by Cathy Cassinos-Carr

When you think of “the blues,” what comes to mind? Maybe you’ve seen *The Blues Brothers* and their playful antics. Or maybe you’ve heard the soulful, wailing guitars of B.B. King or Stevie Ray Vaughan, or the wildly passionate harmonica work of Blues Traveler’s John Popper, or Bonnie Raitt’s cool slide guitar. These are all modern-day examples of the blues. But did you know the blues has actually been around for over 100 years?

The roots of the blues run deep and long, and the blues comes in many shades—from “country” to “city” blues, from Texas to Chicago style, and lots of other varieties. Sometimes the blues even gets mixed into other musical styles, such as folk, rock, jazz, and country.

**The Roots of the Blues**

While no one knows exactly when, where, or how the blues began, most historians agree it developed in the late 1800s in the Mississippi Delta region (though it could be heard in other parts of the South as well). The earliest blues probably developed from the music of slaves who were expressing their sorrow, pain, frustration, and loneliness. Many of the first blues may have been single-word phrases repeated again and again, much like field cries, or *hollers* (also called “arhoolies”). Along with hollers there were the slaves’ work songs that were sung to make the time go faster, as well as to synchronize their movements as they worked.

These field hollers and work songs reflected a vocal tradition in certain parts of Africa. Most slaves in the United States were not allowed to play drums or other instruments from Africa, so they had to rely mainly on their voices to express themselves. Spirituals, which were religious folk songs created and performed by both black and white Americans, played a part in the development of the blues as well.

Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, many African Americans in the South enjoyed their first freedom, but found that the tough times were not over. Many were forced to continue to toil on their farms to pay debts, while others took to the road to find work. On top of this, the former slaves were still treated as “second-class” citizens by many whites. Life was hard, and music was a way to help ease the pain.

Musically, the blues is not strictly a product of the slave experience. The blues and other African-American music was a mixture of remembered African styles and the new European music they encountered, including minstrels, Anglo-Scottish ballads, and English and Irish folk songs. Country reels—the “hoedown”-style fiddle tunes we associate with early rural America—were also part of the musical mix that eventually resulted in what we now call “the blues.”
Basic Blues Form

Fortunately, the musical form of the blues is a lot more clear-cut than its historical underpinnings! In early blues, when musicians performed by themselves, blues could be more free form. But as people began to play together, they needed a set form so they could keep together. By the early 1900s, when blues singers and instrumentalists started to perform in groups, a classic three-part lyrical form emerged: AAB. The first two lines of blues lyrics were alike (A, A), and the third was different (B). Here's an example from a blues song by B.B. King, "Everyday I Have the Blues":

A  Everyday, everyday I have the blues.
A  Everyday, everyday I have the blues.
B  When you see me worried, baby, it's you I hate to lose.

Classic blues form often follows a standard harmonic pattern based on the I, IV and V7 chords found in European-based music. With the blues, these three chords are played as 7th chords (the 7th degree of the scale is added to each chord). They are often played in 12 measures (or bars) of four beats each. This is what's known as the 12-bar blues—a term that comes up a lot when you read about the blues.

Blues melodies are based on a blues scale. Derived from the major scale, the blues scale contains certain flatted (lowered) notes, especially the 3rd and 7th degrees of the scale. These flatted notes, often called "blue notes," appear in much African-American music and are an example of the African influence (see scales below).

W.C. Handy: "The Father of the Blues"?

In the early 1900s, when the blues was just emerging as a form of entertainment, the name W.C. (William Christopher) Handy stood out from all the rest. Handy called himself the "Father of the Blues," but he really only helped to popularize the style. He took credit for "discovering" the blues when he heard a Mississippi street musician playing his guitar with a slide in 1903, though we now know that blues was around long before this time.

Though we can't really say that Handy discovered the blues, it can be said that he was one of the new century's most important bandleaders, composers, and musical publishers. Born in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1873, and the son of a minister, Handy was the leader of an orchestra called the Mahara Minstrels. He was also quite an entrepreneur, and through his sheet-music publishing business, he was the most important pioneer to popularize the blues.

But what he's most famous for is the publication of his self-penned "Memphis Blues," which, when published in 1912, set a new precedent for blues music. However, the song that truly jump-started the blues (and has remained probably the most recorded blues tune of all time) is Handy's "St. Louis Blues," published in 1914.

More to Come ...

From this rich tradition, many musicians in coming years would make names for themselves as pioneers in the blues. In the following articles, we'll take a look at some of these blues "legends," as well as other styles of music that were directly influenced by the blues—namely rock 'n' roll.
Activity 1 – Birth of the Blues

ARTICLE WORKSHEET

NAME ______________________________ DATE ________________

1. List some musical styles that pre-date the blues.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. What is an “arhoolie”? 

________________________________________________________________________

3. The music and people of what two continents came together to form the blues?

________________________________________________________________________

4. When did the blues probably emerge? ________________________________________

5. How many lines of lyrics are in most blues verses? ____________________________
   How would you label their form? ____________________________________________

6. How many different chords are most often used for the blues? _________________
   How many measures are played for each verse in the most common blues form?

7. Who proclaimed himself “The Father of the Blues”? ___________________________

________________________________________________________________________

8. W.C. Handy excelled in what three areas?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

9. The most-recorded blues tune, “_____________ Blues,”
   was published in ________________________________.

Permission to photocopy student activity, limited to one school only.