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This issue is dedicated to Dr. Sheryl Murphy-Manley

The Blues:

Going Medieval on Your Assumptions

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Abstract

No one disagrees that the blues is an American art form, although some arguments may come up about what constitutes blues in general and the differences between blues styles. Each blues style, however, contains common components, along with unique characteristics. In a broad sense, they are identified by the notes that fall “in the cracks,” by the microtones or pitch bending that falls outside of Western diatonic music. These non-standard notes provide a sonic version of tension and release usually associated with song texts.

In this paper, I discuss blues material from an historical perspective; if blues became a part of the American musical landscape in the early 20th century (Wald) and is associated with the post-emancipation African American population, then when and where did the musical and textual components begin their journey? Irregular intervals found in modern blues are also found in centuries-old musics from different parts of Africa as well as in the Islamic call to prayer (Gioia), and a clear paper trail exists between the Arabic music theory of Al-Farabi in the 10th century and its subsequent diaspora to the West (Stevenson). Add to this the plausible connections one can make between 16th-century ground basses with the ubiquitous 12-bar blues (Ross), and you can find no clear point of origin for the harmonic vocabulary, form, or nuances associated with modern blues. These defining characteristics came into the US separately and formed a global confluence that we now call the Blues.