

the blues

A GRAMMATICAL CONUNDRUM

Using “blue” and “the blues” to denote sadness is not recent English slang. The word *blue* was associated with sadness and melancholia in Elizabethan England. The American writer Washington Irving used the term *the blues* in 1807. Grammatically speaking, however, the term *the blues* is a conundrum: should it be treated grammatically as a singular or plural noun? The Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary says it is a plural noun but “sometimes singular in construction.” Because *the blues* can mean “sad feelings” the term can be a collective noun that usually gets a singular status, as in “I’ve got the blues and it sure gets me down.” *The blues* is singular when describing this musical genre, but occasionally it gets a plural reference in songs, as in “These blues are killing me.” As an adjective, *blue* refers to the feeling of sadness, whereas *blues* refers to the style of music, for example, “Albert King is a great blues guitarist.”

blue

Glossary

BACKBEAT—a rhythmic emphasis on the second and fourth beats of a measure.

BAR—a musical measure, which is a repeated rhythmic pattern of several beats, usually four quarter notes (4/4) for the blues. The blues usually has twelve bars per verse.

BLUE NOTE—the slight lowering downward, usually of the third or seventh notes, of a major scale. Some blues musicians, especially singers, guitarists and harmonica players, bend notes upward to reach the blue note.

CHOPS—the various patterns that a musician plays, including basic scales. When blues musicians get together for jam sessions, players of the same instrument sometimes engage in musical duels in front of a rhythm section to see who has the “hottest chops” (plays best).

CHORD—a combination of notes played at the same time.

CHORD PROGRESSION—the use of a series of chords over a song verse that is repeated for each verse.

FIELD HOLLERS—songs that African-Americans sang as they worked, first as slaves, then as freed laborers, in which the workers would sing a phrase in response to a line sung by the song leader.

GOSPEL MUSIC—a style of religious music heard in some black churches that contains call-and-response arrangements similar to field hollers. Many blues and R & B singers, such as Bessie Smith, Sam Cooke, and Aretha Franklin, came out of the gospel music tradition.

HORN SECTION—the part of a band containing the wind instruments, usually saxophones, trumpets, and trombones.

IMPROVISATION—the musical act of playing something not previously planned, usually in the course of a singer’s or instrumental soloist’s part. While other musical forms have occasional parts designed for improvisation, it is this spontaneity that distinguishes blues and jazz from other musical genres.

JAM—to improvise with other musicians, whether in the planned context of a group’s performance or in a gathering of musicians (jam session) for the purpose of improvising and interacting musically.

MINSTREL SHOWS—traveling musical programs that featured black musicians or white musicians made up to look like black musicians.

R & B—an abbreviation for “rhythm and blues”, the label used for much of black American music (except jazz) during the 1950s and 1960s. R & B had its own recording companies and sales charts. It included blues and harmony vocal groups, such as the Moonglows, the Platters, and the Drifters, singing a style known as “doo-wop.” Soul music, which today includes funk and hip hop, comes out of the R & B tradition.

RHYTHM SECTION—the part of a band, usually consisting of drums, bass, rhythm guitar, and keyboards, that plays the rhythms and chord progressions of a song.

RIFFS—similar to chops, but more often referring to special musical tricks and techniques that a soloist might use.

SLIDE GUITAR—a style of playing using a metal or glass tube placed over a finger on the left hand to slide along the strings over the instrument’s neck.

SOUL—To say that someone has “soul” is to say that he or she has the ability to feel things deeply, a feeling often gained by experiencing hardship. “Soul” also refers to a genre of American music, usually performed by blacks, that contains expressive vocals, frequent vocal harmonies, and strong rhythmic backbeats.