

Starr-Waterman

American Popular Music

Chapter 5: "St. Louis Blues": Race Records and Hillbilly Music, 1920s and 1930s

Key People

Alberta Hunter (1895–1984): Nightclub singer known for recording the classic blues, billed as the “Marian Anderson of the Blues.”

Bessie Smith (1894–1937): Classic blues singer known as the “Empress of the Blues” who developed her singing style in rough-and-tumble black vaudeville and tent shows and famously recorded W. C. Handy’s composition “St. Louis Blues” in 1925.

Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897–1929): The first recording star of the country blues whose music reflects a distinctive East Texas style.

Carter Family: One of the most important groups in the history of country music, whose repertoire included adaptations of old songs from the Anglo-American folk music tradition, old hymns, and sentimental songs reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Tin Pan Alley hits.

Charley Patton (ca. 1881–1934): One of the earliest known pioneers of the Mississippi Delta blues style known for his powerful rasping voice, strong danceable rhythms, and broad range of styles.

Ethel Waters (1896–1977): Nightclub singer in the classic blues style who entertained the growing African American middle class in New York, Chicago, and other northern cities.

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (1886–1939): Popularly known as the “Mother of the Blues,” she recorded somewhat “rougher” versions of the classic blues and developed her singing style in the rough-and-tumble black vaudeville and tent shows.

Jimmie Rodgers (1897–1933): Early country music’s biggest recording star who celebrated the allure of the open road, chronicled the lives of men who forsook the benefits of a settled existence, and influenced almost every contemporary male country music star.

Mamie Smith (1883–1946): Black vaudeville performer who helped pioneer the race music market in the 1920s and recorded the influential song “Crazy Blues.”

Ralph Peer (1892–1960): a Missouri-born talent scout for Okeh Records who first applied the promotional catchphrase “race music” and helped record the first commercially successful hillbilly record by Fiddlin’ John Carson.

Robert Johnson (1911–1938): Country blues musician with the greatest influence on

later generations of blues and rock musicians who claimed he sold his soul to the devil at a country crossroads.

Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948): Texas-born former light-opera singer who recorded the first big country music hit.

William Christopher Handy (1873-1958)- Regarded by many white Americans as the originator of the blues, W.C. Handy toured the south for twenty-five years to become acquainted with African American folk traditions that lent to his musical style. His “St. Louis Blues” of 1914 went on to become one of the most frequently recorded American songs of all time.

Woodrow Wilson “Woody” Guthrie: (1912–1967): Oklahoma-born singer and songwriter who composed songs that were more overtly political, including “This Land Is Your Land,” “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” and “Ludlow Massacre.”