

SINGLE NOTE BLUES - Where it might have started?

Improvisation of any kind, either sung or played, has always tended to be modal. That is to say, a few notes are selected from a scale and used at random or through repetition, to create a desired effect. This is especially so in western music where the diatonic scales we are used to, tend to be too weighted down with notes. (twelve if we consider the sharps and flats). Simple, memorable tunes can be found by taking just a few of these notes. If you think of the start of 'Three Blind Mice', you'll see what I mean. This tune comprises of a basic modal phrase using the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd elements of the scale, and soon becomes familiar when repeated a few times.

The pentatonic scale is a way of using this modal system and has become the most popular.

So, what is a pentatonic scale? As the name suggests it is five of something, that is, five notes selected from the diatonic scale. The five notes are the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th. How does this relate to the blues?

- Simple folk songs that formed the basis of the many work songs and later the blues, had melodies derived from the pentatonic scale.
- The pentatonic scale is not unique to western musical tradition. Similar scales exist in parts of Africa, and it is fair to assume they would have arrived with the slaves well before the birth of the blues.
- These pentatonic notes were somehow stressed into what we call blue notes.
- Because of the attitudes and indifference to the birth of the Afro-American culture, it was many years before anyone cared to study the development of the blues note.
- The blues note developed because slaves were too exhausted to sing the simple pentatonic phrases of the work songs in complete tune.
- Certain notes changed due to cultural differences and natural development.
- The blues note was just a minor or sad feel, and was bound to happen due to appalling conditions.
- The African pentatonic scales, already consisted of these blues notes and they just became integrated into the work songs.

The last point is probably the most likely origin of the blues note. Musicologists have shown, that in certain African tribes, the pentatonic scale is used to sing simple work songs, but differing to the European pentatonic by the lowering of the 3rd and 5th notes of the scale. The sound would have been eerie when mixed with the work songs and

hollers of the deep south. It was not necessarily associated with the emotion of the blues as we know it, and could mean happy as well as sad. Whatever happened, the sound became embedded in the unique Afro-American culture, and along with the many other social and economic factors, gave birth to the blues.