Listening Guide "ST. LOUIS BLUES"

Music and lyrics by W. C. Handy; published 1914; performed by Bessie Smith, accompanied by Louis Armstrong, cornet, and Fred Longshaw, reed organ; recorded 1925

"St. Louis Blues"

"St. Louis Blues" is more regular and predictable in its use of blues materials than typical rural examples of the form. In this song, W. C. Handy, a middle-class African American composer (see Box 5.1), combined elements borrowed from the country blues (discussed later in this chapter) with structural elements borrowed from Tin Pan Alley. The formal clarity of Handy's composition is respected by Bessie Smith and her accompanists, even as they use the song's structure as a springboard for subtle improvisations.

Basic Description

"St. Louis Blues" is a longer and more complex song than we have encountered heretofore, a result of composer Handy's fusion of blues with Tin Pan Alley elements. Hence, Bessie Smith's performance presents the song just one time through, without any repetitions; this is all she has time for in a record that nevertheless runs over three minutes in duration. The song's lyrics depict a representative blues subject and mood in their lament over love gone wrong and their projection of a desire to escape the scene of unhappiness. The slow tempo of this performance helps to accentuate the feeling of despair—notice especially the moaning quality of Smith's drawn-out vowel sounds.

Smith is accompanied on this record by reed organ and cornet. The organ is somewhat unusual; a more common choice would have been piano, but the less rhythmically emphatic organ certainly reinforces the singer's projection of hopeless lassitude. The cornet player is jazz great Louis Armstrong (see Chapter 3). Notice how Armstrong's cornet replies to each sung phrase, engaging in call and response with Smith in a manner that is typical of much African American music. Call and response is a common feature of blues and jazz performances of all types and periods.

Form

As may be seen in the accompanying chart, the form of "St. Louis Blues" is based on the AABA model commonly seen in Tin Pan Alley songs. In this instance, the final section is really a C, as it has a new melody, but is related to the earlier A sections by virtue of its identical length and its use of the same basic progression of chords. These A and C sections are representative of **twelve-bar blues**, a formal concept so important in the history of American popular music that it demands our attention here. In the next section of the chapter we explain some of the musical elements that make up twelve-bar blues.

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from Handy's own notation and double asterisks for those she has added on her own to enhance the performance:

* * *
I hate to see the eve-nin' sun go down.
** ** ** *
I hate to see the eve-nin' sun go down.
** ** * * *
It makes me think I'm on my last go-round.

Handy's written composition also calls for a great deal of rhythmic syncopation, or rhythms that play "off" or "against" or "between" the main beats that define the meter of the piece. In fact, Smith's performance goes even further in playing around the main pulse established by the accompaniment. Louis Armstrong's improvised cornet responses to Smith's vocal phrases are perfectly aligned with the singer's own stylistic approach; like Smith, Armstrong continually incorporates blue notes and syncopation into his melody lines. Without ever upstaging the singer, he maintains and underlines the pervading feeling of intense melancholy. But notice also how no two of his responses are ever precisely the same.

A further analysis of this performance would necessitate detailed comparisons between Handy's sheet music and the auditory data of the recording; such an examination would become quite academic and is obviously beyond the scope of this book. The miraculous thing is that all the intertwined and overlapping complexities that went into the making of this recording resulted in nothing remotely academic in effect: the performance comes across as immediate, direct, sincere, and emotionally devastating.

Dashboard
Automated Listening Guide

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TIME	FORM	LYRICS	DESCRIPTIVE COMMENTS
0:00	Introduction		Single held note on organ and trumpet
0:04	A	*I hate to see . . .*	Twelve-bar blues, with call and response between voice and cornet
0:49	A	*Feelin' tomorrow . . .*	
1:33	B: a	*St. Louis woman . . .*	B section has its own distinctive melody and internal form; call and response continues
1:47	b	*Pulls my man around . . .*	
2:02	a	*Wasn't for powder . . .*	
2:16	b	*The man I love . . .*	
2:28	C	*I got them St. Louis blues . . .*	C section returns to the twelve-bar blues format, but with a new melody; call and response continues to the end

The Song

"St. Louis Blues" begins as if it might be a kind of strophic folk blues, with two opening presentations of a typical blues format in both lyrics and musical structure. As we shall see, Southern rural blues songs often adhere to this format throughout. A major factor in the impact and complexity of Handy's song is that it sets us up for a repetitive structure and then deviates brilliantly and expressively from our expectations. The A music never returns, and instead we hear a succession of two new sections, B and C, after which the song concludes. (Handy might well have derived the inspiration for the form of "St. Louis Blues" from ragtime music, which often minimized large-scale elements of return or dispensed with them entirely.)

When the lyrics turn from a tone of general lament to the specifics of place and situation with the mention of the "St. Louis woman," the typical blues music of the A sections gives way to a B section of contrasting form and character, as well as striking length. In one sense, B functions like a bridge, insofar as it separates the opening and closing sections based on the traditional blues. But unlike almost all standard bridges of Tin Pan Alley songs, this B music presents an independent and memorable tune with its own distinctive structure (a-b-a-b; see the accompanying chart), and it is in fact longer than any other individual section of the song. This B tune—arguably the one that people most remember and identify with "St. Louis Blues"—is the central core of the song, virtually a song-within-a-song, rather than a transition in any sense. This emphasis is only fitting in music that accompanies lyrics that identify the villain of the piece and describe her allure.

The music of the B section, with its more graceful, insinuating rhythm (along with its change to a minor key from the prevailing major one) hints strongly at Latin American dance music, suggesting aspects of both the habanera and the tango. This tone evokes at once the exotic and cosmopolitan nature of the "St. Louis woman," with music obviously far removed from the unpretentious, more down-home flavor of the blues sections that portray the jilted singer and her feelings. Precisely at the time Handy published "St. Louis Blues," ballroom dance stars like Vernon and Irene Castle were making the tango the new definition of urban sophistication and sexiness in dance (see Chapter 3).

As already noted, the C section once again presents a blues chord structure, providing return on one level while offering even further variety with its new melody line and lyrics. Handy himself said of "St. Louis Blues," "Here, as in most of my other blues, three distinct musical strains are carried as a means of avoiding the monotony that always resulted in the three-line folk blues." While we may well disagree with the statement that strophic folk blues are inevitably monotonous, and while we may appreciate that Handy may well have made such a statement primarily to distance himself—as a middle-class, educated, urban black man—from poor, uneducated, rural members of his race, the remarkable richness of "St. Louis Blues" is indisputable. This piece, which synthesizes aspects of European American music (Tin Pan Alley song form), African American music (twelve-bar blues), and Latin American music (habanera and tango dance rhythms), is as representative as any we could name of the achievements of twentieth-century American popular song.

The Recording

W. C. Handy's published sheet music for "St. Louis Blues" presents a composition that uses "blue" melodic inflections and rhythmic syncopations to a degree unusual for its time. In notating his song, Handy still needed to balance his interest in evoking effects of pitch and rhythm that originated in African American folk tradition against the inherent limitations of a European-based system of musical notation. Bessie Smith's performance of "St. Louis Blues" adds yet another layer of complexity to Handy's already rich synthesis. Although Smith was by no means a rural blues singer herself, she approached the song as one intimately familiar and comfortable with many of the varied oral traditions of African American music, and consequently her performance treated Handy's composition with considerable—but never inappropriate—freedom.

Handy's published composition contains many written **blue notes**—"bent" or "flattened" tones that lie outside traditional European-based scale structures and reflect particular African American melodic characteristics. Blue notes probably reflect the long-range influence of African scales (and have to be notated as "altered" flat notes in European-based musical notation). In addition to Handy's written blue notes, Bessie Smith adds *additional* blue notes of her own to her performance, intensifying the African American flavor even further. The effect of blue notes is profoundly expressive and easy to hear, as blue notes in the melody generally clash poignantly with notes in the underlying chord. To help you locate and appreciate their effect, we will notate the first A section of the recording as an example. Below are the lyrics for this section. The particular words and syllables on which Smith sings the most prominent blue notes have asterisks above them—single asterisks for those blue notes she takes

(continued)