**How to Write a Blues Song**

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First published: August 16, 2007

*The blues may look and sound simple, but it takes feeling, a gift for wordplay, and an understanding of the rules to write a good blues tune.*

The blues is rooted in the expression of pain. After all, this uniquely American song form was born from the harsh existence of slaves on southern plantations. An amalgam of work songs, field hollers, spirituals and ballads, the blues evolved over the course of a century into the definition of musical lamentation. The blues commemorates the real, not the idealized. It sings of sadness, hardship, and suffering—most frequently at the hands of a man's job or his woman. It also could be bawdy, even humorous. And as the blues traveled northbound on the Mississippi, it influenced a variety of other genres and became a fundamental root of rock and roll.

The formula is deceptively simple. Blues was an oral tradition long before being committed to sheet music. Its practitioners were often not formally trained musicians, and its repetitive schemes reflect the mnemonic qualities required to pass down songs from one generation to another. But don't mistake its simplicity of form as being unsophisticated in expression. Many blues lyrics demonstrate a mastery of *double entendre* and metaphor. To be able to write a compelling story within the particular confines of the blues is an appreciable art in itself. Much like writing bound verse poetry, the key to the blues is about understanding the rules, first to work within them, then to earn the occasional right to break them.

**Musical Characteristics**

There are two defining characteristics of traditional blues. The first is the standard chord progression, based on a I-IV-V pattern (the *tonic*,*subdominant*, and *dominant* tones of the scale). The second is the use of flatted thirds, fifths and sevenths, known as the "blue notes," in the melody. As a result, blues relies heavily on the *pentatonic scale*, and can be written in either a major or minor key. In addition, a blues song can also be defined in terms of the number of measures, or *bars*, that comprise a full stanza. The most easily recognizable form is 12-bar. Also common to the genre are 8-bar and 16-bar schemes.

**Lyrical Characteristics**

Because of the subject matter, the lyrical expression can take on an extremely wide range of forms. The most traditional lyric pattern is based on a narrative call-and-response structure. Taking the form of a three-line rhyme scheme, each stanza repeats the first two lines to form the *call* and concludes with a reply that forms the *response*. There can be any number of stanzas, although three and five are common. A blues song also typically tells a story.

**Putting it All Together**

If we examine a 12-bar blues song with the call-and-response lyric pattern described above, you can see how the music and words work together. Take Robert Johnson's signature tune, *Crossroads Blues*:

(I) *I went to the crossroads*(IV) *Fell down on my knees* (I) (I)  
(IV) *I went to the crossroads*  
(IV) *Fell down on my knees* (I) (I)  
(V) *Asked the Lord above, have mercy now*  
(IV) *Save poor Bob, if you please* (I) (V)

The trick is to take an experience about which you can write. Pick a situation where you felt you were unfairly or badly treated. The blues always works better when you tap into the collective sense of injustice (see Cubs, Chicago, for instance). Do some free writing and then start highlighting salient words and phrases. Listen to some blues standards to get a feel for the rhythm, whether it's slow or up-tempo. Then start fitting your lyrics to the melody, looking for ways to rhyme and repeat. Get a few stanzas written, then revise.

Just remember, blues is as much about feeling as it is about music. You have to put some feeling into it for the song to mean anything. And if you ever get frustrated, take to heart the words of Albert Collins: "Simple music is the hardest music to play, and blues is simple music."