

# BLUES

## *in the Garden*



The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

—Ralph Ellison, *Living With Music: Jazz Writings*

The African American Spiritual, the root of most American music, sings of the quest for freedom. History tells us that the Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, changed the legal status of the African prisoners of the forced labor system in American slavery. In fact, freedom would come much later. From the perspective of these Africans, what The Emancipation Proclamation brought was the solemn reality of a “freed” life still tightly wrapped in oppression. This kind of “freedom” was not the freedom for which they had hoped, fought, and prayed.

The Blues, which is the offspring of The African American Spirituals, sang of the burden of this new “freedom.” Grief, sadness, abandonment, loneliness, pain, and suffering were the solemn reality of life. The newly liberated African was in most cases still viewed and treated as only part human. Their skin's complexion served as their easily identifiable passport. Life was hard. In the midst of this struggle to endure life in a different way, the liberated slaves used their musical instincts and gifts to create a body of music that points us to the reality of life and struggle: the Blues.

*Ain't robbed no train  
 Ain't done no hanging crime  
 Just tell 'em slave to tha blues  
 Even found that man of mine*

*Blues do tell me  
 Do I have to die a slave  
 Do you hear me screamin?  
 You're going to take me to my grave*

*If I could break these chains  
 And let my worried heart go free  
 Well it's too late now  
 The blues have made a slave of me*

*You see me raving  
 You hear me crying  
 Oh Lord  
 This wounded heart of mine*

*Folks I'm agrievin  
 From my head to ma shoes  
 I'm a goodhearted woman  
 But still I'm chained to tha blues  
 —Ma Rainey, "Slave To The Blues"*

As the forerunner to "African American Gospel" music, the Blues at first glance do not seem sacred. Once you take a deeper, longer look, however it is clear the Blues have spiritual tensions.

*Let the day perish on which I was born,  
 and the night that said,  
 A man is conceived.  
 Let that day be darkness!  
 May God above not seek it,  
 nor light shine upon it.  
 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.  
 Let clouds dwell upon it;  
 let the blackness of the day terrify it.  
 Why did I not die at birth,  
 come out from the womb and expire?  
 Why did the knees receive me?  
 Or why the breasts, that I should nurse?*

*For the thing that I fear comes upon me,  
and what I dread befalls me.  
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;  
I have no rest, but trouble comes.*

The lyrics above were composed and sung by one of the great Blues singers of The Bible. They are selected verses in the third chapter of the book of Job, which theologian and jazz pianist Dr. William Edgar, calls a blues book among a few, such as Ecclesiastes (Wisdom). Job's sacred words sing truthfully about the depth of his reality, the purest form of the Blues.

While instances of the Blues can be found throughout the biblical text, some cite the profound words of Jesus on the cross as the greatest blues line uttered: "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) These words reflect deep abandonment, loss, and utter despair. Jesus cries out in agony about His struggle of separation from His Father, even while enduring it.

This great Blues line was a continuation of other lines that Jesus began to sing before reaching Calvary. This song began in the garden of Gethsemane. In the garden, Jesus instructs his disciples to sit while he goes to pray. He takes Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, with Him further into the garden. He knows the last stage of His journey to the cross is very near. Peter, James, and John are the same three disciples who witnessed the glory of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Now Jesus wants these three disciples to also witness his deep anguish and deathly grief. Jesus is troubled and is overcome with a great burden of sorrow.

He communicates these feelings to the three disciples by saying, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me" (Matthew 26:38). Jesus, devoid of sin, was going to experience and suffer His Father's full terrible, vengeful, all-consuming fire of wrath as punishment for our sin. Who can imagine the weight of His fear, terror, and horror of God's dreadful curse?

Jesus continues a little bit further into the garden to where His betrayal will take place a short time later. He falls on His face praying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). This cup is the cup of suffering. Jesus cries out loud with prayers and supplications to the Only One, His Father who could save Him from death.

After a time, Jesus comes back to the three disciples and finds them sleeping. He speaks directly to Peter saying, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:40-41). Jesus knows that his disciples, including these three, will abandon Him later when Judas with his associates in tow comes to Him bearing a betrayer's kiss.