

INTO THE BLUE

REVEALING THE ESSENCE OF A MUSICAL GENRE



EFRAÏM TRUJILLO

Conservatory of Amsterdam, 2019

Research coordinator:
Yaniv Nachum

Advisors:
Professor William Ferris & Professor Ineke Bockting

ABSTRACT

My name is Efraim Trujillo. I graduated at the Conservatory of Amsterdam in 1994. My perception of the blues at that time was a 12-bar tune in swing feel with three basic chords and the use of many harmonic substitutions and turn-arounds. I would use the blues scale and play various bebop licks. I basically adopted the same jazz approach as within any other bebop tune. It was not until the next century that I realized that I had never seriously played Blues.

In this thesis I examine what makes this music blue. In other words: what are the ingredients for the Blues, where did they originate from and how did they develop? And can I become a better musician by doing this research and implementing these techniques in my playing? I feel there is a key element missing in my music that is essential for the bluesy sound. Whereas many of my teachers and colleagues have told me that you need to “listen to recordings, copy the music, get into the mood and vibe,” I feel that is too abstract.

While there is a lot of research available on the history of the Blues, the social context and the lives of many important musicians, most music theory barely comes beyond the basics like the 12-bar form, dominant seventh chords (the harmonic structure), the blues-scale, and the use of the blue notes. These tools are not helping me to sound more bluesy, I still sound like a jazz saxophonist playing a blues song. By using the latest music analyzing techniques, I want to dig deeper into the Blue and find the essentials needed to give my playing the bluesy sound.

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INTRODUCTION

The blues developed out of many different sources. Most importantly the *slave songs*, *work songs*, religious chants and hymns¹ in early Afro American churches and West European folk songs, this combined with rhythms of West African origin. Lyrics were essential, words giving both the performer and the listener relief to withstand the daily struggles of the harsh life in the plantations.

One could argue that without slavery and social injustice in the Southern states of the US, blues would not have existed. Poverty and depravity among the black community contributed to the development of alternative instruments and music-genres. The one-strand and the bottleneck gave the Southern Blues its unique sound that still remains today.

While there is a lot of research available on the history of the Blues, the social context and the lives of many important musicians, most music theory barely comes beyond the basics like the 12-bar form, dominant seventh chords (the harmonic structure), the blues-scale, and the use of the blue notes. These tools are not helping me to sound more bluesy, I still sound like a jazz saxophonist playing a blues song. By using the latest music analyzing techniques, I want to dig deeper *Into the Blue* and find the essentials needed to give my playing the bluesy sound.

As ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax writes in his research book *The Land Where the Blues Began*, and I quote: "Every one of the world-renowned black American genres from ragtime to rap bears the mark of this 'folk' heritage" (p. xiv).

The moody, ambivalent and unresolved sound of the Blues has become a key ingredient for the western music that followed in later years. But the motivation to explore this subject has a social aspect as well. While enjoying the beauty of the Blues it is easy to forget under which circumstances this genre came to life: the tragedies and miseries in people's lives that brought this music into our world. Without slavery and segregation there would be no blues as we know it.

¹ Spirituals.

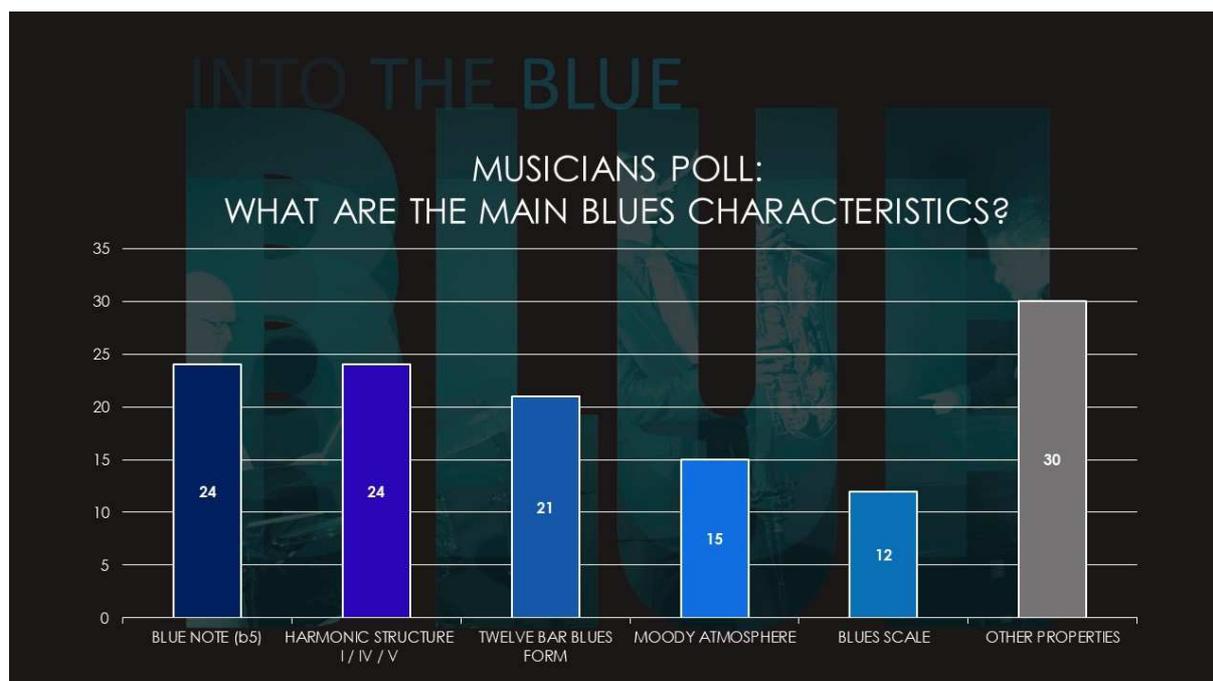
METHODOLOGY

In the first chapters I will describe the possible development of the slave songs into Blues and the circumstances under which it took place. What is the connection between this music genre and the color Blue? In the next chapters I will focus on W.C. Handy. The unique first-hand observations made by composer and musician W.C. Handy, during his journeys through the Mississippi Delta region, will be the starting point for my research. Giles Oakland, author of *The Devil's Music*, credits Handy, who was born shortly after the abolition of slavery, with being the first person to give the blues a podium: "In formalizing the music that was springing up all over the South in a disparate and incoherent way, he helped to give it an identity" (45). While some historians argue that Handy was mainly an imitator, we cannot overlook the importance of his field research. Passing through the Delta he captured the Blues at its birth, at the start of the 20th century, and preserved his observations for later generations with the publication of his autobiography 'Father of the Blues' I will compare his findings and conclusions with the early blues recordings by Southern artists. I am not trying to emphasize the differences between the development of Blues in different regions of the Southern States, on the contrary I am searching for the main ingredients that they all share. The Mississippi Delta is chosen because much research has been done in this region throughout many years. There is a lot of material to work with, there are many early recordings available. I will transcribe and analyze the earliest recordings from the early Delta blues-men Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, Son House, Skip James, Robert Johnson, but as well from their contemporaries Blind Lemon Jefferson and Sylvester Weaver, using Audacity Audio Software 2.1.2. (for recording and the Noise Reduction Plugin) & Cubase Pro Music Production System 8.5 (especially the VariAudio editor, the built-in Equalizer and the Score functions). I will examine the role of the 12-bar form, the blues-scale, the blue note, the chords and the characteristics of a 'blues melody'. The audio analyzing will allow me to go much deeper into detail than would be possible with traditional music transcription. I will explain in chapter 6 what methods I used to isolate the melody with the music software listed above.

A DEFINITION OF THE BLUES

To do research, I first need a definition of the subject. There are many different blues styles. Some styles refer to the location where they originate from: Kansas blues, Chicago blues. And others take their name from the music they are related to. Country blues or Rock blues to name a few. All these styles have their own characteristics, and a lot of research has already been done into those different blues styles. Historical research: what makes Chicago blues unique, and who are the musicians who play in that style? Which period did this music originate from? Since so much has been written on the subject what can we contribute nowadays? But my research question is not what makes these different styles unique but what do they all share. What makes them all 'blues'? What is the common ground that they are all build on? Why do you call music blues and what makes music

bluesy? And finally, can I become a better musician by doing this research? I decided to start off by doing a survey among my musician colleagues. Since they all have played blues and listened to blues for many years their view on the subject could give me a good reference and starting point for research. The participants could pick three choices out of a random list of blues characteristics or add their own. And hereby answering the survey question: 'What are the main blues characteristics?' I used both printed out survey forms as well as the online google forms. A number of 50 participants filled in the form, six answers were invalid, leaving 44 accepted results.



The characteristics mostly named were by far: blue note (b5), twelve bar blues form, harmonic structure I/IV/V, moody atmosphere, blues scale. I decided to disregard 'moody atmosphere' because it would be impossible to prove or disprove a characteristic that cannot be precisely defined. Some music lover might hear a moody atmosphere listening to 'A night at the opera' by Queen and others could have that association with the music of Norah Jones. This leaving the following four key elements to take into comparison:

- 1) **Blue note (b5)**
- 2) **Twelve bar blues form**
- 3) **Harmonic structure I/IV/V**
- 4) **Blues scale**

These are also the main ingredients that I use while playing a blues song. They are mentioned in many music theoretical and historical books. And if you type the term 'blues' in the google taskbar these same results are top listed. But are these elements essential ingredients for the blues?

CHAPTER 1 - THE ORIGIN OF THE BLUES

Who first played the blues, and the precise circumstances of its birth, remains shrouded in mystery. But there can be no doubt where the music emerged - the alluvial plain in the northwest section of the state of Mississippi, created by thousand years of flooding and known as the Mississippi Delta. (Williamson 29).

The Mississippi Delta, with its rich and fertile soil, provided by the Mississippi River, was home to the Choctaw Tribe prior to their deportation to Oklahoma in 1831 (The Indian Removal Act). The European settlers had, until then, stayed close to the river, obstructed by the outstretched wetlands and woods. Those who went deeper into the wilderness often suffered from malaria, typhoid or yellow fever. But the Delta became one of the richest cotton-growing areas after swamps were drained and trees and bushes were stripped away. Slaves brought in from New Orleans were forced to do this harsh and dangerous work. Large numbers of workers were needed on the plantations due to the labor-intensive nature of cotton production. Afro-Americans would soon outnumber whites 5 to 1 in the countryside.

After the Civil War ended in 1865 slaves became sharecroppers.² Their circumstances did not change, however. The promise of freedom turned out to be nothing more than a pretty lie. While white masters became white bosses, segregation and social injustice remained. During the following years, the Southern States issued new legislation to prevent black Americans from improving their social position. Many ended up imprisoned after being convicted of small offences. While white inmates were placed in a prison cell, blacks were forced to work in chain gangs (convict labor).

Convict labor was so widespread and essential to the Southern economy that local sheriffs commonly arrested able-bodied African-Americans and falsely charged them with crimes, forcing them into labor as "convicts" (Gorman 449).

But while whites controlled politics and the economy, they could not prevent the social and cultural growth of the black community. And it was under these severe conditions that America's greatest and most important music genre emerged, created by people without musical education or musical instruments available: *The Blues*

² Sharecropper: A person who enters an agreement with a landowner to farm the land and then pay a portion (share) of the produce as rent (*wiktionary.org*)

The unique mixture of rhythm, harmony and melody played on handcrafted instruments³ gave people means of expression. Social issues were addressed in the so-called *talking blues*. Interaction between the performer and listeners are rooted in oral traditions from earlier times (call and response).⁴ The distinctive structure of the blues evolved through these principles.

The Lord is praised and questioned in melodies based on religious music (Spirituals). Harmony is taken from *folk songs*. Rhythms are deeply rooted in the *work songs* that would keep chained prisoners aligned while executing forced labor. Bended notes (blue notes) give friction to the music.

CHAPTER 2 - FROM BLUE TO BLUES

Synonyms of Blue: depressed, down, sad, unhappy, melancholic.⁵ The term Blue is, in fact, older than the music genre itself.

Francis Grose describes, in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, the meaning of feeling Blue as follows: “to look blue; to be confounded, terrified, or disappointed” (BOB). Grose, born in London, was a man of many crafts. Starting off as a soldier in the British army, he later worked as an antiquary, a draughtsman and lexicographer. In 1785 he published his much-quoted dictionary on slang language, for which he collected his material while cruising London’s nightlife.

The American author Washington Irving, who is best known for his short stories, referred to the Blues in 1807: “He conducted his harangue with a sigh, and I saw he was still under the influence of a whole legion of the blues” (75).

A clear connection between *being* blue and *having* the blues is found in the *Journal of Discourses* by Brigham Young (issued in 1855):

Now suppose my wife and my children would take the same course to please me, and be subject to me, as I am to brother Brigham, would there be any sorrow, or confusion, or broils? No, there would be no sorrow, there would be no blues in my family. I am never blue when I do brother Bighams will; but when I not do it, I begin to grow blue (153).

The *Journal of Discourses* was a collection of religious speeches delivered by leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also referred to as the Mormon Church). This specific quote is part of a speech by Heber C. Kimball delivered in Salt Lake City in 1854.

³ The one-strand on the wall, the jug, washboard, comb with paper, broom on the floor. (see chapter 3.3)

⁴ A musical phrase in which the first and often solo part is answered by a second and often ensemble part (merriam-webster)

⁵ Oxford Dictionaries

It is around this time that slaves in the United States were counted in the first reliable national census. From the data collected by the Census Bureau we learn that the number of slaves in 1850 was 3,204,313. This figure had increased by 1860 to 3,950,528 on a total population of 31,443,321. Slaves made up 12,56% of the total population. If we narrow this down to the state of Mississippi, we see a dramatic difference in ratio. 436,631 slaves were owned by 30,943 slaveholders. The total population was 791,305. An astonishing 55,17% of all inhabitants in Mississippi in 1860 was slave. Only one state had a higher percentage of slaves compared to the total population, another *Cotton State*,⁶ South Carolina.

Slaves would sing while working on the plantation to make life more bearable. This was encouraged by their masters, since it was believed to raise moral and therefore increase production. The songs were sung in the call and response style: one singer raising a question, the others replying, creating togetherness. The music that evolved through this became known as *work songs* and already had some of the characteristics of its offspring, the Blues: the moody, ambivalent and unresolved sound. *Moody* because of the melancholy, sadness and heartache that was spoken out, *ambivalent* because of the double layers within the shared message and *unresolved* because the situation had no perspective for a better future. The days were harsh and long, tomorrow would be the same. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, who became a leading figure in the abolitionist movement,⁷ explains in 1845:

The songs of the slaves represented their sorrows, rather than their joys. Like tears, they were a relief to aching hearts (Douglass 32).

As *work songs* were an expression of discontent, they were delivered in *coded language*⁸ to disguise the true nature of the message. And because it was in the interest of the slaveholder to believe that the slaves were better off under his authority, since it provided justification for the plantation system which relied completely on forced labor, they gladly overlooked, neglected, misread and ignored those messages.

The remark in the olden time was not infrequently made, that slaves were the most contented and happy laborers in the world, and their dancing and singing were referred to in proof of this alleged fact; but it was a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sometimes made those joyful noises (Douglass 32).

The year 1868 marks the end of the slave era. The outcome of the Civil War was a victory for the Northern States and their promise to end slavery was carried out with the

⁶ The Cotton States (the Deep South): Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Louisiana and Mississippi.

⁷ The movement striving to end slavery

⁸ A language consisting of words or phrases with an encoded meaning only known to a selected group

ratification of the 14th Amendment, which granted equal rights to Afro-Americans on July 28 of that year.

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction. (*The Fourteenth Amendment, Section 2*).

But the outcome of the Civil War did not break established patterns in the *Deep South*. The prospect of a better life turned out to be vain hope; especially in the countryside social injustice remained. Slaves were now free but they possessed no accommodation nor did they have means to make a living. The plantations and all their facilities were still owned by the former slaveholders. These farmers needed labor to work the land and the freed slaves (freedmen) needed work. And so, both groups were driven back together. Slaves became sharecroppers and their position stayed vulnerable, as before. They rented all the material needed to farm the land from the landowner and therefore totally depended on his goodwill. His word was law in every conflict. Circumstances would even get worse for the former slaves and their families after new legislation was issued.

Mississippi passed the first and most extreme Black Codes, laws meant to replicate slavery as much as possible. The codes used “vagrancy” laws to control the traffic of black people and punished them for any breach of Old South etiquette. Blacks could not be idle, disorderly, or use “insulting” gestures. Blacks could not own a gun or preach the Gospel without first receiving a special license. Black children were forced to work as “apprentices” for white planters, usually their former masters, until they turned eighteen. Most blatant of all, the state penal codes simply replaced the word “slave” with “freedman;” all the crimes and penalties for slaves were “in full force” for the emancipated (Phillips).

The fertile soil of the Mississippi plains was even more than before a breeding ground for the further development of *slave songs*, *work songs* and *spirituals* into Blues.



Southern U.S. cotton picking (ca. 1920)

CHAPTER 3 - SLAVE SONGS, WORK SONGS & SPIRITUALS

I propose to make a clear distinction between the terms above because in publications these terms are not always used consistently. In my opinion both *work songs* and *spirituals* should be categorized under *slave songs* (songs sung by slaves).

3.1 Work songs

Work songs were sung to make labor more bearable and often have a rhythmic connection to the work they accompany. They are not unique to the South of the U.S. but mostly associated with forced labor in the slave era, with slave transport, and in later years with convict labor (chain gangs). Some of their distinctive qualities are believed to be a result of the limitation of movement while being chained together. This required people to coordinate their actions and the rhythm of music would help to stay in the right pace. One person would sing the first phrase (the call), the others would comment on that (the response). Tempo and mood would depend on the workload and circumstances. The attributes (work tools) used to carry out the specific task gave pulse and groove to the music. The shovel going into the soil or the pick hammer hitting a rock. Words and rhyme

3.2 Spirituals

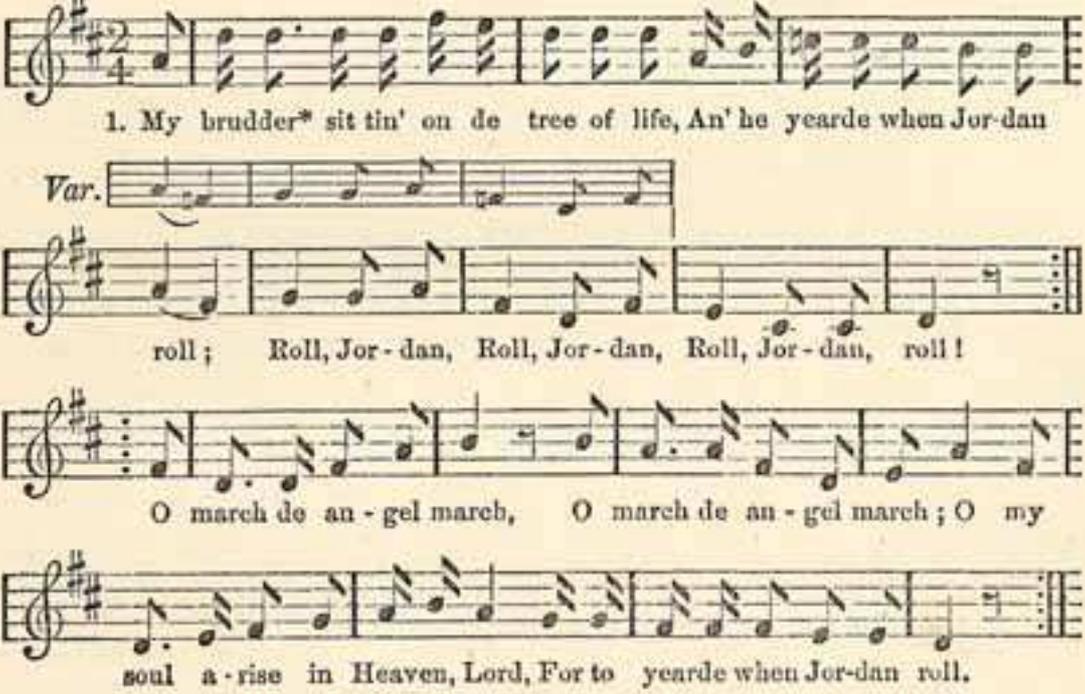
Spirituals, on the other hand, originated from Christian religious music that was sung in church. They were mainly based on psalms and hymns. Church attendance amongst slaves was generally stimulated by the slaveholders, as it was believed that the biblical stories would help keep them more submissive. These also provided a moral ground to the whole concept of slavery.

I will remark with regard to slavery, inasmuch as we believe in the Bible, inasmuch as we believe in the ordinances of God, in the Priesthood and order and decrees of God, we must believe in slavery. This colored race have been subjected to severe curses, which they have in their families and their classes and in their various capacities brought upon themselves. And until the curse is removed by Him who placed it upon them, they must suffer under its consequences; I am not authorized to remove it. I am a firm believer in slavery (Collier 26).

Slaves were usually forbidden to read and write. Because they were taught through biblical stories that good Christianity would lead to salvation, the church became home to faith and hope. A place to gain knowledge and connect through music. Themes from the spiritual songs were transformed into daily events and happenings, modifying lyrics and melodies. And through this, Biblical stories became personal stories. In contrast to the darker work songs, *spirituals* also expressed faith, hope and dreams. They would be sung in church rhythmically accompanied by hand clapping and foot stomping. And were usually constructed in an 8-bar form that could be repeated before progressing into the refrain. They would have a clear beginning and ending. In 1867, for the first time in American history, a large collection of spirituals was published, written down both in music notation and phonetic language/lyrics (*Slave songs of the United States*). These *spirituals* were collected from 1862 on and transcribed and annotated by three abolitionists¹⁰ from the North, William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison. Taking advantage of the chaotic war years in which Southern landowners were forced to flee for safety they were able to spent time on the plantations, hear the slaves sing and notate these songs. The authors write the following about their motivation: “THE musical capacity of the negro race has been recognized for so many years that it is hard to explain why no systematic effort has hitherto been made to collect and preserve their melodies” (Allen i).

¹⁰ The abolitionist movement strived to end slavery before and during the Civil War

1. ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL.



1. My brudder* sit tin' on de tree of life, An' he yearde when Jor-dan
roll; Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, roll!

O march de an-gel march, O march de an-gel march; O my
soul a-rise in Heaven, Lord, For to yearde when Jor-dan roll.

Roll, Jordan Roll, transcribed by Lucy McKim Garrison. (Allan, *Slave songs of the United States* 3)

This particular hymn became very popular among slaves because the biblical river Jordan symbolizes the gateway to freedom as it provides a possible escape by crossing it or *rolling away* with it. It expresses the *longing for freedom* and is therefore a classic example of the use of coded language.

3.3 Call, response and resolution

While work songs and spirituals had a different origin, in later years they would merge and develop into other genres. Around the end of the 19th century call and response would evolve into a more complex form. Call, response (echo) and resolution.¹¹ Due to the ending of slavery and the smaller scale of farming, the music changed from a collective to a more individual way of expressing. Whereas *call & response* were yells that would help motivate each other while working in groups, the role of music shifted more towards reflecting on life after work, making it more a performance than only an experience. Performers would more often sing solo, accompanying themselves, or being accompanied by others with simple rhythm instruments made by home attributes like combs, brooms, washboards and one-string instruments. The singers would improvise lyrics, based on melodies and stories from earlier songs but containing and discussing daily events. The call would be repeated, creating an echo. This would give the singer more time to think of the resolution. Through this way the blues form arose. One section for the call, the next

¹¹ Call and response would still be heard in the chain gangs during forced labor

section for the echo and the last section for the resolution. Never was this music transcribed, written down or recorded. How it sounded can therefore only be reconstructed using similar examples from later dates or by analyzing the testimony of first-hand witnesses.

CHAPTER 4 – THE FATHER OF THE BLUES

W.C. Handy (1873, Florence, Alabama) was, from an early age on, interested in music. But born the son of a preacher man it was out of the question to play or sing music for any other reason than to worship, serve and obey the Lord. At school being asked about his future plans he speaks out the ambition to become a musician. His father is not pleased.

That evening my father calmly preached my funeral. ‘Son’, he said, ‘I’d rather see you in a hearse. I’d rather follow you to the graveyard than to hear that you had become a musician’ (Handy 11).

But that warning does not keep him from purchasing a trumpet and continuing studying and playing music throughout his school years.

In 1892 Handy gets the opportunity to become a teacher at a Birmingham city school. But when he finds out that the position pays ‘*less than twenty-five dollars a month*’ (Handy 22), he quickly changes his plans and takes a job at the Howard and Harrison Pipe Works for a better pay. In the meantime, he is getting involved in the Birmingham music scene playing trumpet with a choir and teaching music notation. When, due to an economic crisis, his wages are cut in half he struggles to survive combining short term jobs with low payed gigs.¹²

In 1896 his luck turns as he is invited to join the Mahara’s Minstrel Men. Minstrel¹³ shows are popular in the U.S. at the end of the 19th century and the band tours intensively throughout the country and even visits Cuba. Starting off as a cornet player he later also works with the band as bass violin player and arranger. After working for many years in the minstrel shows orchestra under white management, he decides to become a bandleader himself. He forms ‘Handy’s Orchestra of Memphis’. It takes some time and changes in the lineup before the band can compete with the other bands that work in the clubs around Beale Street. But thanks to Handy’s arranging skills the band is able to create its own sound. They mostly play for white audiences although not always. “We played for

¹² ‘A single performance by a musician or group of musicians’ (Cambridge Dictionary)

¹³ ‘A member of a band of entertainers with blackened faces who performed songs and music ostensibly of black American origin’ (Wikipedia, November 3,2018)

colored folks too” (Handy 97). As one of the very few black bandleaders with commercial success his star quickly rises. He seems to know exactly what the audience wants to hear. ‘We dusted of the old number that I had written under the title of Yellow Dog Rag and republished it as Yellow Dog Blues’ (Handy 198). After establishing his own publishing company¹⁴ Handy published work by authors like William Grant Still and Fletcher Henderson alongside his own compositions and arrangements. In this position he played a huge role in the emancipation of black composers and artists.

4.1 Memphis Blues

W.C. Handy became publicly known as the ‘Father of the Blues’ after composing and publishing the first commercially successful blues-song in 1912 (*Memphis Blues*).

It was not the first blues to be published, Anthony Maggio already published a 12-bar blues in 1908¹⁵, so did others in the years that followed. But, as Handy explains in his autobiography ‘Father of the Blues’, although he was not the first to compose & publish blues-songs, he was the most successful in doing so. “My part in their history was to introduce this, the new ‘blues’ form to the general public” (Handy 99). *Memphis Blues* was originally written under another title¹⁶ and was advertised as a Southern Rag. (Ragtime). For commercial reasons he changed the name to *Memphis Blues*. That turned out to be a smart decision as the song became a huge success. 50.000 copies of sheet-music were sold in the first year¹⁷ alone and the song was recorded by many artists. Unfortunately, he had already sold the publishing right before the song became popular. “I saw the song that I had sold for fifty dollars become a tremendous hit and a gold mine for the new owner” (Handy 113). The ingredients he used to compose were adopted from the works of other artists. Therefore, some historians see Handy more as an observer and adaptor than a creator. His songs were “vaudeville blues, sophisticated imitations of the folk blues that Handy had heard down home” (Titon 23). “W.C. Handy [...] had no intentions of composing and publishing blues when he arrived in the Delta in 1903”¹⁸ But we must keep in mind that during the early development of the Blues imitating was the only way to preserve it, as there was no other way to capture the music. And it has always stayed a proven method. As the harmonica player Arthur Lee Williams describes in *Blues from the Delta*: “you may pick out a verse from some other song and switch it around a little bit” (Ferris 57).

Many indications that Handy got his inspiration to write blues in the Mississippi Delta come from his own autobiography. It also reveals that he was not so much motivated by artistic reasons to become ‘The father of the blues.’ Instead he saw the potential of this new music genre and the business opportunities as he explains in the following passages:

¹⁴ The Pace & Handy Music Company (together with Harry Pace)

¹⁵ I got the blues

¹⁶ *Memphis Blues*’ original title was *Mr. Crump*, named after a politician who ran for major. Handy was commissioned to write a campaign song.

¹⁷ Father of the Blues p. 109

¹⁸ Mississippi Blues Commission

My own enlightenment came in Cleveland, Mississippi. I was conducting the orchestra in a dance program when someone sent up an odd request. Would we play some of 'our native music'[...] later a second request came up. Would we object if a local colored band played a few dances? [...] We eased out gracefully as the newcomers entered. They were led by a long-legged chocolate boy and their band consisted of just three pieces, a battered guitar, a mandolin and a bass [...]. They struck up one of those over-and-over-strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went... A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish, stomping feet. The dancers went wild [...]. These boys had the stuff the people wanted [...]. Folks would pay money for it [...]. That night a composer was born, an American composer. Those country black boys at Cleveland had taught me something [...]. My inspiration came from the sight of that silver money (Handy 76/77). I returned to Clarksdale and began immediately to work on this kind of music (Handy 78).

Stack Mangham, clarinet player and a member of Handy's orchestra, recalls that evening in Cleveland in a 1941 interview with Alan Lomax and John Works: "Mr. Crump Dont Like It,' which became his 'Memphis Blues' was 'the same thing we heard that night in Cleveland" (Cheseborough 124).

CHAPTER 5 - SIX CATEGORIES TO DEFINE THE BLUES BASED ON OBSERVATIONS BY W.C. HANDY

In his book *Father of the Blues* W.C. Handy comprehensively describes which sources he studied before composing Memphis Blues and where his inspiration came from.

And by doing so he gives us a very informative inside of how he defined the Blues at the beginning of the 20th century. It is by no means my intension to suggest that this is more than a personal vision, but it is the opinion of a musician who observed blues music throughout the period that it emerged. A musician who traveled around the U.S. for extensive periods of time, who had the music-theoretical skills needed to seize and analyze his subject. Based on the observations written down in his autobiography 'Father of the Blues' we can distinguish six 'Handy requirements or categories to define the Blues':

- 1) Rhythm (and tempo)**
- 2) Form**
- 3) Harmonic structure**
- 4) Lyrics**
- 5) Blue notes**
- 6) Slurs, slides and bended notes**

5.1 The rhythm (and tempo)

“The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went” and “Thump-thump-thump went their feet on the floor” (Handy 77).

“I had up a fair training in the music of the modern world and had assumed that the correct manner to compose was to develop simples into grandissimos and not to repeat them monotonously” (Handy 76).

Monotone and lengthy

5.2 The form

“The three-line stanza had twelve instead of sixteen measures to the strain, another blues characteristic” (Handy 99). “The songs themselves, I now observed, consisted of simple declarations expressed usually in three lines and set to a kind of earth-born music that was familiar throughout the Southland half a century ago” (Handy 75).

Twelve bar blues form

5.3 The harmonic structure

“with its three-chord basic harmonic structure (tonic, subdominant, dominant seventh) was that already used by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers and other of their undaunted class” (Handy 99).

The use of tonic, subdominant and dominant seventh is common in Blues, but like Handy writes, not unique to this genre. It can be found in various folk music genres as well in earlier spiritual music.

Harmonic structure I/IV/V

5.4 The lyrics (the themes)

“The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I'd had ever heard. I leaned over and asked him what the words meant...but he did not mind explaining. [“] Southern Negroes sang about everything.

Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast woman, mean bosses, stubborn mules-all become subjects for their songs” (Handy 74)

While Handy does not mention the use of coded language it seems very likely that stubborn-mules is a metaphor and could stand for any person that you don't get along with very well.

Trains and boats are symbolic for a possible escape.

5.5 The blue notes

“and the transitional flat thirds and sevenths in my melody, by which I was attempting to suggest the typical slurs of the Negro voice, were what have since become ‘blue notes’” (Handy 99).

This is especially interesting because nowadays we exclusively call the lowered 5th the blue note.

5.6 The slurs, slides and bended notes

“The primitive Southern Negro as he sang was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tones of the scale, slurring between major and minor. Whether in the cotton fields of the Delta or on the levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same” (Handy 120).

Slurs, slides and bended notes

The outcome of the musicians survey partly corresponds with the findings of W.C. Handy. The twelve-bar blues form and the harmonic structure I/IV/V are named as key elements both in the outcome of the survey and as well in Handy's findings. But Handy does not make notice of the blues scale nor of the blue note b5. Instead he mentions the slurs, slides and bended notes and flat thirds and sevenths.

CHAPTER 6 - ANALYZING

Analyzing early blues recordings and comparing their characteristics with the outcome of the survey and the findings of W.C. Handy.

My research material consists of the following eleven songs by seven blues artists.

Guitar Blues - Sylvester Weaver (recorded in 1923)

Match Box Blues - Blind Lemon Jefferson (recorded in 1927)

Cool Drink of Water - Tommy Johnson (recorded in 1928)

Got the Blues - Blind Lemon Jefferson (recorded in 1929)

Down the Dirt Road Blues - Charley Patton (recorded in 1929)

Green River Blues - Charley Patton (recorded in 1929)

Black Mama part 1 - Son House (recorded in 1930)

Walking Blues - Son House (recorded in 1930)

Devil Got My Woman - Skip James (recorded in 1931)

Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues - Skip James (recorded in 1931)

Crossroad (V2) - Robert Johnson (recorded in 1936)

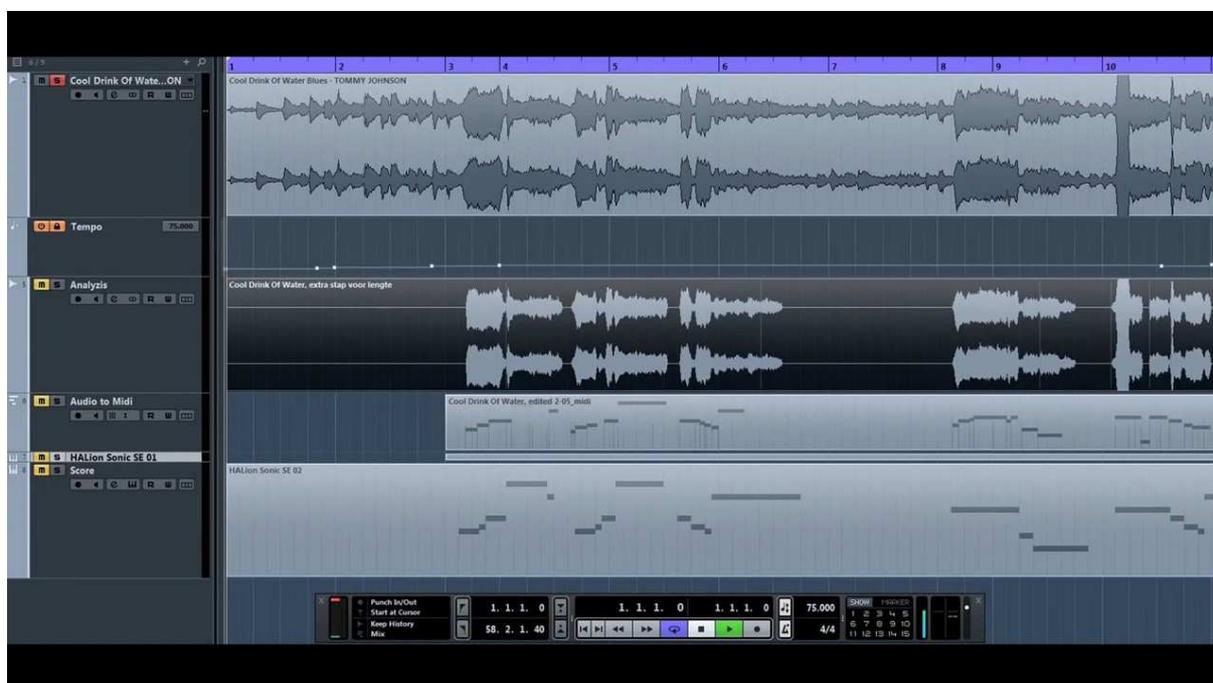
These artists and recordings were chosen carefully. They are among the first blues artists recorded and are all mentioned in the literature that I used for my research.

I could not find any evidence of doubt or dispute that their recordings are genuine and authentic. It was my goal to determine if the following elements were present in the above listed recordings:

- 1) **Blue Note (b5)**
- 2) **Twelve bar blues form**
- 3) **Harmonic structure I/IV/V**
- 4) **Blues scale**
- 5) **Other blue notes**
- 6) **Slurs, slides & bended notes**
- 7) **Dominant seventh chords**
- 8) **Minor chords**
- 9) **Call, response (& resolution)**

6.1 Methods for analyzing

- 1) Recording from a YouTube source with Audacity Audio Software 2.1.2.¹⁹
- 2) If there was a high level of background noise or other unwanted sounds due to the limitations of the recording techniques used, I would try to reduce that with the incorporated Noise Reduction Plugin.
- 3) If the signal had become too weak, I would add volume.
- 4) Exporting the sound file in WAV format and importing that in Cubase Pro 8.5.
- 5) Adding a tempo track to specify the form and exact tempo.
- 6) Isolating the vocals from the rest of the recording. (see ‘Voice Isolation’ below)
- 7) Applying the ‘audio to midi’ analyzes to generate a midi image from the melody.
- 8) Creating a music score from the data of this midi track, adding the tempo, form and chords.



Cubase Pro 8.5. On the top the original audio file of ‘Cool Drink of Water’, below consecutively the tempo track, voice isolated (analyzes), the audio to midi track and the score track. [AUDIO & VIDEO EXAMPLE](#)

6.2 Voice isolation explained

In order to examine the slurs, slides and bends in the vocal melodies in detail it was necessary to isolate the voice so that the VariAudio²⁰ editor could analyze the melody exclusively without other sound interfering. There are many voice isolating software programs and apps designed to separate vocals from the remaining audio signal. These

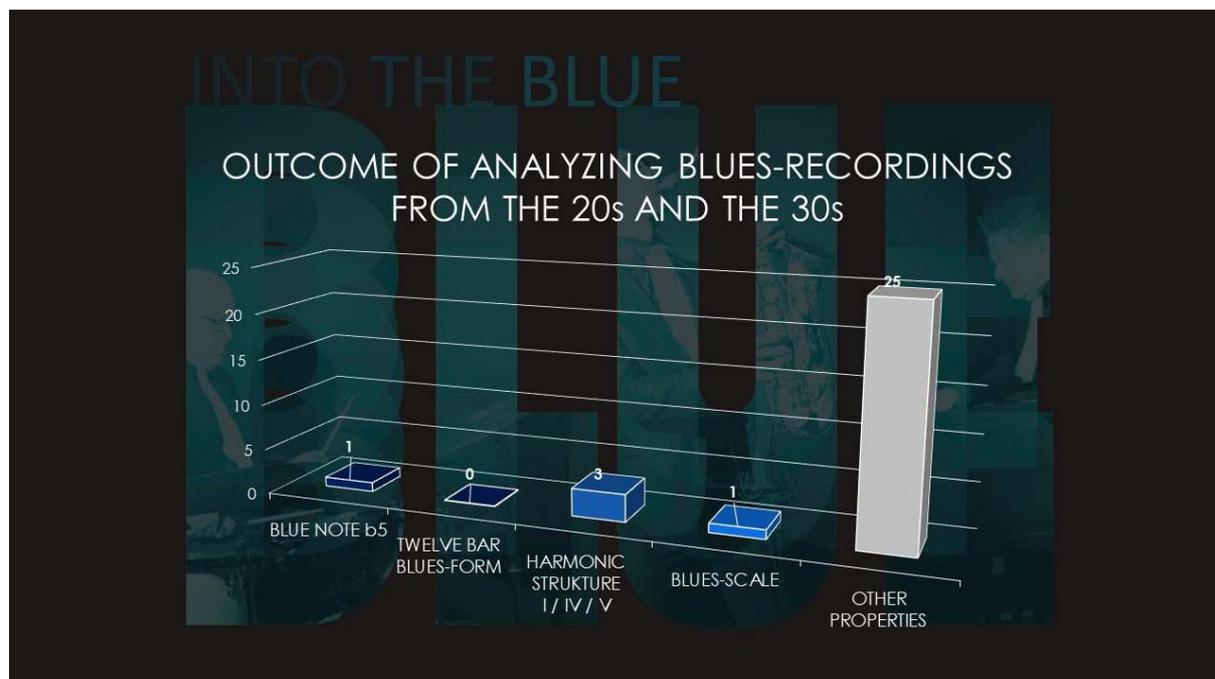
¹⁹ I made sure that the source was trustworthy by comparing the song with the same audio on Spotify.

²⁰ ‘The VariAudio features in Cubase allow you to edit pitch, correct timing and intonation of individual notes in monophonic vocal recordings’ (steinberg.help/cubase_pro_artist)

programs use the stereo spectrum to differentiate between the audio sources (instruments). All instruments have unique position in the stereo spectrum. Bass might be on the left, guitar more on the right and vocals are almost always in the middle. This image comes closest resembling a live performance. But the blues songs from the 20s and 30s are all recorded in mono. That means that the left audio channel is identical to the right channel. And the voice separation technique explained above cannot be applied to these recordings.

Another method to differentiate between several input sources on one audio file would be to make use of the specific frequency footprint of each instrument. This is possible with the selected blues recordings but the audio files have a very narrow frequency bandwidth. Therefore, all sound is cramped together in the midrange of the frequency spectrum. Although the selected blues recordings consisted primarily of guitar chords, single notes, vocals footsteps and slaps on the body of the guitar. The Cubase Vari editor (which works much like the Melodyne program made by Celemony) had some trouble separating the different sounds. Therefore, I applied a low and high cut in the build-in equalizer where needed to emphasize the voice. Subsequently I completely removed the parts without vocals from the recording. The final result was an image of the melody with very precise rhythmical and melodic details.

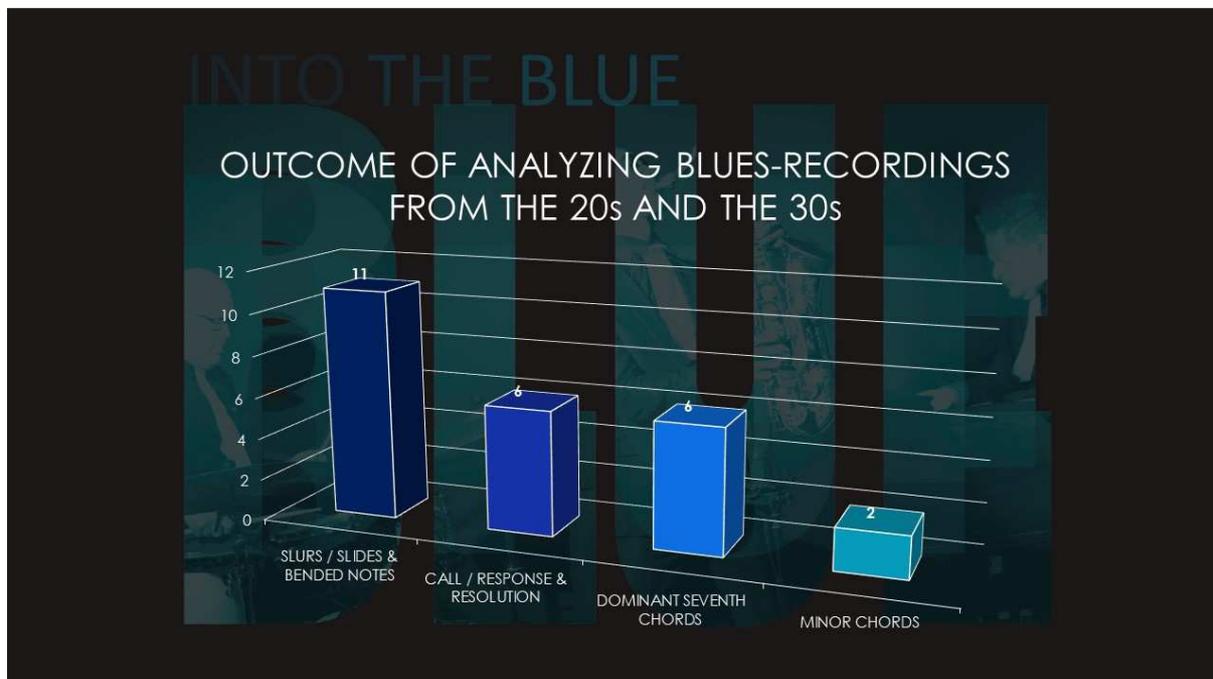
CHAPTER 7 - OUTCOME OF THE ANALYSIS



It turned out that the outcome of the analysis does not correspond with the result of the survey among my colleagues. The blue notes (b5), the twelve bars form, the harmonic

structure I/IV/V and the blues scale were almost never used in the researched music. These ingredients are not responsible for the bluesy sound in these specific recordings.

Down below the 'other' category is specified.



Exactly as suggested by Handy the slurs, slides and bends turned out to be crucial for the specific sound of these blues songs. The effects were mostly used sliding towards (and even beyond) the thirds and seventh note of the scale, but also around other notes (most evident the 5th).

7.1 Three examples

In the following examples created by the Cubase score editor the most distinct slurred notes are accented in red.

DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES

DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES – CHARLEY PATTON (1929)

| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

We can see a blues with the typical I/IV/V harmonic structure, there is no twelve-bar form, blues scale or blue note (b5) being used. There are the slides towards the 3rd and 7th note of the scale. The call, response & resolution technique is clearly visible. I chose to write three 2/4 measures because there is a strong downbeat on the one accentuated by the lower string on the guitar suggesting the beginning of a new bar. The melody follows this form as well.

DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN

GUITAR INTRO

1 2 6 8

9 Amin 10 11 D₇^{NO3} D₆^{NO3} 12

13 14 Amin 15 16 D₇^{NO3} D₆^{NO3}

17 D₇^{NO3} D₆^{NO3} 18 19 D 20

DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN – SKIP JAMES (1931)

| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

This song lacks the I/IV/V harmonic structure, there is no 12-bar form, blue note (b5). blues scale (but the minor pentatonic scale is used). There are many long slides towards the 5th note of the scale of A and the 3rd note of the scale of D.

COOL DRINK OF WATER

1 F^{#10} 2 3

4 F/C 5 F/D F/C F/D F 7 8 F/A

9 B^{b7} 10 11 F F^{#10/#11} 12 F 13

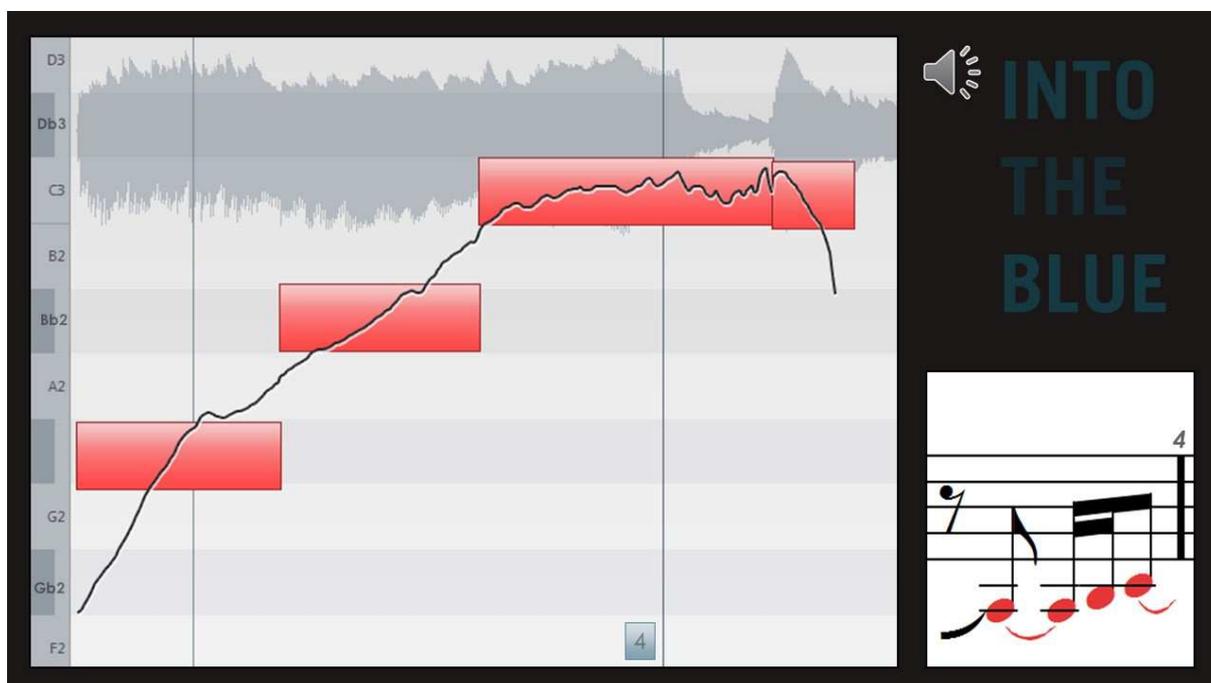
COOL DRINK OF WATER – TOMMY JOHNSON (1928)

| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

In this example of the first chorus of 'Cool Drink of Water' by Tommy Johnson we see slurs towards the 5th and 3rd note of the scale. Both in the F chords as well as in the Bb chord. There is no I/IV/V harmonic structure, twelve-bar form, blues scale or a fixed blue (b5) present. With the western music notation techniques, it is not possible to notate slurs like the ones in bar 3 and bar 8/9 in full detail.

7.2 Getting into the details

The following slides compare the conventional music notation with the graphic notation of the Vari editor after isolating the melody of 'Cool Drink of Water'. The pitch is shown on the vertical axis while the time is displayed on the horizontal axis (the vertical lines dividing the quarters). The waveform shadowed in the background provides information about the amplitude of the audio signal.



BAR 3 - COOL DRINK OF WATER BY TOMMY JOHNSON

| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

The slide-up, transcribed and notated by me as an A with a slur moving to a C in reality turns out to be a very low-pitched Gb sliding to a high-pitched C ending with a bend-down. A long slur that makes a 5th interval. This song is in the key of F so the slide moves up to the 5th note of the scale.

BAR 8/9 - COOL DRINK OF WATER BY TOMMY JOHNSON

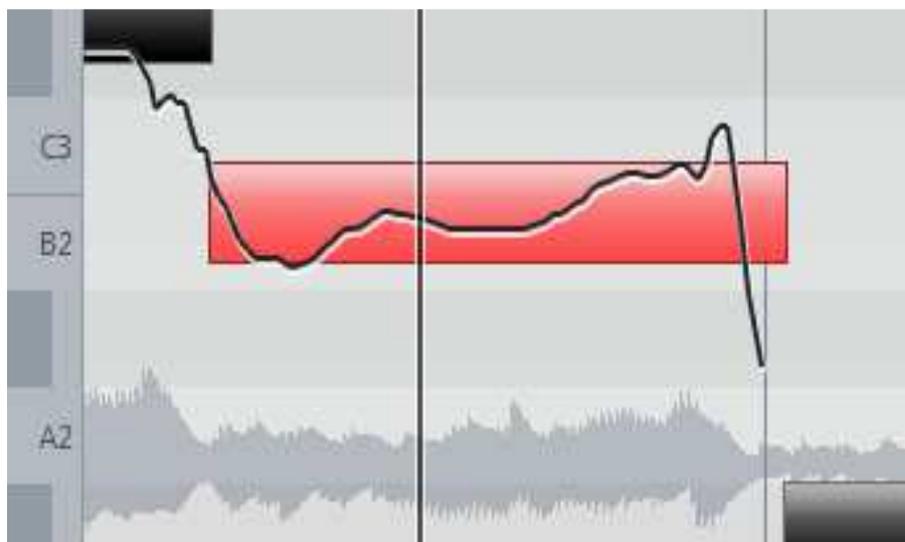
| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

In this second example from bar 8 and 9 we see a slide-up from Bb climbing all the way up to an Eb before dropping down again and ending on a D. I notated this in the score as a D with a slur. Note: at this point the harmony moves to a Bb7 chord so the melody note is actually a 3rd.

Looking at these examples it becomes clear that our conventional music notation techniques are not sufficient to capture complex melodic information such as these blues melodies. None of the melody notes have a regular pitch and often they are sung in between two half notes (quarter note pitch). The slides are often very long and cover a large pitch range. They can reach notes giving tension and depth to the relatively simple harmonies that are played by the guitar. There is a striking similarity to be found in the melodic techniques used on all the blues recordings that were analyzed. Both in the shape of the slides as well in the choice of notes that they move towards we see a clear pattern contributing to the distinct sound. Another quality they share is that a slide-up always seems to start on an offbeat where the pulse in the rhythm is usually on the one.

CHAPTER 8 - INCORPORATING THE SLIDES, SLURS AND BENDS INTO MY PLAYING

After determining that the main characteristics of the blues I have researched are the very typical long slurs that most often reach beyond their destination before dropping down home to the 3rd, 5th or 7th note of the scale. They can end major, dominant or minor, independent from the chord that is played underneath. A fixed blue note cannot be found. The absence of a blue note in my opinion means that it would make sense to rename blue note and call it *blue movement*. It's the slide-up to the 3rd and 7th and the 'slurring between major and minor' (Handy 120) (example 1) that makes the bluesy sound.



EXAMPLE 1: SLURRING BETWEEN MAJOR AND MINOR, GOT THE BLUES BY BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON (IN THE KEY OF A Flat)

| [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

A special effect can be created by sliding to a designated note, holding it fixed for a period of time and then pushing it up. A technique used by guitar players as well, applied by sliding towards a note and pushing/bending the string up. I will name this the *after-touch effect*²¹ (example 2).

²¹ The aftertouch feature allows keyboard players to change the tone or sound of a note after it is struck, the way that singers, wind players, or bowed instrument players can do.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keyboard_expression

The image displays a musical score and its corresponding spectrogram. The top portion shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The number '16' is written above the staff. The melody consists of several notes, with three red dots placed below the first three notes, connected by a red slur. The bottom portion is a spectrogram with a vertical axis labeled with frequencies: A2, G2, F2, E2, and D2. A black line represents the pitch contour, which starts at a low frequency, rises to a peak, and then falls. Two red rectangular boxes highlight specific frequency ranges: one between E2 and F2, and another between G2 and A2. A small blue box with the number '16' is located at the bottom left of the spectrogram. On the right side of the spectrogram, the text 'INTO THE BLUE' is written vertically in large, blue, capital letters.

EXAMPLE 2: AFTERTOUCH EFFECT ON THE MINOR 3RD IN THE KEY OF D, DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN BY SKIP JAMES
 | [CLICK FOR THE AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

In the studied material slurs and slides are often sung in the lower regions of the melody. On saxophone it is surely possible to bend notes up but not to an extent of 5th interval. To play any bends up in the lower octave range beyond a whole tone is impossible without the use of the side keys. On a clarinet, on the other hand, the effects described above are all playable since this instrument has open tone-holes. It is therefore (in theory) possible to slide your fingers of the keys to create a long slur up, even in the low register. Aftertouch can be simulated by lifting the fingers subtly from the tone-holes. To simulate these effects on saxophone without the use of electronics I chose to develop a saxophone with open tone-holes. Saxophone specialist Paul Feldmann was responsible for the modifications on a Buescher 400 tenor saxophone as described below.

8.1 Modifications on a Buescher 400 tenor saxophone



Open tone-holes in a Buescher 400 tenor saxophone (version 1, December 2018)

We started working on the modifications in November 2018. Our main challenge was to maintain a comfortable position for my fingers as the size and placing of the tone-holes on a saxophone are not designed for the open finger technique. We tried to make the holes as large as possible to achieve the maximum effect keeping in mind the limitations of my fingertip size. As can be seen in the image above, showing the first version of the upper-hand keys modifications, the tone-holes are placed far apart making it difficult to close them firmly. I was able to create (small) sliding effects but unwanted effects due to leaking of the C and B valves were common. Other modifications on version 1 (December 2018) were: Removing the auxiliary F key and closing the tone-hole and replacing the leather pads by silicon ones since they are better resistant to moisture and damp passing through the holes.



Redesigned tone-holes with a roller mechanism positioned slightly upwards (version 2, January 2019)



Tone-holes with the roller mechanism and the finger-rest platform (version 3, March 2019)

Version 2 featured a *roller mechanism* to allow me to slide off the tone-holes more comfortably. The hole in the B valve was placed closer to the edge so I would not have to overstretch my fingers. The rim of the tone-holes was made a bit wider preventing air to escape past my fingers. The A tone-hole was closed permanently (see image above).

Version 3 added a broader rim and a finger-rest platform that connected to the rollers. The new design of the upper hand keywork gave me more grip and flexibility.

For the lower hand keywork mechanism it turned out not to be possible to make similar adjustments. To have sufficient effect the holes needed to be larger, making them difficult to control. And the F, E and D valves are too far apart to operated them in the same way as the upper hand tone-holes. An alternative design plan involved valves that could be pressed down for a second time after initially closing the valves in the traditional way to generate a quarter tone *aftertouch effect*. This valve seemed to be ideal to use for the lower hand keys as it keeps the valve closed until pressed again. We named this valve the *flipflop-klep* (flip-valve).



F flip-valve (version 1, January 2019)

The slide-up effect from both a low E and an F upwards worked really well but tests carried out with the saxophone students of the Artez Conservatory in Zwolle revealed that it was difficult to prevent the flip-valve from opening spontaneously while playing low notes. Paul designed a new version with a click mechanism to prevent unintentional opening of the valve.



The updated F flip-valve (V2)
with click mechanism
(February 2019)





F flip-valve (V3) with the click mechanism activated (March 2019)

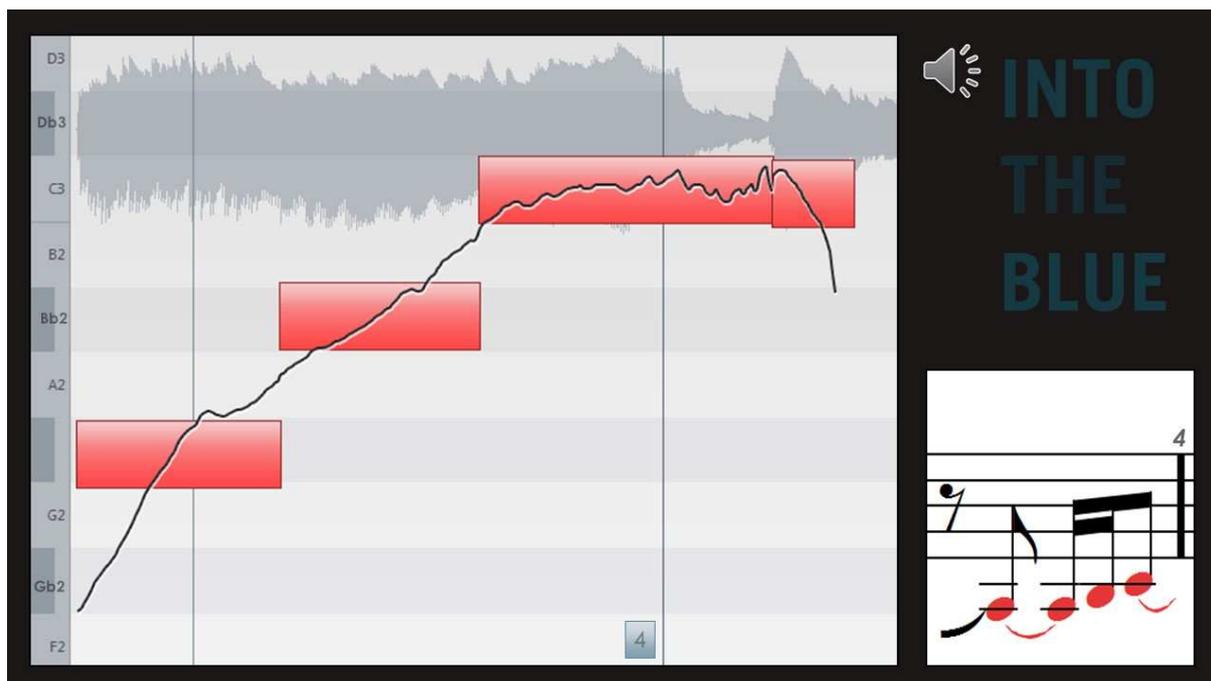
Version 3 featured double key control. The top one to operate the F key in the conventional way and an additional key to open the 'aftertouch' slide mechanism. The latter works in two ways: passive (staying open until closed) or active (closing automatically after release). The last modification done on this saxophone provided a slide from F# to G by adding a new key mechanism operated by the lower thumb.



Thumb operated F# to G slide key mechanism (March 2019)

8.2 Playing slides on the 'Blues horn'

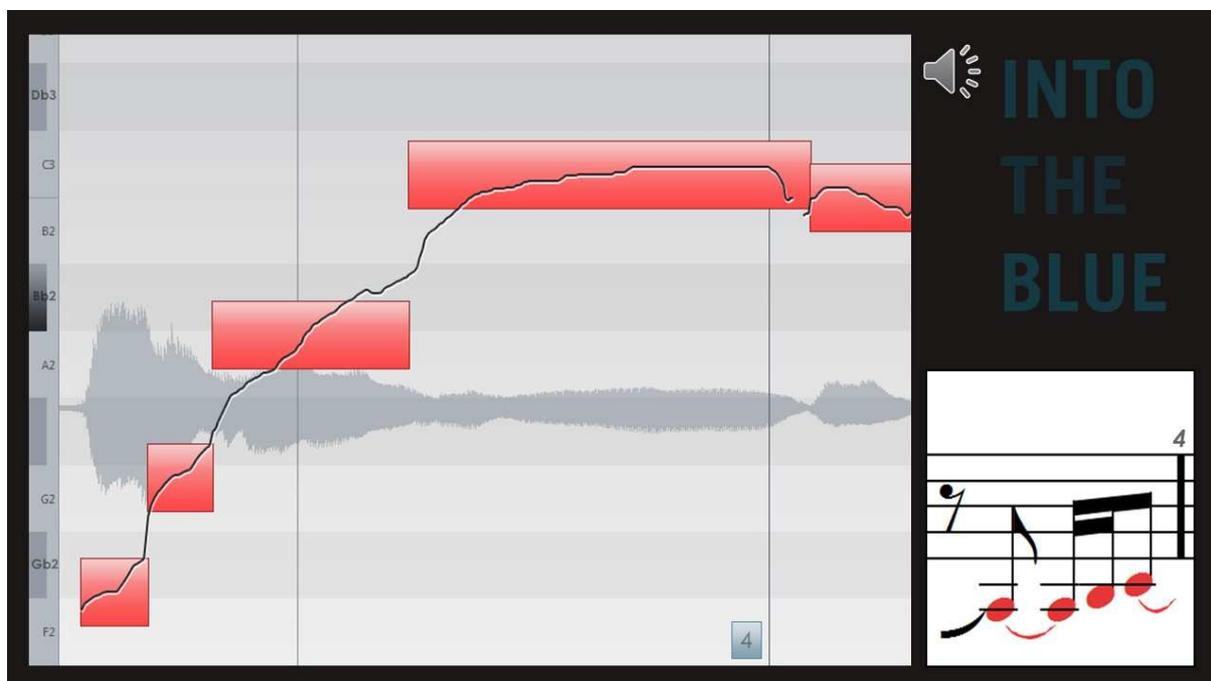
Since the last modifications were made shortly before the deadline for handing in the written work, I had little time to test all the possibilities. For this reason, I decided to concentrate on the long slides in the lower range of the melody as Tommy Johnson sings it in "Cool Drink of Water."



BAR 3 - COOL DRINK OF WATER BY TOMMY JOHNSON

| CLICK FOR THE [AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

This slide-up of a 5th interval extending from a low-pitched Gb to a high-pitched C is unplayable by me on a conventional saxophone but it can easily be executed on the modified Buescher 400. Therefore, I chose to rename this saxophone to “Blues horn.”



BAR 3 - COOL DRINK OF WATER AS PLAYED BY EFRAIM TRUJILLO ON THE BLUES HORN

| [AUDIO EXAMPLE](#)

There are many more features and possibilities still to be tested. As the development is ongoing, I've created a website where I will post regularly updates regarding the progress on the modified saxophone. The next step is to work on the low E valve keywork design. Follow us at: WWW.BLUESHORN.COM

CONCLUSION

Professor William Ferris (double Grammy Award winner of 2019 for his historical album *Voices of Mississippi*) gave me the inspiration for choosing my research topic while I was rereading his classic study of the Southern blues: *Blues from the Delta*. I became interested in the history and development of the blues and its musical ancestors. My goal was to define the most important characteristics of the blues, and to incorporate these elements into my playing. I was happily surprised and honored that he agreed to be my adviser.

Based on the research carried out by studying literature, most importantly the works of W.C. Handy, and analyzing selected blues recordings, I came to the conclusion that *slurs, slides & bended notes* are the essential ingredients for the blues and are required for a bluesy sound. This outcome of analysis did not correspond with the blues characteristics chosen by my colleagues (survey on page 6). The *twelve-bar blues form*, the *harmonic structure I/IV/V* and the *blues scale* are almost non-existent in my research material. These elements might be closer connected to the blues-form in jazz music than to the blues music that I analyzed.

The *blue note* seems to be absent, the bluesy effect is, in fact, a *blue movement* climbing up towards the 3rd, 5th or 7th note of the scale with an optional bend-down at the end. I was surprised by the extent of the slurs, slides and bends, and by the variety of techniques used. The *slurring between major and minor*²² and the *aftertouch effect* are addressed in chapter 8. Slide-up effects can span the range of a 5th interval. Depth is creating where complex melodic lines with quarter-note intervals generate tension on top of relatively simple harmonics: complexity that cannot be captured with our conventional music notation tools. But by isolating the voice and analyzing it with the VariAudio editor in Cubase Pro 8.2 we can make this visible in full detail.

The next step was incorporating these techniques into my playing. The choice of developing a customized saxophone was preferred over the use of electronics to recreate the bluesy effects. Since blues music evolved with the use of a broad range of homemade instruments, it seemed logical to make a homemade instrument, the *Blues horn*, an instrument that allows me to play effects that are not possible on a conventional saxophone. Most notably these effects are: slides in the lower register of the saxophone, distinctive long slides up (as explained in section 7.2) and the aftertouch effect. Open tone-holes make it possible to slide the fingers from the keys in a comparable way to clarinet slide techniques. In addition, saxophone specialist Paul Feldmann and I came up with the idea for a completely new valve system consisting of two independently controlled parts designed to emulate the aftertouch effect. Since we have not finished testing the

²² “The primitive Southern Negro as he sang was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tones of the scale, slurring between major and minor. Whether in the cotton fields of the Delta or on the levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same” (Handy 120).

modifications yet, it is too early to formulate a final conclusion about the applicability of the new keywork layout. However, first tests show that the effects are audibly (and visible) but it is a challenge to keep a saxophone with open tone-holes manageable and controllable. This is definitely a project that needs more testing on several subjects.

In addition to the saxophone modifications, I feel more research is needed concerning the roles of homemade instruments in the development of blues, especially the one-strand and bottleneck techniques. These seem closely connected to the slurs, slides and bends. The role of double layers in lyrics (coded language) and the call, response (& resolution) form are subjects I would like to bring more into the spotlight in future analyses.

Efraïm Trujillo
Amsterdam,
March 3, 2019

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