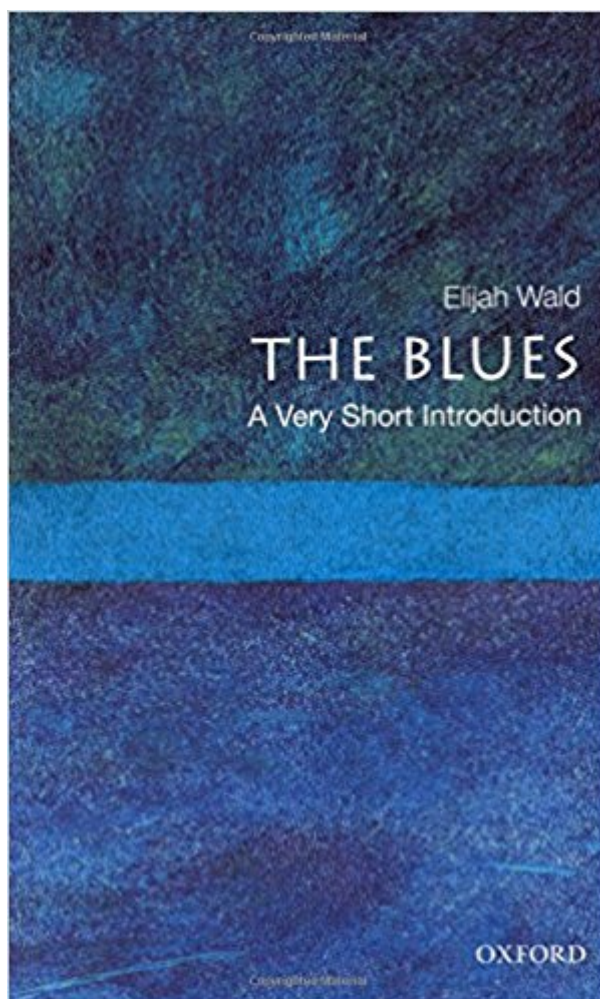


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The Blues: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Praised as "suave, soulful, ebullient" (Tom Waits) and "a meticulous researcher, a graceful writer, and a committed contrarian" (New York Times Book Review), Elijah Wald is one of the leading popular music critics of his generation. In *The Blues*, Wald surveys a genre at the heart of American culture. It is not an easy thing to pin down. As Howlin' Wolf once described it, "When you ain't got no money and can't pay your house rent and can't buy you no food, you've damn sure got the blues." It has been defined by lyrical structure, or as a progression of chords, or as a set of practices reflecting West African "tonal and rhythmic approaches," using a five-note "blues scale." Wald sees blues less as a style than as a broad musical tradition within a constantly evolving pop culture. He traces its roots in work and praise songs, and shows how it was transformed by such professional performers as W. C. Handy, who first popularized the blues a century ago. He follows its evolution from Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith through Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix; identifies the impact of rural field recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton and others; explores the role of blues in the development of both country music and jazz; and looks at the popular rhythm and blues trends of the 1940s and 1950s, from the uptown West Coast style of T-Bone Walker to the "down home" Chicago sound of Muddy Waters. Wald brings the story up to the present, touching on the effects of blues on American poetry, and its connection to modern styles such as rap. As with all of Oxford's Very Short Introductions, *The Blues* tells you--with insight, clarity, and wit--everything you need to know to understand this quintessentially American musical genre.

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Customer Reviews

The more I learn about the blues, the less I know, (at least in comparison to what I thought I knew before). Back in "the day", (which for me was the mid-1970s up until the mid-1990s, my peak fan years); I was sure about many things. I wouldn't have called myself a blues purist, that title would be relegated to acoustic fans who cursed the day Muddy Waters plugged in his guitar. (The same crowd hooted at Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965.) I was quite happy with the roots image that the blues enjoyed, but I saw it as something more. It deserved to be appreciated in its own right. To this day, (and I still enjoy the music), I will rarely venture into acoustic land, (although I appreciate many aspects of it; like Robert Johnson). But back then in "ancient" times I was well aware of the thievery that went along with the blues business, (and the music business in general). I heard about Led Zeppelin settling out-of-court for 'The Lemon Song', (which was a rip-off of Howlin' Wolf's 'Killing Floor'), and for 'Whole Lotta Love', (first covered by Muddy Waters and written by "Wee" Willie Dixon). There were many similar stories. Then some time passed. I became aware of an earlier version of a song, (1930), attributed to 'Howlin' Wolf, ('Sittin' On Top Of The World'), by the Mississippi Sheiks. (Howlin' Wolf published the song in 1957 under his real name, Chester Burnett). Then I recently read Buddy Guy's latest book 'When I Left Home', where he describes the aforementioned Mr. Dixon helping himself to songwriting credits for something that Mr. Guy created. And then we have 'The Blues: A Very Short Introduction' by Elijah Wald. (And, a more recent tome called 'How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'N' Roll', by the same author). Mr. Wald has done his homework.

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