

Blues

The blues originated in the rural South of the United States in the late 1800s, drawing from African traditions, work songs and field hollers, spirituals, and narrative folk ballads. The blues employ a call-and-response pattern, blue notes (often a flatted third and seventh) and other bent pitches, and specific chord progressions. A twelve-bar blues (having twelve measures) is a common form. Rural blues musicians performed either without accompaniment or accompanied themselves on guitar or banjo. As African-Americans migrated to the cities in the 1940s, urban blues developed, using electric guitars and other amplified instruments, and led to the development of Rhythm & Blues and Rock and Roll. A Muddy Waters song is entitled “The Blues Had a Baby and Called It Rock and Roll.”

Blues in Missouri

As blues music grew in popularity in the early 20th century, it became an important genre that was performed throughout rural and urban Missouri. Blues musicians played clubs in St. Louis and Ma Rainey remembered first hearing the blues in 1902 at a St. Louis theater and adopting the blues as her chosen style. W.C. Handy was not from St. Louis, but composed “St. Louis Blues” after hearing on the banks of the Mississippi a St. Louis woman lament that her man “had a heart like a rock cast into the sea.” “St. Louis Blues” became the best known and most recorded blues song ever. Blues music was a major factor in St. Louis jazz, and was a defining influence on Kansas City jazz where Bennie Moten, Jay McShann and Count Basie and the “territory bands” operating out of Kansas City played blues instrumentals and jazz derived from the blues. Big Joe Turner began as a blues shouter in Kansas City and performed from the 1920s to the 1980s, morphing into Rock and Roll in the 1950s, and is especially known for writing “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” Some of the prominent blues musicians who worked in St. Louis were guitarist Albert King (nicknamed “The Velvet Bulldozer” because his day job was driving one), guitarist Robert McCollum (who used a variety of stage names – Ramblin’ Bob, Peetie’s Boy and Prowling Nighthawk, before settling on Robert Nighthawk), guitarist Lonnie Johnson (who moved on to jazz and played with Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong), guitarist and pianist Henry Townsend (who stayed in St. Louis and lived to age 96, receiving a posthumous Grammy Award for his playing on *Last of the Great Mississippi Delta Bluesmen: Live in Dallas*), and Big George Brock (who in his early years worked in the cotton fields and boxed on the weekends, actually once beating Sonny Liston and wrestling a bear). The non-profit National Blues Museum in downtown St. Louis opened in 2016 and celebrates the history and impact of the blues through exhibits and performances.

Blues Bios

Victoria Spivey

Victoria Spivey (1906-1976) was born in Houston but made her fame in Missouri. She personifies the transformation of blues from a rural, African American folk music to a commercial commodity. Spivey was famous for saying, “The Blues are my business.”

She started performing in a family string band led by her father when she was three and played piano at house parties from the age of seven. At the age of 19, Spivey came to St. Louis, at that time known as a center for the new recording industry. There she persuaded Jesse Johnson, a talent scout for Okeh Records, to cut a record of her performing her own composition, “The Black Snake Blues.” The record was a hit, and over the next two years, she made no less than

38 recordings. In the late 1920s, she worked for 15 years as a staff song writer for the St. Louis Music Company, commuting by train from Moberly, Missouri.

By 1929, as the craze for the blues was dying out, she adapted, forming jazz and swing bands that toured the US and Canada. In the 1960s, when the folk and blues revival began, she quickly got on board. Spivey toured blues and folk festivals in Europe and the US, and she and a fan, Len Kunstadt, set up a record company, Spivey Records, that reissued her own songs and promoted all the nearly forgotten blues artists who were her colleagues and friends. She always supported new, upcoming talents as well, including a young Bob Dylan who made his first recording appearance, singing backup vocals on one of Spivey's records.

Marquise Knox

Marquise Knox (born 1991) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and hails from a musical family deeply rooted in the blues. He learned to play the guitar from his grandmother Lillie and played with his uncle Clifford who was a major influence in his life. As a teenager, he was mentored by blues legend and Grammy Award winner Henry Townsend. He has opened for B.B. King, Willie Clayton, Latimore, Kenny Neal, Barbara Carr and Carlos Santana, and performed at festivals around the country and in Europe. Marquise was received enthusiastically by fans at the "Bluesmasters at the Crossroads" series which led to three albums – "Manchild" nominated for a Blues Music Award for Best New Artist Debut, "Here I Am" and "Black & Blue."