**Musical Elements of the Blues**

Blues is a musical form and genre that originated in African American communities in the “Deep South” of the United Stated around the end of the 19th century, originating from African chants, spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and European rhymed simple ballads. It is the bed-rock of American music influencing jazz, blue grass, R & B, rock & roll.

**About the Blues**

* Have roots in West Africa (Senegal, Nigeria, Mali and Ghana)
* Drew on numerous cultural traditions (Influenced by Scottish & Irish settlers)
* Grew from and built on several proceeding US-originated musical forms
* The word Rap comes from the Blues—which means to communicate (early slaves called playing the drums rapping, the drums were a form of communication)
* 1909-Memphis band leader, W.C. Handy, inspired by the blues he heard while traveling through the South, published the first blues composition, “Memphis Blues”
1. **Form:**

Although there are many different forms in the blues, such as 16-bar, 8-bar…..the most common form is the 12-bar blues. From a literary stand point a blues is a three line AAB poetic form.

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| *Ex. St. Louis Blues – comp. W.C. Handy* |
| **Bar 1** | **Bar 2** | **Bar 3** | **Bar 4** |
| *I hate to see* | *the evenin’ sun go* | *down.* |  |
| **C** | **F** | **C** | **C7** |
| **Bar 5** | **Bar 6** | **Bar 7** | **Bar 8** |
| *Hate to see* | *the evenin’ sun go* | *Down.* |  |
| **F** | **F** | **C** | **C** |
| **Bar 9** | **Bar 10** | **Bar 11** | **Bar 12** |
| *‘Cause my baby* | *he done lef’ this* | *Town.* |  |
| **G** | **G7** | **C** | **C** |

1. **Shuffle Rhythm:**

Many would say that shuffle rhythm is the heartbeat of the blues, the defining element that brings the music to life. Think of it as the relation between sounds in time, like the ticking of a clock or the chugging of a train engine.

**3. Improvisation:**

This is the act of creating music on the spot, as opposed to writing it down before one begins to play.

**4. Riff:**

This is a musical phrase repeated over and over, usually as a background to the main melody. Most blues melodies are riffs. It probably began in the 19th century, an improvised solo cry or whale used in work songs.

**5. Blue Notes:**

Blue notes are an important part of the blue’s tone color. They are perhaps best described as slightly flatted thirds, fifths, sixths and seventh notes of the scale in syncopated rhythm.

**6. Call and Response:**

This practice is exactly what its name says it is. A “call” (musical theme) is played by one or more musicians, and it is then followed by a “response” (a musical answer or repetition of the same theme) by a different group. In many ways, call and response can be thought of as a musical conversation between two groups. It is similar to the riff.