A Study on the Development of Blues Music and Its Interaction with American Society

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Abstract. This paper explores the origins, evolution, and impact of blues music in American society. It analyzes how blues music emerged from African American communities in the late 19th century and evolved into a significant form of cultural expression in the 20th century. The study highlights the close connection between blues music and American social, political, and racial issues. By examining the lyrics, stylistic changes, and performance forms of blues music, this paper reveals how blues reflects and influences racial issues, social classes, and historical changes in American society.

Keywords: Blues music, African American music, music and society.

1. Introduction

The Emergence of Blues has Inseparable Connection to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In 1492, with the support of the Spanish king, Christopher Columbus reached the Bahamas, initiating a slave trade that lasted for five centuries and established the transatlantic route to the Americas [1]. This "triangular trade" involved Europeans sailing to Africa to transport African slaves to the Americas, where they were sold to plantation owners. In return, gold and raw materials from the Americas were shipped back to Europe, contributing to the early accumulation of capital. During transportation, African slaves retained their customs and cultural traditions. The Atlantic slave route was a deadly journey; enslaved Africans endured six to ten weeks of harsh conditions while being transported from West Africa to the Americas. Despite these hardships, they sang and danced on the ships, often secretly bringing African musical instruments to the Americas. Their singing primarily took two forms: call-and-response work songs and field hollers without accompaniment [2]. The latter became a means for enslaved individuals to express their hopes, frustrations, and discontent while laboring. To better control the enslaved population, plantation owners introduced Christianity to them, providing African Americans with opportunities to sing hymns alongside white congregants in churches. However, those familiar with European music created their unique spirituals in African American churches inspired by Protestant hymns, gospel songs, and the Bible—known as African American spirituals. These spirituals took three primary forms: call-and-response, fast-tempo, and slow-tempo songs. They were also influenced by West African Islamic music, incorporating melismatic singing and microtonal nuances. Additionally, spirituals were closely related to the tonal characteristics of African languages. They contained numerous African musical elements, such as repetitive rhythmic motifs, improvisation, the blending of different rhythmic patterns, syncopation, and call-and-response phrasing. The central theme of these songs was often the longing for freedom. African American spirituals laid the foundation for the development of blues music.

From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, an increasing number of enslaved African Americans labored on plantations in the southern United States. Their work was constantly accompanied by singing, and they preserved the tradition of African functional music while working in fields, prisons, and elsewhere. This included field hollers and work songs, which were often improvised by the laborers. The lyrics, melodies, and rhythms emerged spontaneously during their work. Although they lacked musical instruments, much like their ancestors, they created music using any available percussive sounds. Over time, they combined their traditional work songs with European religious music and the field hollers they sang daily, creating a new musical form. Instruments such as the guitar and harmonica were introduced, giving birth to what is now known as blues music. Blues, with its expression of the sorrow, frustration, and melancholy experienced by

African Americans, quickly resonated with the Black community. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it had gained widespread popularity and became a foundational genre that influenced many other styles of music.

This paper aims to explore the origins and causes behind the emergence of blues music, the changes it underwent at different stages of development, and its defining characteristics. Through this study, we seek to examine how blues music reflects the social status of African Americans, the changes in American society, and how the evolving social position of African Americans has influenced the stylistic features and evolution of their music. By analyzing the interactive relationship between blues music and the African American community, this study aims to reveal the survival and developmental transitions of African Americans.

2. The Emergence and Development of Blues Music

Blues music originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and serves as a genuine expression of the social environment experienced by African Americans after they broke free from the constraints of slavery [3].

From 1860 to 1862, seven slaveholding states in the southern United States—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas—seceded from the Union. In February 1861, they established the "Confederate States of America" (commonly known as the Confederacy) [4]. On March 4, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as President of the United States. On April 14, Confederate forces captured Fort Sumter, marking the outbreak of the Civil War. After the war began, four additional slaveholding states—Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee—seceded from the Union and joined the Confederacy. Although the North had significant advantages in terms of manpower, economy, industry, weaponry, and railroads, the South had been preparing for war for a long time and had a considerable amount of military talent. This combination contributed to a prolonged stalemate on the battlefield. To undermine the South's plantation-based slave economy, strengthen the North's position, and secure a moral victory to prevent European powers from aiding the South, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy. The proclamation declared that effective January 1, 1863, all slaves in states or regions still in rebellion would be "forever free." As a result of the proclamation, four million enslaved African Americans gained their freedom. Following this, slaves in Union-controlled areas were also emancipated, and many Southern slaves, yearning for freedom, fled northward. Once armed, they joined the Union forces. However, the Emancipation Proclamation was merely a wartime military measure; its legal validity would cease once the war ended [6]. The freedom of those liberated by the proclamation was not legally guaranteed.

On April 9, 1865, the Confederate government was defeated, bringing an end to the American Civil War and restoring the unity of the United States. To protect the rights of African Americans, Congress enacted a series of legislative measures. In January 1865, President Abraham Lincoln passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which marked the complete abolition of slavery. The end of the Civil War in April 1865 effectively abolished the institution of slavery that had lasted for more than two centuries, liberating enslaved African Americans from the exploitation of slave owners and providing an initial improvement in their social status.

Following the war, Congress passed the 14th Amendment and the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, legally defining the rights of African Americans and providing protection for their civil liberties [7].

With the final abolition of slavery through the Civil War, African Americans were no longer considered the private property of slave owners and were granted nominally equal personal rights alongside white citizens. However, in reality, they continued to face deep-rooted racial discrimination and segregation. While they achieved legal independence equal to that of whites, they were still denied the same rights and opportunities. The struggle for true equality continued.

In the 1890s, African Americans gradually migrated to urban areas, and blues music drifted through the streets and alleys of the cities alongside these wandering individuals [8]. Those who left the plantations retained the call-and-response singing style they had used in the fields, accompanying themselves with guitars, banjos, and various homemade instruments. With mournful and melancholic tones, they expressed the deep pain in their hearts. Due to the African American community's shared emotional connection to music and their communal way of life, these songs quickly spread within Black communities. As they were passed down orally by countless singers, the music gradually took on a standardized three-line structure. Characterized by its distinctive blues scale, melancholic tones, raspy shouts, unique chord progressions, and complex rhythms, blues developed into a sorrowful and poignant musical style that resonated deeply within the African American community.

2.1 The Historical Origins of Blues Music

The development of any musical genre is shaped by historical factors and socio-political contexts. African slaves brought to the Americas originated from regions in West Africa such as West Congo, Nigeria, Dahomey, and Ghana. From the moment Africans were sold into slavery and transported to the Americas, African music accompanied the transatlantic slave trade. Music was an essential part of daily and ritual life for Africans. During tasks such as carrying heavy loads, blacksmithing, and milling grain, natural sounds gradually became rhythmic and evolved into coordinated percussive beats. When these beats combined, they produced complex rhythms. Africans also experimented with available materials to create instruments, leading to the development of a variety of drums in different sizes and types.

During labor, singing naturally aligned with work rhythms to increase efficiency, eventually evolving into call-and-response improvisational songs. As a result, African music developed the following characteristics:1) Polyrhythms: African music features multiple rhythmic lines with varying lengths and time signatures played simultaneously. The rhythms of West and Central Africa are particularly intricate and dynamic, often incorporating frequent improvisation and the use of third intervals in melodies.2) Call-and-response singing: This is the most common vocal style in African music, where a lead singer is followed by a chorus, creating polyphonic textures through overlapping phrases and interwoven harmonies. The melodic phrases are typically short, with narrow pitch ranges and repetitive motifs. Vocalists use their natural voices and often sing in a seven-note scale, although a significant number of songs also use a five-note (pentatonic) scale. Improvisation is a prominent feature in African vocal music.3) Integration of music and dance: African music is often performed with dance, characterized by swinging and spinning movements. African dance is simple yet rhythmically vibrant and energetic, with a strong emphasis on movement and rhythm.4) Preference for percussion instruments: Drums are the most commonly used instruments in African music, made from a wide variety of materials such as goatskin, deerskin, lizardskin, and even elephant ear skin, producing different pitches and tones. Africans play drums and other percussion instruments to create harmonious yet highly dynamic rhythms and melodies. Other commonly used African instruments include the marimba, which is a wooden xylophone, and the carlimba, also known as the kalimba. Additionally, there are horns made from animal horns or ivory, as well as flutes, panpipes, and various string instruments. Stringed instruments, primarily played by plucking, are often used in vocal performances and storytelling, but they are rarely played alongside drums. One notable African string instrument is the kora, a plucked lute traditionally used by West African griots (storytellers) who recited historical events while traveling. This tradition laid the foundation for the development of blues music. African American music in the United States shares fundamental melodic, rhythmic, and vocal elements with African music, confirming that the roots of blues music trace back to Africa.

Although blues music did not originate in Africa, it emerged within African American society in the United States, indicating that its development was influenced by American music and culture. Firstly, in terms of instrument construction, African Americans adopted instruments such as the violin and guitar from American culture. Due to restrictions imposed by slave owners on the use of drums and the economic hardship faced by African Americans, they often resorted to making their

instruments during labor. In the early 20th century, American folk musicians commonly used the guitar for accompaniment. After encountering the guitar, African Americans began creating their versions by stretching animal skins over cigar boxes or tin cans to form a resonator and adding strings to produce a guitar-like instrument. Although most slave owners prohibited enslaved people from using musical instruments, some allowed them to play instruments such as the violin for entertainment purposes. After the Civil War, African Americans also learned to play military brass instruments that were left behind on battlefields. To further assimilate enslaved Africans and erase their cultural heritage, slave owners encouraged them to convert to Christianity. This led to missionary and gospel movements among African Americans in the 19th century, resulting in a growing number of enslaved individuals becoming Christians. Consequently, the themes of blues music shifted from expressions of longing for Africa to religious subjects such as "meeting God," and biblical stories began appearing in blues lyrics. Furthermore, the call-and-response structure and four-line stanza format found in African American church music closely resembled those in white religious music. According to American scholar Giles Oakley, African American slaves absorbed elements from Wesleyan hymns, Scottish and Irish fiddle music, and various folk songs [9].

It is evident that while African Americans preserved their African musical traditions, they also incorporated European-American instruments, song structures, and lyrical themes to create a unique and distinctive form of blues music.

2.2 The Emergence and Early Development of Blues Music (17th Century – Mid-19th Century)

The period from the 17th century to the mid-19th century marked the incubation phase of blues music, evolving from African American work songs and folk calls. During this time, the development of music went through several different styles and stages, including primitive blues, downhome blues, and classic blues. By the late 19th century, the early forms of blues music had begun to take shape. Blues originated as African American folk music, formed by combining the work songs, spirituals, and field hollers sung by enslaved Africans who were brought to the southern plantations of the United States. The term "blues" originally referred to sorrowful melodies, as a significant portion of African American songs expressed themes of separation, life and death, and deep emotional pain. The term was an apt description of the melancholic nature of these songs. Over time, it became a general term for this genre of African American music and eventually developed into a distinctive and typical musical style within African American culture in the United States [10].

During the early stages of blues, African American work songs primarily took the form of field hollers. Their music often maintained a steady bass line, which served as the foundation for accompaniment. The instruments they used were influenced by both African and European traditions, including the banjo, percussion instruments, diddley bows, violins, and guitars [11]. The melodies played on these instruments often imitated popular music of the time, such as Scottish ballads, Scottish folk dances, and other European folk songs. The song structures were typically based on American or British folk music, featuring 8, 9, 10, or 12-bar phrases, with vocal styles that bore similarities to the African call-and-response tradition. This early blues music, known as Proto Blues, usually followed a three-part structure with significant elements of improvisation and repetition, offering a high degree of flexibility. Both Black and White musicians contributed to this musical exchange, borrowing from each other's styles. The music was deeply social, freely expressing the performer's secular spirit, social status, personal experiences, and life realities. One example of proto blues is the folk song We're Planting Wheat, which vividly depicts the cruel exploitation of enslaved people by their masters. Another highly combative song praises the slave rebellion leader Nat Turner with lyrics that reflect the spirit of resistance:

"You may be a fat big man, riding around in your fancy cart,
But you can't stop the world from turning,
And you can't stop people from following Nat Turner."

Similarly, the song Black, Brown, and White Blues conveys a powerful message of racial discrimination and injustice. The lyrics go:

"Ah, brother, please listen to my song, a song of truth.
If a Black man looks for work,
People say, 'If you're White, that's fine; if you're colored, wait in line.'
If you're Black, oh brother,
Move on, move on, move on."

Through blues music, African Americans expressed their inner sorrow and frustration, singing about their anxieties regarding survival and the humiliation, poverty, and violence imposed by racial segregation. They used the blues to protest against racial discrimination and social injustice while yearning for true freedom and equality. The music also voiced their hopes for love, sincerity, and all things beautiful in life.

Building upon the foundation of Proto Blues, another style emerged from the agricultural regions of the American South known as Downhome Blues. Early Downhome Blues was primarily concentrated in the southern Mississippi Delta region, spanning from Vicksburg, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, as well as parts of Louisiana and Texas. These areas were early centers for Blues activity, with dense Black populations where the ratio of Black individuals to White individuals exceeded 2:1. Downhome Blues primarily featured vocals accompanied by instruments such as the banjo. The banjo, originally introduced to the United States from Africa, became a staple among Black musicians. Due to economic hardships, many Black individuals crafted their simple banjos for accompaniment, while those with slightly better means would acquire guitars. Early Downhome Blues was influenced by traditional British ballads, characterized by simple melodies and steady rhythms with a narrative quality. The content closely mirrored the realities of Black life, focusing on themes such as hometowns, lost love, wandering, and religious faith, often imbued with a sense of melancholy. The form was predominantly solo performances, utilizing a simple three-line stanza structure with variations in each rendition, accompanied by instruments like the banjo. Major styles within Downhome Blues included Mississippi Delta Blues and Texas Blues.

2.3 The Development and Characteristics of African American Blues Music in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century

The development of Blues music accompanied the end of slavery and the efforts to establish a new relationship between Southern Whites and African Americans as they gradually moved towards equality. Blues reflected the changing social status of both groups. Initially emerging from the fields, Blues was a form of vocal expression during agricultural labor. It later spread and evolved primarily in rural areas, performed as a form of folk music by male singers who sang while playing the guitar. Due to racial segregation, African Americans were initially unable to perform or attend theatrical performances alongside Whites, nor could they access public venues on equal terms. However, with the progress of the movement for African American emancipation, White individuals began hiring Black musicians to perform African American music, offering them small payments. This marked the early commercialization of Blues and became a source of income for Black musicians. Subsequently, African Americans began performing Blues independently in various locations, such as street corners, tea houses, restaurants, brothels, small bars, riverboat docks, and train stations. They also integrated elements of White music into their performances, particularly during celebrations and festivals. As a result, Blues gradually transitioned from rural settings to urban areas, bringing it closer to White audiences. The venues for Blues performances shifted from the fields to the bustling streets and alleys of the city.

With the abolition of slavery, African Americans and Whites were allowed to attend theater performances together on equal terms. However, African Americans were initially restricted to non-central areas of the theater. Eventually, African Americans were permitted to sign performance contracts, but they were initially only allowed to perform in racially segregated White theaters. For instance, Black touring performances were featured in venues such as the Western Vaudeville and

the B.F. Keith-Orpheum theaters. These theater syndicates signed performance contracts for African American acts, and Black audiences were allowed to watch these performances from segregated, low-priced upper balcony seats. Over time, theaters began to have non-White managers who enabled African American performers to perform for audiences of various racial backgrounds. In 1905, a theater named the "Pekin Theatre" was established in Chicago. It was managed by African Americans and became the first venue to allow Black performers to entertain audiences of all races. This marked the debut of Blues songs as a novel musical form. As the African American community gained wealth and became more enthusiastic about attending performances, more theaters like the Pekin Theatre emerged. This led to the establishment of more venues specifically catering to Black audiences and the gradual development of African American touring performances.

Blues performances eventually gained independence from being merely an auxiliary to White music and evolved into a distinct musical form capable of touring independently. The emergence of management agencies for African American artists professionalized and expanded Blues performances. As the status of Blues rose, it gradually entered White society and gained mainstream recognition. With the growing prominence of Blues performances, Classical Blues emerged—marking a significant transition from informal performances to formal theatrical productions, representing a new stage of development for Blues music.

Early Blues music was initially performed as solo acts with a simple performance style. The harmony and melody were quite basic, with no embellishments, and the lyrics were straightforward. The musical structure typically followed a binary form. During performances, African American singers often used a mix of chest and falsetto voices to transition between high and low notes—this marked the formative stage of Blues development. Later, Blues evolved with the introduction of larger bands and a distinctive dance rhythm known as ragtime. The music began incorporating local cultural elements and characteristics of White music, and bands started receiving professional training. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the elements and performance styles of Blues music had taken shape. Its defining feature was its distinctive musical tone, which was not meant to serve the music itself but rather to convey emotions—whether personal or social. Blues music served as an outlet for inner feelings, acting as an emotional release of self-expression or societal sentiment. Correspondingly, Blues singing adopted various expressive styles, reflecting emotions such as anger, joy, and irony. At this stage, the song structure of Blues was largely established, laying the foundation for its expansion and commercialization.

The commercialization and expansion of Blues music were characterized by several key factors:1). The emergence of large-scale bands: These bands underwent formal training, and occasionally, Blues music incorporated distinctive rhythms similar to ragtime.2).Publication of Blues music: Before the 19th century, African Americans who were imprisoned for crimes often recorded music or performed for White audiences. However, these recordings were rarely published and did not reach a larger audience. As Blues gained wider recognition, more publications of Blues music appeared. The lyrical themes and rhythmic patterns of Blues songs became more standardized, leading to the emergence of Blues stars and a growing trend of popularity, which facilitated wider dissemination. Publications labeled as "Blues songs" started to appear on the market, and minstrel stages in African American communities across the Southern cities began featuring Blues performances. Two milestone Blues songs emerged during this period: "I Got the Blues," published in 1908 in New Orleans by Antonio Maggio, and "I'm Alabama Bound," composed in 1909 by White New Orleans pianist Robert Hoffman, with the subtitle "The Alabama Blues." By this time, the primary, secondary, and dominant chord progressions of Blues music had been established, and typical thematic content had formed within Blues lyrics. Once Blues songs appeared, they quickly gained popularity, much like other folk songs. Blues music soon became a widely recognized and accepted musical genre.

Some Blues singers born in the 1870s and 1880s later became stars and began recording their own music, gaining considerable influence and fame across the United States. One of the most famous Blues singers was Charley Patton (1887–1934), who sang in one of his Blues songs:

"I see a rolling river, it feels like a journey to a distant place,

I jump into the clear river to travel far away…
I will go south to find my friends,
Some say the Clear River Blues is nice,
But that Clear River Blues is not my dream.
The night has fallen, all is silent,
The lonely wilderness holds my dear in my eyes,
How long has the train been gone…
I am about to leave,
To walk that lonely road, I am about to go."

From these lyrics, it can be seen that Blues at this stage expressed a longing for a better life, as well as personal observations and experiences. The themes of Blues music had taken shape, focusing on individual emotions, reflections, personal desires, and social conditions. The lyrics were inspired by the singer's thoughts, wishes, and observations of social phenomena, rather than simply venting dissatisfaction and rebellion as in the earliest stages of Blues. Blues musicians began to observe the beauty around them, and from the perspective of the lyrics, it is evident that African Americans had achieved a degree of liberation. Their living environment had improved, and their focus gradually shifted to observing life changes. The evolution of Blues lyrics reflected changes in the thoughts of African Americans.

At the same time, as Blues music moved into urban areas, different regions developed their distinctive styles, leading to the emergence of various urban Blues genres. These regional styles of Blues flourished, including Delta Blues, Texas Blues, Chicago Blues, New Orleans Blues, Memphis Blues, and Southeastern Blues.

In the early 20th century, as the number of large theaters in major American cities increased, Blues music transitioned from spontaneous street performances to formal theatrical productions. When Black musical performances began to cater to Black audiences, the establishment of Black theaters in cities became necessary. The early 20th century saw the emergence of Black theaters, with a man from Memphis initiating a small-scale theater tour in the South in 1907.In 1909, the Theater Owners' Booking Agency (TOBA) was established, an organization dedicated to registering Black artists and audiences. This organization was commonly referred to as "Toby Time," while others called it "Tough On Black Asses." The establishment of TOBA marked the formalization and professional management of Black musical performances. Several theaters flourished during this period, including The Pastime and The Beale Avenue Palace in Memphis, The Lyric in New Orleans, The Lyceum in Cincinnati, The Dream in Columbus, The Koppin in Detroit, and The Bijou in Nashville. These theaters frequently hired female Blues singers, leading to the widespread popularity of Classic Blues. Unlike Downhome Blues, which was characterized by spontaneous, improvised melodies, Classic Blues featured songs composed by professional songwriters. The structure of Classic Blues became more stable, the rhythm more relaxed, and the vocal style more refined and delicate. With the accompaniment of jazz bands, Classic Blues developed a slight jazz influence, paving the way for the commercialization of Blues with full-band accompaniment.

During this period, Blues music developed into a mature musical genre with distinct characteristics. First, it featured a unique musical tone and a vocal style that included falsetto and growling. Its structure was characterized by a compact call-and-response format, with musical phrases often presented in a conversational style and accompanied by rhythmic clapping patterns. The rhythm of Blues music had its distinct patterns, though the methods of clapping and percussion varied. In its early days, Blues accompaniment primarily included instruments such as the banjo, harmonica, piano, violin, and even small brass bands, as well as drums and other percussion instruments. Modern Blues, however, frequently incorporates syncopation, melancholic tonalities, improvisational variations between beats, and multiple tonal variations within a single section. It also features accompaniment from reed and brass instruments. The evolution of Blues music led to the emergence of large ensembles and the integration of elements from other musical styles.

Blues music is characterized by a distinctive chord sequence, which can be expressed in the 1-4-1-5-4-1 pattern. This harmonic sequence begins with the tonic (1) in harmony with the subdominant (4), reflecting the conversational nature of Blues music. However, this interaction varies depending on the song. The subdominant (4) may persistently repeat the tonic (1) or introduce slight modifications, but the fundamental progression remains the same: moving from the tonic (1) to the subdominant (4) and then returning to the tonic (1). In the second phrase, the tonic (1) and subdominant (4) chords often reach a climax. Blues musicians continuously sought to innovate by introducing a third chord after the initial two, further enhancing the harmonic complexity of the music.

In addition, Blues music follows a fixed 12-bar AAB pattern. Under this structure, a Blues song typically consists of twelve 4/4 time measures, which are divided into three parts, each containing four measures. Generally, the first line (A) is repeated, while the second line (A) may feature subtle variations in accentuation. The third line (B) concludes with a rhyme that corresponds to the previous two lines. However, the twelve measures are not always rigidly distributed among the three sections of the song. During performance, an extra two measures may be added to a particular section. Correspondingly, the accompanying instruments might reduce two measures to align with the lyrical phrasing. This interplay between the three four-measure lyrical phrases and their instrumental accompaniment creates a complete 12-bar structure. This AAB pattern contrasts with other, more complex musical structures in Blues. Instrumental accompaniment typically consists of a harmonic framework based on the tonic (I), subdominant (IV), and dominant (V) chords. Beyond the standard AAB format, Blues music includes other variations such as the AAA pattern (12 bars), AAAB pattern (16 bars), AB pattern (8 bars), and repeated AB pattern (12 bars). Sometimes, the first four bars create a sense of correspondence, while the latter eight bars contain repeated phrases.

In summary, Blues music is fundamentally based on a pentatonic scale for both vocal and instrumental performance, featuring a distinctive harmonic structure. Its melodies are built around chord progressions that primarily revolve around the I, IV, and V chords, with the 12-bar format serving as a recurring framework. A key characteristic of Blues melodies is the flattening of the 3rd, 5th, and 7th scale degrees of the tonic, which produces the distinctive “Blues notes” that evoke a bittersweet, melancholic emotional impact. Later, the 12-bar Blues form became the foundational structure for jazz improvisation. In jazz, new improvised melodies continuously emerge over the repeating 12-bar structure, supported by bass lines, offering musicians endless possibilities for interpretation and variation beyond the basic tune. It can be said that the development of Blues music laid the groundwork for the evolution of jazz and other popular music genres.

3. Conclusion

Looking at the emergence and development of Blues music, from its early formative period to its full establishment and flourishing growth, Blues has always served as a voice for African Americans. The evolution of Blues music reflects the changes in the living conditions of Black people—from their initial status as exploited and oppressed slaves to gradually gaining freedom and slowly integrating into White society. Correspondingly, the lyrical themes of Blues music transitioned from expressions of suffering and the depiction of a bleak existence to yearning for freedom and resistance against oppression, and later to celebrating a better life and reflecting on their social environment, personal experiences, and inner thoughts. The content expressed through Blues music reveals the changing social conditions and evolving mindsets of African Americans. It also reflects their shifting attitudes toward White people, American society, politics, and religion. Blues music has witnessed the history of African Americans; it is not just a musical genre but also a form of resistance, a means of expressing freedom, and a celebration of life.

Although Blues music emerged as a fusion of Black and White musical influences, it has always been performed predominantly by African Americans, embodying their social and racial identity in the United States. The evolution of Blues music is closely linked to the social and political status of African Americans, representing the awakening of Black national consciousness—a process of

oppression, resistance, and eventual integration. The themes of Blues songs are closely tied to the lives and social standing of African Americans. As their social status improved, the performance venues and audiences of Blues music also underwent significant changes. Initially performed for Black audiences, Blues gradually attracted White listeners and eventually saw White musicians participating in Blues performances. Over time, the racial and class distinctions of Blues music weakened, and it became a genre embraced and performed by people of all backgrounds. However, despite its universal appeal, Blues music retains its historical significance as a symbol of the African American struggle for freedom. The racial and social identity associated with Blues music serves as a lasting testament to the resilience and perseverance of African Americans in their fight for equality and recognition.

Blues music reflects the changing living conditions of African American communities as well as broader social transformations. It carries strong social and functional significance. The evolution of African American society has been a key factor in the stylistic changes of Blues music. Social factors inevitably drive shifts in musical styles, and changes in the social status of African Americans have influenced the way their music is expressed—both in form and content. The social function of African American music has also evolved alongside their changing societal position. Initially, Blues served as a tool for African Americans to vent their frustrations and express resistance. However, as their social status improved and the need for such expressions of defiance diminished, Blues transitioned into a genre that entertained the masses and nurtured the spirit. It began to focus on celebrating life, love, and freedom. Although modern Blues no longer primarily conveys themes of oppression, the tradition of using music to reflect personal struggles and resistance remains intact and has been integrated into American popular music. The spirit of struggle inherent in Blues has influenced popular music, enabling it to reflect social realities, express the artist's inner thoughts, and endow it with a deeper mission beyond entertainment.

From its inception to its rise in popularity, Blues music evolved from being performed exclusively within African American communities in the southern United States to being embraced by audiences of all racial backgrounds across the country, and eventually expanding to the Western world and beyond. The development of Blues music highlights its profound social nature. It mirrors the social changes in American society, reflecting cultural, political, and economic aspirations while also representing the spiritual heritage and cultural richness of the African American community.

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