

# What (is) The Blues

Akram  
Najjar

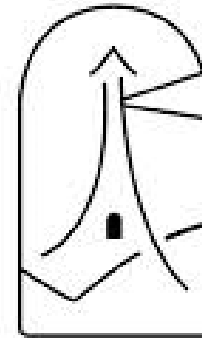


# But first of all . . . Thanks go to our Friends

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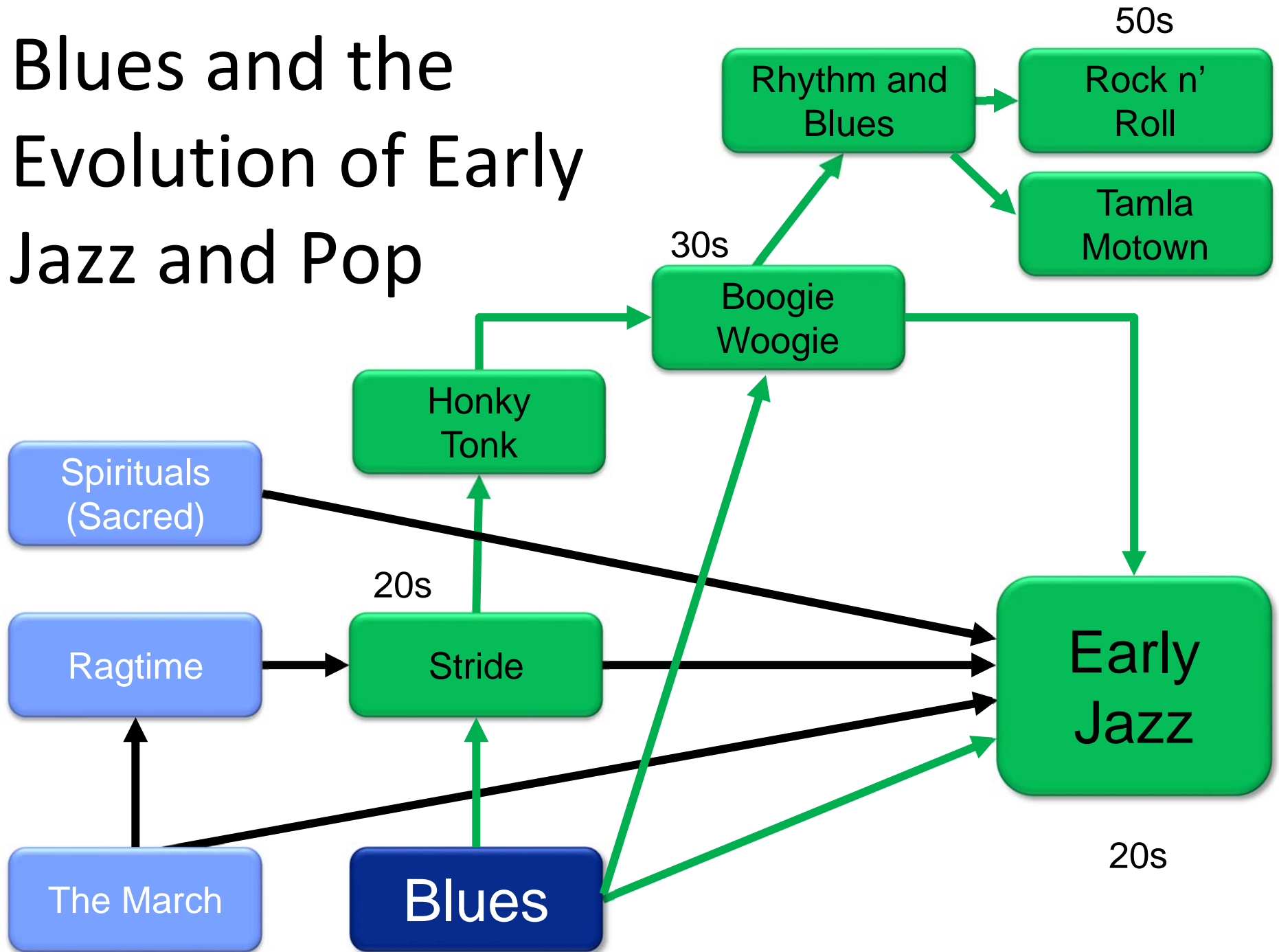
CHATEAU



QANAFAR



# Blues and the Evolution of Early Jazz and Pop



# African Roots

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- Music was functional
- It was tied to everyday life:
  - Birth / Death / Marriage / Exorcism
  - Agricultural Events / Calendar Events
  - Sicknesses / Woes / Religious Feasts
- Music was also found in:
  - Work Songs / Field Hollers (Communications)
  - See the Film: **Amandla!: A Revolution in 4-Part Harmony**
- “Professional” musicians were not common
  - They were an addition to village life

# Characteristics of African Music

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- **The Body** was part of the music:
  - Clapping / Swaying / Pounding a Stick / Dancing
  - Dress code followed music
- **Everyone sang**
  - Individuals come in and out of the performance
- **Call and response**: singing
- **Riffs**: communal repetition of musical phrases

# The African Drum Family

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- Dominates all instruments
- **Poly-rhythms (or Cross rhythm)** is very common
- It is the simultaneous use of 2 or more conflicting rhythms or when the regular pattern of accents of the prevailing meter is contradicted by a conflicting pattern
- The tribe is divided to play different rhythms
- The banjo started life as a percussion instrument



# More . . .

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- **The Pentatonic scale** is basic: (more later)
- Other Common Western scales were not common
- **Bent Notes**: going from one note to another by singing or playing all pitches in between
- **Swung Notes** (best shown through a demonstration)
- **Riffs** = repeated sequences or phrases
- **Vocal Characteristics** are unusual . . . .
  - Raspy Tones / Buzzes / Falsetto / Bending Tones
- No attempt at finding a **pure or beautiful vocal sound**
- Nor a **perfect mastery of instruments**

# Examples: Works Songs / Hollers / Etc.

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- 1) **Call and Response:** Work Songs in a Texas Prison
- 2) **Field Holler**
- 3) **Field Holler (French Clip)**
- 4) **Bessie Smith:** Ma Man's Gotta Heart like Rock n Steel
- 5) **Cross Rhythm:** visual example
- 6) **Riff + Call and Response:** Glenn Miller: In the Mood
- 7) **Call and Response:** Miles Davis – So What



# The Blues “is” Many Things . . .

## SOME or ALL of the following . . .

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- 1) It is a **Mood** of music evoked by sorrowful lyrics
  - Mostly about “unsatisfied love”
  - “Situation of slavery” was not a common subject
- 2) Songs repeat **12 bars**: each set is made up of a specific relationship between 3 keys
- 3) Blues scales use **Blue Notes**
- 4) Blues uses **African Musical Devices**
  - Bent notes / Swung notes / Riffs
- 5) It uses **African / Slave Singing Devices**
  - Work Songs / Field Hollers / Call and Response

# The Blues Gave Jazz: The Unexpected

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## 1) Offbeat Melodies

- A singer or a player plays a note just before/after the beat
- **Billie Holiday** was the GENIUS who mastered that
- A Sailboat in the Moonlight with **Lester Young**

## 2) Swung Notes:

- Blues/Jazz musicians use a beat of 8 x triplets
- They then remove the middle note in the triplet
- This needs a **demonstration**

# Swung Note:

## A Contribution of the Blues to Jazz

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1 2 3 4



1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and

# Swung Note: Remove the Middle Note of Triplets

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1 and ah 2 and ah 3 and ah 4 and ah

This musical exercise consists of four measures on a treble clef staff. Each measure contains a triplet of eighth notes. A thick black horizontal bar is drawn over the middle note of each triplet. Below the staff, the lyrics '1 and ah', '2 and ah', '3 and ah', and '4 and ah' are written under each measure respectively. Above each triplet, a bracket with the number '3' indicates the triplet.



1 and ah 2 and ah 3 and ah 4 and ah

This musical exercise is identical to the one above, but the thick black horizontal bar is drawn over the first and last notes of each triplet instead of the middle note. The lyrics and triplet markings remain the same.

# And the Blues also gave . . .



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**3) Bent Notes:** the blues singer will not jump from one note to another but will “glide” singing all the tones in between (also applies to guitar playing)

- **Big Bill Broonzy** in Backwater Blues

**4) Blue Notes:** these are 3 notes outside the standard European major scale (which has 7 notes):

- The 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes are frequently flattened
- Flattening = playing the note just below a note whether it is in the scale or not
- **Demonstration:** blues notes (and bent notes)

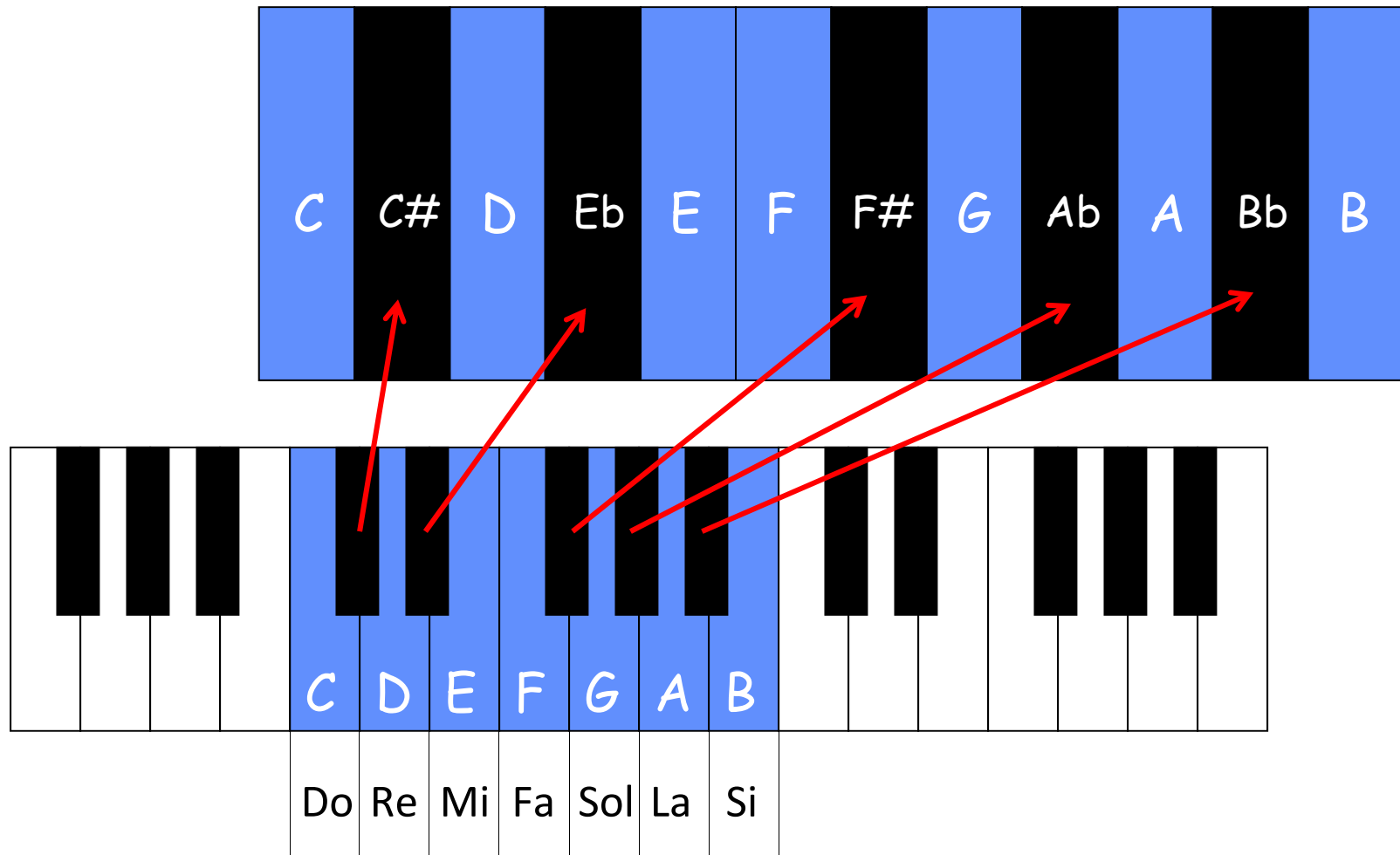
# AND for those who wish to know . . . .

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**5) Pentatonic Scale** is made up of 5 notes out of the 12 standard European tones

- Separated by 1 Tone - 1 Tone - 1 ½ Tones - 1 Tone
- C – D – E – G – A
- The Pentatonic Scale is pervasive:
  - Chinese / African / Celtic / Latin American / etc.
- **Sudani Song:** Ashrat Ayyam (Pentatonic Scale)
- Next we will show how the Blues Scale (6 notes) is derived from the Western Major Scale
- And how the 5 of the Pentatonic notes are found in the Blues Scale

# C Major Scale (7 notes)

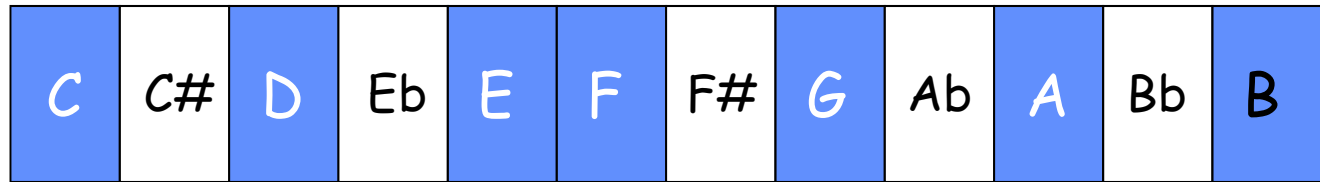




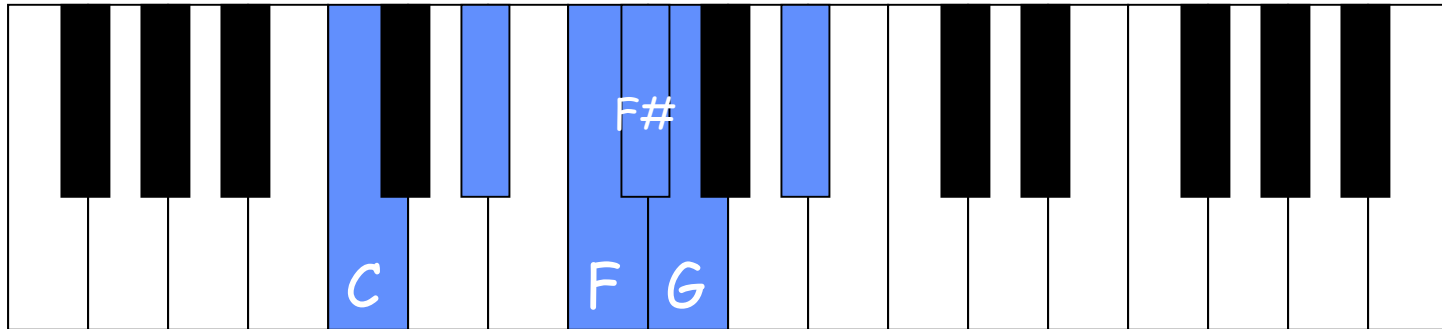
# C Major Blues Scale (6 notes)

Contains 3 Notes from C Major which are Flattened

C Major

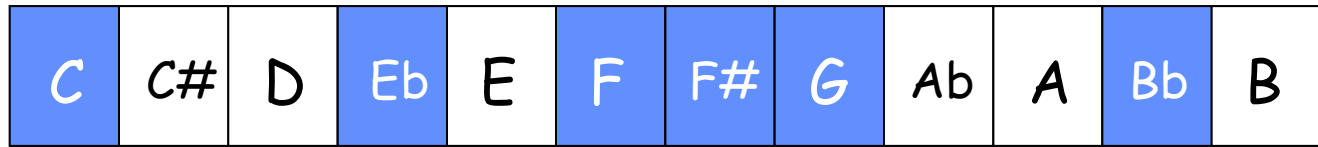


C Major Blues

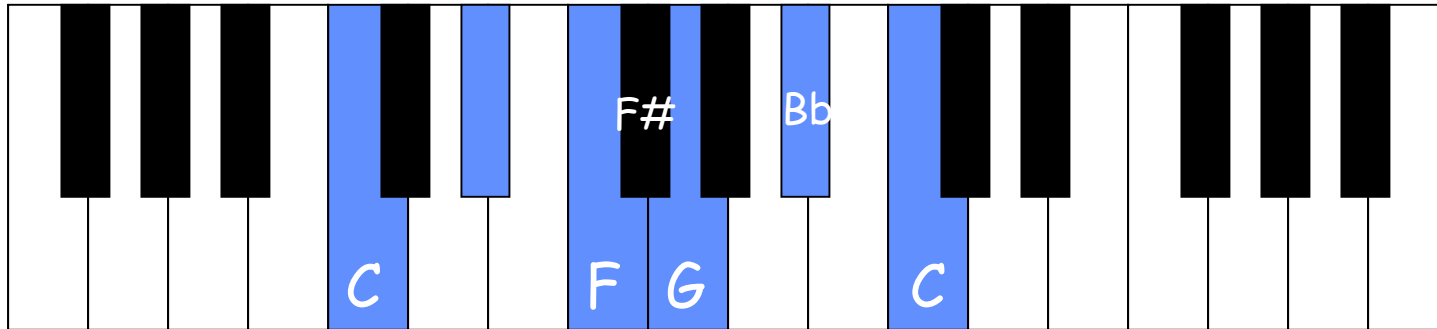


# E Flat Pentatonic Scale

C Major Blues



E flat Pentatonic



# **4) The 12 Bar Three Minute Song**

# Most Western Songs have the **Sweet Little Sixteen** structure (often 32, 64 . . . )

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- Each chorus has 4 phrases = **A – A – B – A**
- Each is in 4 bars giving us **16 bars**
- Usually, the first 2 A's are in the same key:
  - Sweet Little Sixteen
  - Happy birthday
  - The Ode to Joy theme from Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony
- Phrase B goes to another key, phrase and melody
- **Resolution**: the last A resolves the tension created by the jump to B's key and returns to the initial key.

# Examples of 16 Bars . . .

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- **George Harrison:** The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea
  - 4 groups of 16 bars each . . . .
  - The second group is a refrain, completely different
- **Chuck Berry:** Sweet Little Sixteen

# The 12 Bar Blues (Creates More Tension)

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- The last 4 bars: **A – A – B – X** are “amputated”
  - This leaves a feeling of emptiness, tension
- **More Empty Space:** the 3 groups = 4 bars each
  - The first 2 bars are sung leaving 2 bars for “tension”
  - Later, this space was used for instruments to improvise
  - **Soon:** an example of Beatles genius

Examples: **12 Bar Blues** (more to come)

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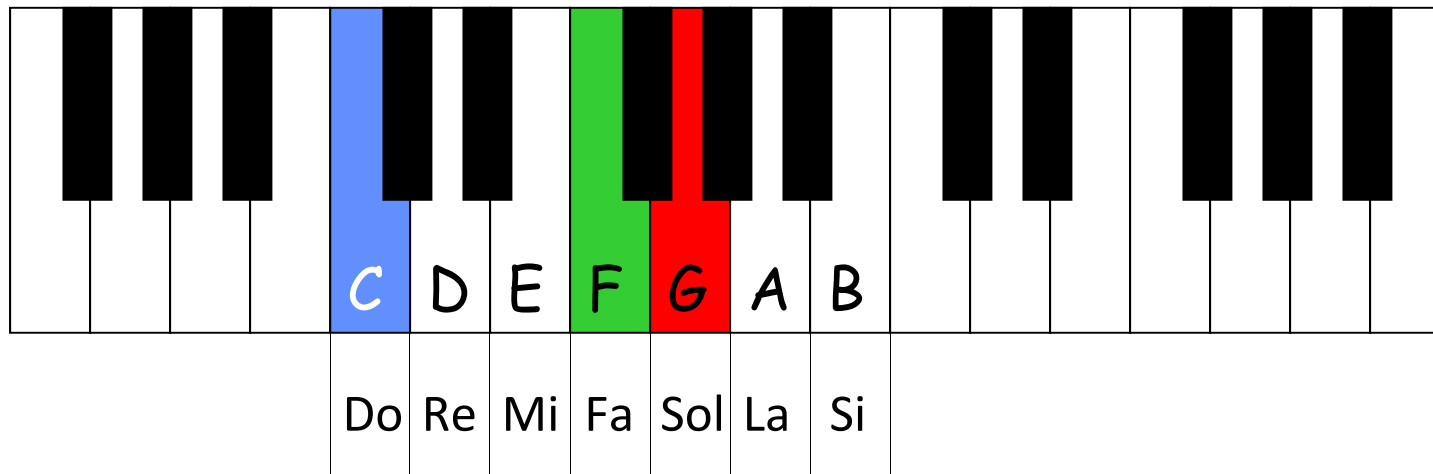
- 1) **Boogie Woogie**
- 2) **Ursula Ricks:** Early One Morning (Jimmy Williams)
- 3) **Beatles:** Kansas City (Leiber and Stoller)
- 4) **Beatles:** Birthday



# Keys Related to the Tonic (Starting) Key

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- Say we are playing in the Key of C = **Tonic**
- The **Sub-Dominant** = the key of the 4<sup>th</sup> Note in C = F
- The **Dominant** = the key of the 5<sup>th</sup> Note in C = G
- (Other starting keys have different 4<sup>th</sup>'s and 5<sup>th</sup>'s)



## Ending A – A – B on the Dominant (5th / G)

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- The first 4 bars (A) are all in C or the Tonic
- The second 4 bars (A) are: 2 in F then 2 in C
- The third 4 bars (B) have this sequence:  
G – F – C – G or (5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> – Tonic – 5<sup>th</sup>)
- 12 Bar Blues end in the **Dominant (5th/ G)**
- NOT in the tonic as in the case of most Western Songs
- It forces the Blues singer to keep on repeating the 12 bars

# More Tension . . .

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- We have already amputated the last group
- We now find that AAB is unresolved = more tension
- The need to return to C in the next A-A-B is called the **Turn Around**
- Playing Blues is compulsive
- Performers reach the **Turn Around** and have the urge to continue with another A – A – B

# The Standard Twelve Bar Form (AAB)



Woke up this morning, blues hanging in my head

**A**

C (Do)

C (Do)

C (Do)

C (Do)

Woke up this morning, blues hanging in my head

**A**

F (Fa)

F (Fa)

C (Do)

C (Do)

Ma woman left me, just a room n' an empty bed . . . . .

**B**

G (Sol)

F (Fa)

C (Do)

G (Sol)



Turnaround

# 8 Bar Blues – Not Very Common



- First Form: 1 – 5 – 4 – 4 / 1 – 5 – 1 – 5
- Second Form: 1 – 1 – 4 – 4 / 1 – 5 – 4 – 5
- Third Form: 1 – 1 – 1 – 1 / **5 – 4 – 1 – 5**
- Lots of varied forms - None are highly standardized
- **Big Bill Broonzy**: Keys to the Highway
- **Muddy Waters**: Baby Please Don't Go
- **John Lee Hooker (with Van Morrison)**: Baby Please Don't Go

# Country Blues (mid 1800s or earlier)

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- **Blues Starts as a Vocal genre**
  - Accompaniment? Sometimes none – sometimes a guitar
- **Lyrics**
  - Dealt with the hardships of life
  - Mostly love issues – not slavery
- **Vocal Style**
  - Very expressive
  - Voice quality not critical
- **Location:** work camps, rural areas
- **Singers:** mostly men

# Examples of Country Blues

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- 1) **Blind Lemon Jefferson**: See That My Grave Is Kept Clean (1928)
- 2) **Big Bill Broonzy**: I Can't Be Satisfied (1930)
- 3) **Rolling Stones**: I Can's Be Satisfied
- 4) **Big Bill Broonzy**: Sun's gonna shine in my backdoor
- 5) **Robert Johnson**: Come on in my Kitchen
- 6) NOTE: these are late recordings because at the time Country Blues evolved, there was no recording



# Urban / City Blues (Late 1890s)

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- **Accompaniment:** piano or small bands
- **Lyrics:** more sophisticated, problems of the heart, social issues, etc.
- **Vocal Style:** more refined
- **Location:** vaudeville, clubs, red light environment
- **Singers:** usually women
- **Next?** By early 30s, Blues invaded Jazz
  - A lot of non-vocal blues
  - All types of instruments

# In the Modern Period . . . .

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- Blues became pervasive
- Large schools of Blues blossomed in different areas
- An important school is the British Blues
  - Early Eric Clapton (also with CREAM)
  - Georgie Fame
  - The Rolling Stones, Fleetwood Mac, Alexis Korner, etc.
  - Etc.

# Examples: Urban and Modern Blues

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- 1) **Billie Holiday**: T'ain't Nobody's Business if I do
- 2) **Thelonious Monk**: Blue Monk
- 3) **Dexter Gordon**: Blue Monk
- 4) **Jimi Hendrix**: Red House
- 5) **Georgie Fame**: Bluesology (Milt Jackson)
- 6) **Pentangle**: I've Got a Feeling (A blues in waltz time)
- 7) **Duke Ellington**: C Jam Blues
- 8) **Dave Brubeck**: Blues Piece
- 9) **Miles Davis**: Freddy Freeloader

**What is the  
Epitaph  
of a  
Blues Singer?**

