Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Blues music 1920 to 1950

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Where blues came from

- Blues grew up in African American communities in the southern USA, especially the Mississippi Delta, in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
- It came from work songs, field hollers and spirituals, and it was passed on by ear rather than written down.
- AQA studies blues from 1920 to 1950: from solo **Delta blues** to electric Chicago blues.

The sound of the blues

- The **12-bar blues** is a chord pattern that repeats: four bars of chord I, two of IV, two of I, then V, IV, I, I.
- **Blue notes** are the flattened third, fifth and seventh. They give blues its sad, bending sound. The blues scale is 1, ♭3, 4, ♭5, 5, ♭7.
- Lyrics often follow an AAB pattern: a line is sung, repeated, then answered by a different line.
- **Call and response**: the singer sings a line, and the guitar or harmonica answers with a short fill.
- Rhythms often swing or shuffle (long-short pairs of notes) over a steady 4/4 beat.

Delta blues and Chicago blues

- **Delta blues** (1920s and 1930s): one singer with an acoustic guitar, sometimes played with a slide (**bottleneck guitar**), and harmonica. The rhythm is free and the feel is raw.
- Chicago blues (1940s and 1950s): musicians who moved north added electric guitar, amplified harmonica, piano, bass and drum kit, playing as a band.
- Other features: **walking bass** (a bass line moving in steps on every beat), improvised solos, boogie-woogie piano.
- Blues led to rhythm and blues, rock and roll and rock, and influenced jazz.

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Key terms

12-bar blues	A repeating 12-bar chord pattern using chords I, IV and V.
Blue note	A flattened third, fifth or seventh, bent for expression.
AAB lyrics	A line sung twice, then answered by a different line.
Call and response	A phrase answered by another phrase, often voice then guitar.
Swing rhythm	Pairs of notes played long-short instead of evenly.
Walking bass	A bass line moving step by step on every beat.
Bottleneck guitar	Guitar played by sliding a glass or metal tube along the strings.
Delta blues	Early acoustic blues from the Mississippi Delta.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where did the blues first develop?
2. What is the usual chord pattern of the 12-bar blues?
3. Which notes are flattened to make blue notes?
4. What is the pattern of most blues lyrics?
5. In blues, what does call and response usually mean?
6. What is a swing rhythm?
7. Which instruments did Chicago blues add to the Delta sound?
8. How is a bottleneck guitar played?

Answers

1. African American communities in the southern USA
2. I, I, I, I, IV, IV, I, I, V, IV, I, I
3. The third, fifth and seventh
4. AAB: a line, the same line again, then an answering line
5. The singer sings a line and the guitar or harmonica answers
6. Pairs of notes played long-short instead of evenly
7. Electric guitar, bass, drum kit and piano in a band
8. By sliding a glass or metal tube along the strings

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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