

# INTRODUCTION

The African-American art form known as blues is at the heart of every roots music tributary—jazz, country, rhythm and blues, rock ’n’ roll, through to the contemporary music of today. Its rich history can be charted through the array of artwork that has accompanied the music from album covers to record sleeves and from promotional photographs to show posters, proving that blues music culture is as much a feast for the eyes as it is for the ears.

**B**LUES DID NOT spring fully formed from the fertile imagination of a solitary African-American field hand looking for relaxation after toiling on a plantation from sunup to sundown. It was a blend of the field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and minstrel music prevalent across the South and other parts of the United States. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the syncopated ragtime innovations of Scott Joplin and other composers swept the country, giving the music a more formal framework. New Orleans boasted a cultural diaspora like no other city in the United States, encompassing brass bands, orchestras, and a unique social climate that facilitated the development of jazz.

Orchestra leader W. C. Handy first encountered blues in 1903 when he heard a man singing and fretting his guitar with a knife at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. His mammoth contributions to the genre as composer, arranger, and music publisher would eventually earn him the title “Father of the Blues.”

Although scholars have stringently established boundaries between blues and jazz, there was a time when artificial separations between African-American musical genres did not exist. The climate of the day resulted in black music being universally stereotyped under the umbrella of “race music,” from the classic blues chanteuses of the 1920s to territory bands and the many solo guitarists and pianists who proliferated in the South. Musicians of that era were not confined by barriers, so they performed together in a vast array of different combinations. That led to some memorably

groundbreaking studio collaborations, including one seminal 1925 session that cast a young Louis Armstrong as sideman to Bessie Smith. Conversely, blues guitar virtuoso Lonnie Johnson appeared on an Armstrong recording session a couple of years later.

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Regionally identifiable styles were commonplace during the 1920s and ’30s, from the Mississippi Delta blues of Charley Patton and Robert Johnson to the intricate finger-picking guitar technique that defined the East Coast’s Piedmont school and the rumbling barrelhouse piano tradition that thrived in St. Louis. The same was true in the jazz field, where bandleader Bennie Moten’s blues-oriented Kansas City approach contrasted with the sophisticated sound that Duke Ellington perfected during the Harlem Renaissance.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Great Migration brought hundreds of thousands of African-Americans up from the rural South to the urban North in search of a better life. Musicians were part of that trek northward, and once the transplants settled into their new surroundings, their blues took on a more citified





veneer. This quality defined the extremely popular recordings of prolific blues stars Tampa Red, Big Bill Broonzy, and Leroy Carr.

During the early 1940s, a new generation of innovative guitarists led by jazzman Charlie Christian and his blues counterpart T-Bone Walker plugged into amplifiers, and their flashy lead licks were instantly heard as distinctly as anyone in their respective bands. There would be no turning back as the electric guitar eventually became the instrument most closely associated with the idiom. The years following World War II were relatively prosperous ones, giving rise to a network of nightclubs, theaters, and taverns where the music flourished. On the West Coast, jump blues driven by roaring horn sections predominated. A tight ensemble approach was perfected in Chicago by Muddy Waters and Little Walter, one of the first harpists to use amplification (and easily the most important). Instead of the handful of major labels that once dominated the blues recording field, an invasion of hungry little independent record companies came to claim the lion's share of the postwar rhythm and blues (R&B) market as the fresh new sound spread like wildfire. There were still noticeable regional developments—south Louisiana spawned a lowdown sound during the mid-to-late 1950s that would later become known as swamp blues—but as more and more artists followed the example of B. B. King, it became difficult to pinpoint precisely where a blues musician hailed from just by listening.



ABOVE LEFT: A turn-of-the-century African-American minstrel band in fairly formal attire. One of the first forms of black music to be performed for white audiences; this group's lineup of two banjos, violin, and guitar was well-suited for dancing long into the night. Stringed instruments were portable and thus ideal for performances.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith, in an early publicity photo that was the work of a New York photographer called Elcha. The linchpin of the classic blues movement, Smith recorded prolifically from 1923 to 1933. She died tragically in a car wreck on September 26, 1937, along US Route 61 between Memphis and Clarksdale, Mississippi.

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At the dawn of the 1960s, major music festivals began to present a wide array of African-American performers, finding room for gospel diva Mahalia Jackson as well as rock 'n' roll architect Chuck Berry. These events, attended by thousands of college students and other young people, revitalized the long-defunct careers of many blues greats that had not been heard from for decades, most notably Delta legend Son House, and introduced them to a demographic they could not have dreamed of reaching when they started out in the rural South. This new and relatively well-off audience purchased plenty of blues records but concentrated primarily on acquiring albums rather than the singles that had sustained blues for so long. Some Caucasian converts of a musically inclined nature were inspired to crank up the volume on their amps and let fly with their own high-energy brand of blues-rock, creating a hybrid that forever blurred the lines between the two genres.

*The Art of the Blues* is not intended to be an exhaustive history of the music and its masters. It is instead a tribute

to the visual side of its golden age, when rare and beautiful images abounded that perfectly complemented the epochal music. These artifacts, including record advertisements, posters, and 78 rpm (78s) record labels, were diligently designed, especially during the prewar era. Lavish, color-soaked artwork adorning 1920s sheet music seemed to jump right off the page. During the 1930s, a sleeker, more streamlined look inspired by art deco came into fashion. That great attention to detail faded during the 1940s and '50s, but the period brought its own share of artistic delights, especially in the design of album covers. During the first half of the 1960s, stately portraits of the artists were in vogue for album cover art; near the decade's end, a blast of trippy psychedelia blew into the graphic design arena.

Just like the music itself, the art featured in this book is exceedingly rare and of the highest caliber imaginable. Its appeal is as timeless as it is captivating.

ABOVE LEFT: One of the most adventurous and accomplished blues guitarists to emerge during the 1920s, New Orleans native Lonnie Johnson recorded the mournful "Lonesome Ghost Blues" for Okeh in New York on August 11, 1927. It was later said to have been an influence on Robert Johnson. Lonnie was equally dazzling as a jazz guitarist.

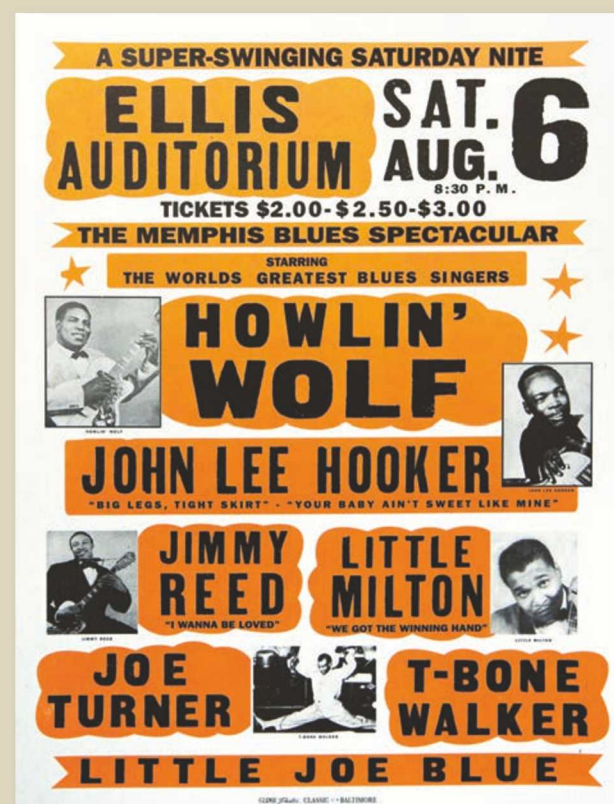




OPPOSITE, ABOVE RIGHT: The front and back covers of Columbia's second Robert Johnson album reissue in 1970 contained an incredible illustration of his November 1936 debut recording session at San Antonio's Gunter Hotel credited to Tom Wilson and the *Daily Planet*. No photograph was then available of the shadowy guitarist, so he was pictured from behind, singing into a microphone.

ABOVE: Marion Post Wolcott's June 1940 photo of Frenchies Bar and Beer Garden allows us a stunning glimpse at a juke joint in Melrose, Louisiana. Spread across the rural South, juke joints were highly informal meeting places where African-Americans gathered to socialize, imbibe, and dance to a non-stop soundtrack of live blues.

RIGHT: An unbelievable lineup commanded the stage of Memphis's Ellis Auditorium on August 6, 1965, headlined by Chicago powerhouse Howlin' Wolf. Boogie man John Lee Hooker was second-billed above his Vee-Jay Records labelmate Jimmy Reed and soul-blues guitarist Little Milton. Big Joe Turner and T-Bone Walker had not had hits in a while, hence their low billing. Baltimore's Globe Poster Printing Corporation did the layout for this eye-catching poster.



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