

# The Guide

## A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Daniel Kimbro for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

### *It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues*

By Charles Bevel, Lita Gaithers, Randal Myler, Ron Taylor, & Dan Wheatman  
Based on an original idea by Ron Taylor

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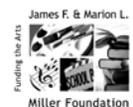
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# About the Creators

**Mississippi Charles Bevel** multi-media artist and lecturer, began his professional career in 1973. From 1973 through 1983 he performed intermittently as a musician, including a self-terminated one-year stint as a recording artist on the A&M record label. During that ten-year period the most meaningful of those years of Mississippi were spent performing as a duo with another songwriter/performer, Chic Streetman. They also worked as an opening act for such artists as Taj Majal, Richie Havens, Hoyt Axton; Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Doc Watson, B.B. King, Third World, Albert King, Gil Scott Heron, etc.

**Ronald James Taylor** (October 16, 1952 – January 16, 2002) was an American actor, singer and writer. He grew up in Galveston, Texas and later moved to New York to attend the American Academy of Dramatic

Arts. After graduating, he began working in musical theater, appearing in *The Wiz* (1977), before getting his break with the 1982 off-Broadway production *Little Shop of Horrors*. Taylor voiced the killer plant Audrey II in the show, which ran for five years and over 2,000 performances. Taylor both created and starred in *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*, which charted the history of blues music, from its African origin to American success. Originally performed at high schools in Denver as a 45-minute piece, the revue was expanded to two hours, played around the country and opened on Broadway in 1999. It was met with critical acclaim, ran

for eight months, and saw Taylor receive two Tony Award nominations. He also had numerous television roles, appearing in *The Simpsons*, *Twin Peaks*, *Ally McBeal* and *L.A. Law*. His performance in the latter, as a singer who performed the American national "The Star-Spangled Banner" at baseball games, led him to perform the anthem at several real-life sporting events. Taylor was married and had one son. He died in January 2002 after suffering a heart attack.

**Randal Myler** has received two Tony Award nominations (Best Musical/Best Book of a Musical) and a Drama Desk nomination (Best Musical Revue) for *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*, which ran at both Lincoln Center and Broadway's Ambassador Theatre. *Love, Janis*, Mr. Myler's musical biography of Janis Joplin,

reached 700 performances at Eric Nederlander's Village Theater, where he is currently staging *Dream a Little Dream: The Mamas and The Papas Musical* with Denny Dougherty. *Lost Highway* received its premiere at the Tony Award-winning Denver Center Theatre Company and then moved to the Mark Taper Forum, the Old Globe and the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. Regional directorial credits: Kennedy Center, Arena Stage, New Victory, B.B. King's in NYC, Geffen Playhouse, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Coconut Grove Playhouse, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Cincinnati Playhouse, Royal George, Virginia Stage, Missouri Rep, Meadow Brook and Bay Street. A 17-season veteran of the Denver Center, Mr. Myler's recent projects include *Touch the Names: Letters to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, *John Fante's 1933*, the musical version of *The Immigrant* and the critically acclaimed Cuban-American play *Union City, New Jersey, Where Are You?*, starring Rosie Perez. His latest work (co-authored with Dan Wheatman) is *Fire on the Mountain: The Music of the Coal Mines*, set to premiere in California this spring, and he will be directing Betty Buckley in the new musical, *Diner Stories*, at the Denver Center this summer.

**Dan Wheatman's** play, *Appalachian Strings*, written with Randy Myler, was recently performed at the Cincinnati Playhouse. He was the composer and musical director for John Irving's *Cider House Rules*. He won a Drama-Logue Award for Musical Direction for *Lost Highway-The Music and Legend of Hank Williams* at the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. He has worked as an actor, musical director, composer, and musician at DCTC in Denver, San Diego Rep, Meadow Brook Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Crossroads Theatre, The Old Globe, Virginia Stage, Arena Stage in DC, and most recently, The New Victory. He toured and recorded with John Denver for seven years, wrote a Christmas song for Kermit the Frog, recorded a 78rpm with R. Crumb and the Good Tone Banjo Boys, played a fiddle duet with Itzack Perlman, and worked as an opening act for Steve Martin for a year. He plays in the band Marley's Ghost, records for Sage Arts, and is the father of five. 🏠

## FEATURED SONGS

- "Come On in My Kitchen"
- "Black Woman"
- "Crawlin' King Snake"
- "Walkin' Blues"
- "The Thrill is Gone"
- "Crossroad Blues"
- "I Can't Stop Loving You"
- "Dangerous Blues"
- "His Eye Is on the Sparrow"
- "Fever"
- "Someone Else is Stepping In"
- "Walking After Midnight"
- "Good-Night Irene"
- "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man"

left to right  
 WC Handy,  
 Charlie Patton,  
 Big Bill Broonzy



## What Makes the Blues the Blues?

by **12-bar blues** The classic structure of blues songs; the scaffolding that is then filled in by the rhythm, melody, and lyrics. Each ‘bar’ is a count of four beats. It takes 12 bars for a verse to complete itself.

If each of the boxes below were divided into 4 beats each, the 12-bar blues would look like this, reading horizontally across the page:

1st bar	2nd bar	3rd bar	4th bar
5th bar	6th bar	7th bar	8th bar
9th bar	10th bar	11th bar	12th bar (turnaround)

Although the 12-bar blues is the structure most widely used, there are examples of 8-bar and even 13-and-a-half bar blues.

**I-IV-V** Many blues songs follow the chord pattern of one-four-five, wherein the I (one) is the tonic, or root, of the major scale. The IV and the V are the fourth and the fifth intervals, respectively. In the 12-bar format from above, I-IV-V could look like this:

I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
V	V	I	I

**AAB** A common lyrical formation in blues music. The first line (A) of a verse is repeated (A) and followed by the final, third line (B). In the 12-bar format:

A	A	(no lyrics)	(no lyrics)
A	A	(no lyrics)	(no lyrics)
B	B	(no lyrics)	(turnaround)

The AAB structure can be applied to these lyrics from Freddie Spruell’s 1928 recording of “Low Down Mississippi Bottom Man”:

As you can see, there is often some variation between the two (A) verses.

**Turnaround** The last bar of the 12-bar progression that ‘finishes up’ the verse and leads into the next section.

**Vocal variation** As opposed to singing the melody lines ‘straight,’ many blues musicians utilize low, husky growls as well as octave-jumps into the high, falsetto range. Grunts, howls, whoops, and hollers are also employed.

**Pitch bending** Used in both vocal and instrumental blues music, pitch bending is the stretching or slackening of a tone into a higher or lower register. The distinct steps between different tones that are found on Western musical scales

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are slurred with pitch bending; a note can be slid into from below or dropped into from above.

**Pentatonic minor scale, or Blues scale** Diatonic scales have 7 tones in them (for example CDEFGAB would be the notes in a C major scale). Pentatonic (pent=5) has five tones in it (CDEGA, or I-II-III-V-VI in a pentatonic major scale). To make the scale minor, flatten the third. To make it a Blues scale, add the blue notes--the flat III (already included), flat V, and flat VII (CEbFGbGBb)

**Blue notes** An important and influential concept in the blues, the blue notes are ‘notes between notes,’ the flattened third, fifth, and seventh of the major scale. Listeners often hear a worried, lonesome, dissonant sound when these notes are played.

**Syncopation** An irregularity in the expected rhythm of a song. A beat is either left out from where the listener’s ear thinks it ‘should’ be or inserted into a space where it ‘shouldn’t’ be. This effect is widely used in traditional African drumming and in the blues, as well as in European music.

**Shuffle rhythm** A train-like rhythm that where certain accents are played just slightly behind the beat to create a groovy, swinging feel.

**Improvisation** Melodic lines or lyrics that are made up on the spot and performed over the basic chordal structure of a song. An important concept in blues, jazz, bluegrass, and other musical genres.

**Lyrics** Blues lyrics are funny, profane, spiritual, sexual, sorrowful, joyful, deep, and lighthearted. In other words, they cover the whole scope of living as a human. Male-female relationships, oppression at the hand of the law, drinking, traveling, eating, mental angst, and the weather all make their appearance in blues music. Often there is a narrator with a story to tell.

**Slide guitar** A method of guitar playing borrowed from the Hawaiian guitar style wherein a metal or glass tube is placed over one of the fretting fingers. The guitar in a sense becomes a fretless instrument as the player slides between notes, creating a cry-like, shimmering vibrato. 🎸

## A Brief History of the Blues

by Daniel  
Kimbro

The Blues is America. It is the alchemical combination of widely differing cultures; a potent mix of the sacred and the profane; the boiling, muggy sweat of late-night, hip-shaking juke joints in the plantation South and the electrified, lonesome, guitar wail in the urban North. It is the spiritual and the transcendent, the physical and the sexual. It is the woman who left you and the man who did you wrong. It is finally having enough money in your pocket to go out on Saturday night in your brand new car. It is the wide, deep, and sometimes dangerous river whose undercurrents have created or influenced almost all genres of modern American music, from jazz to rock to bluegrass to country. It is sorrow and joy, it is Africa and Europe. Without it, this country just wouldn’t sound the same.

Beginning in the early 1600s, slave traders took Africans from their native lands and brought them to America as a source of free, forced labor. If the Africans survived the

Atlantic crossing, they arrived to brutal conditions in a land whose residents perceived them as savages. Families were separated, the work was backbreaking and living situations were sub-par. They brought with them their religions, which they weren’t allowed to practice; their languages, which they couldn’t speak in public; and their music, which became the roots of the blues.

African slaves were captured from many different regions and tribes of the sub-Saharan, western part of Africa. All the tribes’ cultural traditions differed from each other significantly, but these groups also shared musical practices that set them apart from the European musical structures of their captors. Call and response, where a leader calls out a line and a chorus responds to it in unison, was prevalent. Stringed gourd instruments, from which the banjo evolved, were used in many different groups, as were vocal whoops, hollers, and “bent” notes. Singers often improvised melodic lines over the rhythmic

left  
Koko Taylor

base of the song. Some tribes spoke pitch-tone languages, where the same word has different meanings depending on how high or low the word is pronounced. Villages gathered around musicians to celebrate and to mourn. Story tellers passed on the legends of the tribe in a way that combined the sacred world of the gods with the lessons learned in the day-to-day experiences of domestic life. All of these practices contributed to the formation of the blues.

Rhythm was the basis of western African music. It was a conversation, a way to relate and come together. Master drummers imitated the human voice with “talking drums.” Percussion was the foundation on which the embellishments of harmony and melody were laid, a form of communication as important as speaking.

In the antebellum South, drumming was banned by plantation owners when they realized it could be used by slaves to signal a revolt. But music itself could not be stifled. Complex rhythms and tones still beat inside the Africans. In the fields, they sang call and response style “hollers” to keep their spirits up and their bodies moving. They adopted Christianity and gathered together to worship, changing European hymns into “spirituals”—emotion-laden wall-shakers where the entire congregation stomped and clapped along. Some slaves learned how to play instruments and entertained guests of the plantation owners at social functions.



above Jimmy  
Rodgers

The African roots of the slaves ran deep and covered a lot of area. Eventually, the pressure of years of toil, trouble, and singing in groups compounded these widely differing influences together. When elements of European instrumentation and song structure were added into the mix, a recognizable musical form began to appear in the repertoires of rural, black, southern musicians.

The Civil War meant freedom for African Americans, but life was still brutally hard for most former slaves and their children. Throughout the South, plantations instituted the sharecropping system, where black farmers would rent plots from large landowners and work the land year round, under the supervision of white overseers. The landowners were responsible for



selling the crop, and for letting the sharecroppers know at the end of the season either how much they made or how much they owed. Often the sharecroppers would end up deep in debt due to the unpredictable cotton market, dishonest plantation owners, and the high prices at the company store—plantation-run commissaries that held a monopoly on necessary goods.

Though the legal scales of society were still tilted against them, blacks were at least free to move, to marry, and to celebrate. In small shacks called juke joints on the outskirts of town, they would gather on the weekends to dance and drink their troubles away. Traveling musicians, often with just a guitar or a banjo, would get the whole place jumping. Though not respected by church-going, establishment types, these troubadours were well-appreciated at parties and social gatherings.

In the early part of the twentieth century the field hollers, folk spirituals, and party-making songs of the traveling entertainers began to coalesce into a music that honestly expressed the crushing hardship of the times, through images such as jail cells, dishonest lovers, and suicide. Salves to that hardship were also presented, things like leaving town, making love, and watching the evening sun go down.

One of the areas that we think of as a birthplace of the blues is the Mississippi Delta, which is actually a flat, agricultural land north of the river’s true delta. From this cotton-growing plain, with its paralyzing summer heat and muddy bottom-lands, rural musicians developed the intricate guitar picking patterns and basic chord structure of the Delta blues. Guitar players in this country style often used metal or glass slides on the fretting hand to induce a slippery, crying tone from their guitar. Lyrics were delivered as if the singer were a preacher trying to save the souls of his congregation. The

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stories they told dealt with weighty subjects such as God and the Devil just as easily as sexual encounters (often disguised as metaphors) and working all day for nothing.

As the twentieth century began its march into an era marked by massive technological and social changes, the blues was catching on among African Americans. Tent shows traveling throughout the South featured blues musicians on mandolin, guitar, banjo, or harmonica. W.C. Handy, a black orchestra leader and music teacher, helped bring the blues to a wider audience with the publication of compositions for small string orchestras. In New Orleans, musicians took the blues and applied piano, horns, and European musical training to sow the seeds of jazz. The city of St. Louis created its version of the blues by incorporating it with ragtime music. Memphis blues drew on the music of jug bands and vaudeville performers.

White hillbilly music and country blues music at this early phase were closely related. Jimmie Rodgers, one of the fathers of country music, was known “The Blue Yodeler.” He played acoustic guitar-based blues songs intermixed with European alpine yodeling. Bill Monroe, the inventor of bluegrass, credits black musicians who played near his boyhood Kentucky home with teaching him about the blues and giving him a musical edge that made his style stand apart from other similar country acts.

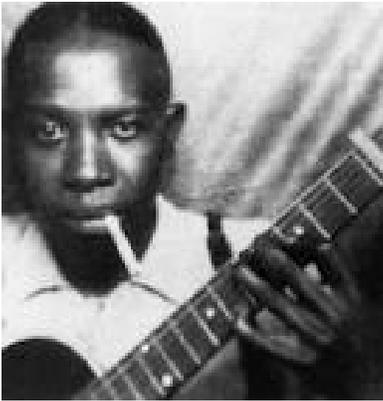
In city cabarets and vaudeville shows, female singers began to develop a style that we now call classic blues. Jazz ensembles backed up performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who at the time weren’t considered blues singers, but would include blues songs in their acts. This urban, female-led style would remain popular throughout the 1920s.

Starting in World War One and stretching into the 1930s, the first wave of America’s Great Migration took place. The rapidly industrializing northern states began to

experience labor shortages at the same time that the sharecropping system was breaking down. Jim Crow laws in the South had created a caste system with blacks on the bottom, subjected to the whims and cruelty of a social system that was determined to draw hard lines between the races. Violent attacks on African Americans by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were on the rise, and blacks had to watch their every step. Many of them, in the face of increasing injustice and inability to make a living, chose to leave behind the institutionalized racism of the South. The welcome from northern working class whites was not always warm and the living conditions could be cramped and cold, but over the years millions of southern blacks bet their futures on the factories of cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York, as well as western destinations like Seattle and Los Angeles.

It was in these cities that black musicians developed the jump blues, a precursor to rhythm and blues. This style was upbeat with danceable, driving rhythms and less emphasis on lyrics. It appealed to newly urban audiences who were ready to shed their down home, country pasts.

Even with the addition of piano and horn sections, it wasn’t always easy to be heard over raucous nightclub



top to bottom  
Robert Johnson,  
Muddy Waters,  
Elmore James  
right  
Bessie Smith



*right*  
BB King

partiers. In the early 1940's, the blues plugged in. Though some guitarists had experimented with amplification in the past, it was Muddy Waters and his Chicago band who took the Delta blues and changed it into something the world had never heard before.

Waters had been a farmhand and juke-joint owner in Clarksdale, Mississippi before moving to Chicago in 1943, during the second wave of the Great Migration, when the second world war would provide another massive wave of African Americans to leave the South. He was a country blues player, but when he plugged in and turned up, the rural-urban bridge was crossed. His cutting, amplified guitar sound appealed to the city dance crowd, while homesick transplants from the country could relate to his wistful, hard-edged lyrics. His harmonica player Little Walter spawned countless imitators. Popular radio shows, records, and tours brought his style to a much wider audience than had ever heard the blues before. The blues was losing its status as a regionally appreciated black folk music, to become an internationally recognized American invention that would change the face of popular music in the next half of the century.

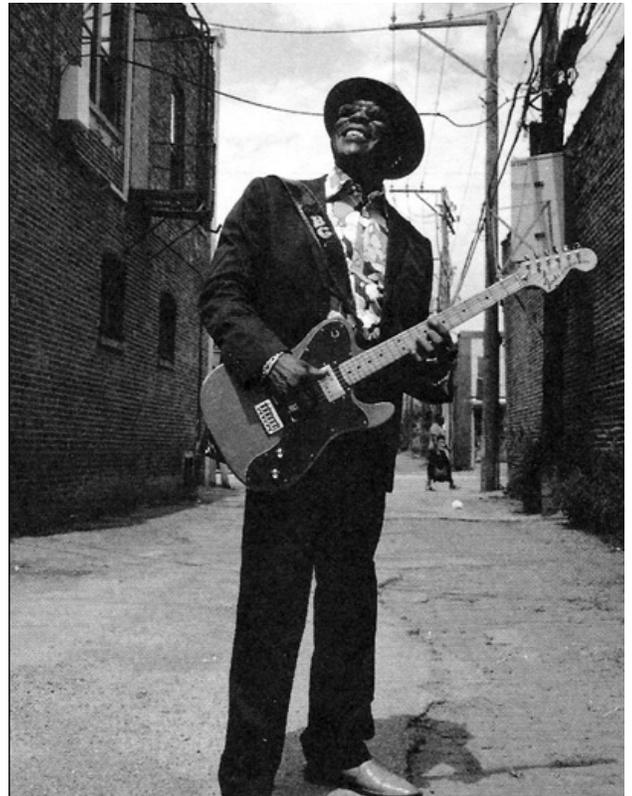
As African Americans urbanized en masse and white audiences began to turn on to this black music (as they had with jazz in the 1920s), a coming together/clashing of cultures was inevitable. White musicians such as Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins adopted the moves, style, and feel of artists such as Ike Turner, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard. Rock and roll was born kicking and screaming.

I've said that playing the blues is like having to be black twice.

Stevie Ray Vaughan missed on both counts, but I never noticed.

—B. B. King

In the 1960's, middle class, urban blacks with a growing awareness of and involvement in the civil rights movement began to see the blues as less relevant to their lives, leaning instead toward the sounds of soul music and rhythm and blues. At the same time, however, the Delta was being rediscovered by British rockers and the burgeoning folk-music scene, who idolized the aging players as the creators of a truly unique and powerful form of music. American rock and roll in the 60's was beginning to fade, just as young Brits were shining the spotlight on Chicago masters such as Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters, and on country pickers like Sleepy John Estes.



Blues was born from the slow burning fire of African American history--the fire of heartbreaking, tedious, brutal situations, bearing down day after day on a resilient, musical, and community-oriented people. It was created by country folks who were loathed and looked down upon by the mainstream. Yet it is the pulse of this nation's heart, the river that is such a rich source of story, soul, and sound. Its subject matter is sometimes gritty, sometimes lowdown. But by listening to it, or better yet, feeling it and letting its rhythms, tones, and images wash over you, it lifts you up. It gives the performer an intensely personal experience to share with their audience, whether that audience is a friend on a porch on a lazy summer Sunday, or an auditorium filled with thousands of hand-clapping fans. It connects us, it causes us to laugh and nod our heads and tap our feet. It makes us realize that we are all floating along the same slow-churning, muddy river of life. When we look over to the next raft and see a weathered man picking out an achingly beautiful blues tune on his guitar, the light changes just a bit and we think about where we are, floating down this slow river, watching the deep red sun go down as the past disappears behind the trees. ■

# Famous Quotes about the Blues

right  
Ma Rainey

“The ‘Blues’ does not mean black music. It means having the courage or audacity to speak to what is in your heart without consulting your head. That human attribute is colorless. But what is now termed the ‘Blues’ has to be placed in the context of the unique way in which this music form was derived. Its African roots cannot be denied, but most of its energy was and continues to be acquired from a people being forced to continuously live on the outer edges of the majority culture in America. From slavery, through legal segregation, to the many present forms of isolation, blacks have developed unique ways of expressing the constant pain and frustration that comes with being perpetually guaranteed. And since music is the easiest way to express matters of the heart, the ‘Blues’ (the pain and the joy, whether directed inwardly or outwardly) is, and will continue to be, the most persistent form of expressing matters of the heart in black culture in America.”

—Mississippi Charles Bevel

Audiences like their blues singers to be miserable.

—Janis Joplin

Blues is easy to play, but hard to feel.

—Jimi Hendrix



White folks hear the blues come out, but they don't know how it got there.

—Ma Rainey

Anybody singing the blues is in a deep pit yelling for help.

—Mahalia Jackson

## Further Reading

[cascadeblues.org](http://cascadeblues.org)

[blues.org](http://blues.org)

[deltabluesmuseum.org](http://deltabluesmuseum.org)

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