

What the Blues Knows About Yoruba That Musicologists Don't

The pentatonic scale, the blue note, the call-and-response — every defining element of the blues has a direct West African antecedent. Not a parallel. A lineage.

10 min read · SEMA Editorial Team · Musicology, Diaspora, History

WHAT THIS ARTICLE ARGUES

The blues is not an American invention that happens to resemble African music. It is African music, preserved intact across four centuries and an ocean, played on new instruments by people who were denied the right to know what they were carrying. The evidence is structural, neurological, historical, and social — and it was there long before the musicologists arrived to document it.

1. The Body Knows Before the Mind Does

The most compelling evidence is neurological, not academic. Malian kora melodies and Delta blues guitar runs trigger measurably similar emotional and physiological responses in listeners with African heritage — regardless of prior exposure to either tradition. The body carries what history tried to erase. The kora's pentatonic scale forms the direct foundation of blues music, but it is the specific melodic ornaments, pitch bends, and improvisational departures from the tonal center that prove lineage rather than coincidence.

2. The Blue Note Has a West African Address

The "blue note" — the flattened third and seventh that give the blues its characteristic emotional texture — has long been discussed and never fully explained by Western music theory. In Malian griot music, the jeli tradition of the Mande people uses microtonal inflections that occupy the same emotional space and do the same work. They appear in the blues because the people who invented the blues learned music from people whose grandparents were griots. Robert Johnson was playing something his

great-grandmother heard at a ceremony in what is now Nigeria.

"You don't invent the blue note. You inherit it."

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3. Call and Response: A Theology, Not a Technique

Call-and-response — foundational to every form of African American music from gospel to hip-hop — is not an artistic device in Yoruba practice. It is a theological one. The individual spirit (ori) calls; the community responds. Music is the medium in which that dialogue becomes participatory. This is why a Black church service feels structurally different from a Western concert: in the Western tradition there is performer and audience; in the African-descended tradition, everyone performs. The preacher calls. The congregation is the music.

4. The Guitar's Forgotten Ancestor

The ngoni — a West African lute of Malian and Guinean griots — is the direct functional ancestor of the blues guitar. Blues guitarists used the instrument in ways with no precedent in European music: bending strings to produce blue notes, using the guitar to imitate the human voice, playing simultaneously in rhythmic bass and melodic treble. These techniques are documented in kora and ngoni playing going back centuries. Blues musicians did not learn ethnomusicology. They played the way the music in their bodies told them to play.

5. The Griot and the Blues Man: One Social Position

The griot and the bluesman occupy structurally identical social roles: the outsider-insider whose function is essential but whose standing is liminal. Griots could speak uncomfortable truths to power, protected by their ceremonial role. Blues musicians played at juke joints — spaces the church officially disapproved of but privately depended on — singing about subjects polite society left unsaid. Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey were not bohemians. They were griots in a new landscape, maintaining an ancient function: the community's capacity to tell the truth about itself in sound.

6. Hip-Hop Completes the Circuit

The progression from blues to jazz to soul to hip-hop is not a movement toward sophistication. It is a movement toward explicitness about what the tradition has always been. The MC is the griot. The sample is the genealogical fragment. When DJ Kool Herc extended the break beat in the Bronx in

1973, isolating rhythm and dwelling in it, he was doing precisely what West African master drummers do. Kendrick Lamar as community chronicler, keeper of names, speaker of uncomfortable truths — this is the griot function, operating in 2026, in Los Angeles and Lagos and everywhere that music still does what it has always done: hold the community together in sound.

The musicologists will eventually catch up. The bodies already know.

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