Rock & Roll’s Blues Roots Playlist

Background

Blues music arose from African-American communities in the South and has origins in older styles such as work songs, field hollers, and spirituals. This music was informed by the African-American experience, which often relied on oral tradition to pass on knowledge, values, and history. While we associate “the blues” with sadness, blues music expresses a range of emotions; its power comes from artists’ unique stories and sounds. This playlist features three types:

Classic blues, a style first recorded in the 1920s, was influenced jazz and typically featured a solo singer with a pianist and/or small backing band. Many major performers were women. Ma Rainey was one of the first stars, and she coached Bessie Smith, who became known as the “Empress of the Blues.” Later artists including Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton carried the classic blues traditions into the rock & roll era.

Country blues, a style with strong ties to the Mississippi Delta region. This music usually featured a singer accompanying themselves on guitar or another portable instrument. Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues,” for example, has an improvised sound and exhibits call-and-response between voice and guitar. Charley Patton is another example of an artist who recorded songs in country blues style.

Chicago blues, also called electric blues, emerged during the second wave of the Great Migration. Musicians began playing electric instruments, turned up the volume, and put together larger bands. For example, Muddy Waters—who was born in the Mississippi Delta—became famous playing songs like “Got My Mojo Working” in Chicago clubs. Howlin’ Wolf, known for his booming voice and electric guitar playing, also influenced many rock musicians.

Playlist

- Ma Rainey, “Jelly Bean Blues” (1924)
- Bessie Smith, “Back Water Blues” (1927)
- Charley Patton, “Green River Blues” (1930)
- Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues” (1937)
- Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, “Hound Dog” (1952)
- Muddy Waters, “Got My Mojo Working” (1957)
- Howlin’ Wolf, “Spoonful” (1960)

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