instrumental link into the second verse, which is the same as the first verse but with slight changes.
- a) What changes occur in the second verse? Why do you think they are there? What effect do they have?
  - b) Identify the two brass instruments used in this piece.



# Blues influences

# Blues became the inspiration for many other popular music styles, either in their use of structure, chords, melodic features, metre and rhythm, or through performers being inspired by, and basing their music and performance techniques and styles on, blues singers and players.

