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**By Dr. Victor Ezquerro**, instructor at Metro Music Masters IntroductionBlues music developed by African-Americans in the United States in the late 1800s, and developed throughout the 1900s. It describes a style of music, a way of presenting musical ideas, different musical cultures that began in the United States and were developed internationally, and an emotion. Blues musicians tend to make love and sadness, build a simple I-IV-V 12-bar chord progression, contains very down-to-earth lyrics, and evolves with time. This blog takes a close look at the meaning, structure, and history of blues music.And before we continue, consider Metro Music Makers if you are interested in piano lessons in Atlanta, vocal instruction, or another instrument. We work with kids through adults, and we bring music instruction to your home.What is the blues?The blues is several things: a feeling, a form of music, and a genre. The blues is considered an American roots musician of the genres born and developed in the United States along with jazz, country, gospel, zydeco, traditional country, and Native American music. Those genres formed the roots for the tree of American music that would eventually bear fruits including rock, R&B, soul, and jazz. Here is a great article that situates American roots music in historical and cultural contexts. Below are several aspects, qualities, and interpretations that help explain and analyze the broad concept of blues music.What is blues form?The musical form (the way a piece of music is organized) of the blues tends to be relatively simple. Probably the most common form is the 12-bar blues, which only uses three chords (I, IV, and V) and repeats after each twelve bars or measures. Although there are many variations, the basic 12-bar blues form usually laid out follows, each measure represented by a number 1-12: [Chorus] Verse 1 [Chorus] Verse 2 [Chorus]. Each verse has four lines of eight notes, making it 64 notes long. The A line is sung during the first four bars and repeated during the second four bars. The B line almost always rhymes with the A line and is sung during the last four bars. Below is an example of a blues verse in AAB form taken from B.B. King's 1969 song, "The Thrill Is Gone":  
[A line, measures 1-4]The thrill is gone baby,  
[B line, measures 5-8]You know you done me wrong baby,  
[A line, measures 9-12]And you'll be sorry someday  
[B line, measures 13-16]It's important to note that although the 12-bar chord progression and the AAB lyric form tend to be the most widely used, there are other forms of the blues.What are the musical characteristics of the blues?Because blues evolved throughout the 20th century, its characteristics are dynamic and dependent on the specific type, phase, or sub-genre of the blues that is considered. However, several common characteristics can be identified.Guitar and vocals are the instruments most frequently heard in blues music. Other instruments commonly heard are piano, harmonica, drums, and bass. Early on, not only were the lyrics of the blues improvised, but the instruments as well. Due to lack of accessibility and money, blues artists often had to make their own instruments. This would give rise to the one-stringed diddley bow, which was played with a bottle neck; the percussive washboard, which was played rhythmically with thimbles; an incredibly basic wind instrument (the jug);the spoons;and the washtub bass. Click the links to see and hear those resourceful and cool inventions!Many of the characteristics found in the blues can be attributed to the influence of African music and culture. The use of improvisation, syncopation (emphasizing off-beat rhythms), social involvement (music during work/play), unique timbres (which can be raspy, twangy, and seem less polished than European music), call and response (one or more musicians playing/sings a musical phrase and another musician or group of musicians answers with a musical phrase), and melodic phrasing (melody phrases that do not follow standard harmonic rules). The blues is also characterized by melancholy, heartbroken, down, guttural, despair, or other gloomy emotions. Although there are happy and uplifting blues songs, blues music is focused around harsh realities of life. Love is also a central subject/motif and loss, being mistreated, and romance gone wrong are frequently sung about.The presentation of the subject matter is expressive, honest, and straightforward. Since the blues is expressing pain, the performer(s) should have and understanding of and be able to communicate that pain. The language used in that communication is simple and down to earth. Lyrics are accessible and tend to avoid embellishment, convolution, picturesque descriptions, or grandiose settings. When blues artists share their truth, both artists and audience feel that deep meaning. Not every blues artist has had a rough upbringing, struggled with poverty, had to do grueling labor, or had their heart broken the way they describe in their music. However, what (good) blues musicians are honest and truthful about is the feeling of having the blues. Genuine blues music isn't paved with fluff.Blues historyBlues music began in the southern United States in the late 19th century, most notably along the Mississippi delta. It was developed by African-Americans who blended European music with African music. The combination of those cultures and sub-cultures created what would become the blues. Early precursors that lent melody for blues music include work songs, field hollers, spirituals, folk ballads, and minstrels.Early blues music (late 1800s early/mid 1900s)Delta blues is a term for early blues that refers to a specific geographic location, the Mississippi Delta. Typically, delta blues was performed with only one vocal part and one guitar (sometimes the piano); often the musician would perform alone by singing and playing at the same time. It was played in rural, informal settlements like a porch or a barn and was not widely distributed through media. Lyrics were centered around things seen in the countryside, trains, manual labor, etc. Out of the relatively few recordings that exist, Delta blues is known to be the earliest form of recorded blues music. It was a solo performance where the musician produced a new type of blues ensemble. Piano, harmonica, and especially drums and bass were frequently seen during performances instead of only a single voice with a guitar. The guitars that were being played were now electric instead of acoustic. Urban blues introduced slightly different subject matter (more city themes), less informal performances (actual records instead of casual get-togethers), increased number of and better-quality recordings, and increased exposure to blues artists and music through several forms of media. This era of the blues would lay the foundation for the creation of other musical genres including rock, funk, soul, and R&B.Following the evolution of the blues, Muddy Waters (1913-1983) was born in Mississippi and became a prominent blues musician in Chicago. With his modest guitar playing and unforgettable voice, Waters was an embodiment of the urban blues that would inspire countless other artists. Two of his more popular songs are Got My Mojo Workin' (1957) and Hoochie Coochie Man (1954). B.B. King (1925-2015), who was mentioned above, was another blues artist who followed the Great Migration from the south to the northern U.S., where he would be regarded as a legendary guitarist because of his unique and soulful solo guitar playing. His song, which was titled after the name he gave his guitars, Lucille, (1968) demonstrates his amazing solo playing and tells the story about how guitar practically saved his life.Blues revival (1960s)For roughly half a century, blues music had remained exclusively within black American culture. But by the 1960s, blacks in America had turned their attention to other genres such as R&B and soul music. The blues was no longer the most popular genre for black Americans. However, beginning in the 1960s, many white musicians in the U.S. and abroad had discovered the blues and began playing it. Although blacks still played the blues, its popularity among white audiences and musicians brought the genre to the foreground again, but in a different cultural contextwhere blues revival.In the 1960s, the blues experienced a resurgence in popularity. Many young people, particularly in the U.S., began listening to and playing the blues. This led to a renewed interest in the genre. One of the key figures in this movement was Eric Clapton, whose album with B.B. King in 2000, The Rolling Stones derived their name from a Muddy Waters song, also covered Johnson's Love In Vain in 1969, and worked frequently with the famous bluesman Howlin' Wolf. Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, The Allman Brothers, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and many of their contemporaries recognized and harnessed the power of the blues. Innumerable musicians would continue to follow suit as time went on. There are many, many examples of how musicians from the 1960s onward have borrowed from, collaborated with, been inspired by, and learned from blues music.Is blues music still around?Yes, blues music still remains alive and well. A term that has been used to describe recent blues music is Americana. Although this term can be used to identify a contemporary version of any U.S. roots music (country, bluegrass, etc.), it also applies to blues. Americana highlights another phase in the evolution of roots music including the blues. The two artists pictured directly above are part of the newest generation of blues artists; Christine Kneifel Ingram on the left and Gary Clark Jr. on the right. Both artists continue the musical traditions of the past while advancing them into a present-day context. With careful listening, it is easy to notice the influence of the blues in music from all around the world today.ConclusionDespite the fact that the blues has humble beginnings and is relatively simple, it has sustained the interest of artists and audiences, spread across the globe, and adapted to changes imposed by time and place. The success of the blues stems from its adaptability, honesty, and universality. Whether its regarded as a feeling, genre, culture, form, and/or all of those things, the blues has been one of America's most important contributions to the world. If you're interested in playing the blues, check our free 3-part video course created by Metro Music Makers. If you need Alpharetta piano lessons or other in-home music instruction for yourself or your family, get in touch.Citations: 1.Words of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples. By Robert F. White. Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780195306949. Edited by Titiyo Adenuga, Richard O. Wright II, and John S. Edwards. 2.Lyrics Just Like the Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm. By Victor Ezquerro. 3.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Bruce VanVleet. 4.American Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 5.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 6.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 7.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 8.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 9.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 10.The Blues: A History and Guide. By Victor Ezquerro. 11.The Blues: A History and Guide. 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Blues music style. What is the structure of the melody in blues music. Typical blues song structure. What is the lyrical structure of most blues music. Blues song structure. What is the lyrical structure of blues music. Blues muziek.