

Timeline of Black American Music & Danceable Rhythms

A Resource for Understanding Musicality Through Cultural Context curated by Kara Fabina

1600s–1900s: Slavery & Work Songs, Syncopated Dance Music (Folk Spirituals introduced around 1790s)

Context: Central themes around the experience of slavery, love/relationships, oral traditions, freedom. Songs featured call and response, phrasing, vocals, improvisations, and repetition. Work songs, field hollers and street cries were predominantly acapella and without any instruments. Syncopated dance music was often two drums and one stringed instrument.

Genres: Work Songs, Field Hollers, Street Cries, Satirical & Protest Songs, Game/Play Songs, Syncopated Dance Music

Songs:

- **Work Songs:** “*Lost John*”, “*Arwhoolie*”, “*Rails Unloading*”, “*Railroad 2*”, “*Complaint Call*”
- **Folk Spirituals:** “*Blow Gabriel*”, “*He Rose From The Dead*”, “*Go Down Moses*”, “*Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel*”, “*Steal Away*”
- **Syncopated Dance Music:** These were all played in an African-derived style as heard in “*Knox Country Stomp*” by the **Tennessee Chocolate Drops** and “*My Babe*” by a fife and drum band. The melodies were syncopated and involved timbral variation as heard in “*Altamont*” by **Murphy Gribble** (banjo), **John Lusk** (fiddle) and **Albert York** (guitar)

“Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers.” **Frederick Douglass**

1900s–1920s: Blues Roots & Early Jazz

Context: Born from African spirituals, work songs, and field hollers. Expresses both hardship and joy. Stride arose from early ragtime, and the combination of ragtime and blues gave birth to jazz. Early gospel is described as the words were spiritual, but it was the blues. Beginning in the 1890s, many female vocalists began their professional careers singing in traveling minstrel shows, medicine, and vaudeville shows, dance halls, sporting clubs, and cabarets. Vaudeville blues, like vaudeville itself, was primarily for entertainment.

Genres: Rural/Folk blues, Country blues, Delta blues, Vaudeville/Classic blues, ragtime, boogie woogie, New Orleans-style jazz, Stride Piano, early gospel, and early jazz

Artists:

- **Ma Rainey** – “Mother of the Blues”
- **Bessie Smith** – Powerful vocals, themes of love & survival
- **Jelly Roll Morton** – Early jazz innovator from New Orleans

“*Blues is not just music—it’s a way of life, a way of understanding and surviving the world.*” — **Angela Y. Davis**, scholar & activist

1930s–1940s: Swing & Race Records

Context: Big bands rise. “Race music” became the marketing term for Black music sold separately from white artists’ work. Big bands distinguish themselves from New Orleans-style bands by both the number of musicians (14-16 vs 5-7) and the style they’d play, scored arrangements that incorporate repeated riffs, call and response, improvised solos, and rhythmic breaks versus a collective polyphonic style. The combination of syncopated eighth-notes with improvised melodies later evolved into what became known as the swing style. Boogie-woogie, primarily a piano-based style, is one of the most rhythmically intense forms of blues music. Bebop is a jazz style that evolved during the 1940s, directly out of

and as a reaction to the restrictions of the swing bands of the 1930s. It marked the beginning of a new era in jazz alongside the decline of ballroom dancing during World War II and the closing of related venues.

Genres: Swing, boogie-woogie, jump blues, bebop

Artists:

- **Count Basie** – Rhythm-heavy swing, Kansas City style
- **Ella Fitzgerald** – Queen of jazz vocals and improvisation
- **Big Joe Turner** – Jump blues, precursor to rock & roll
- **Thelonius Monk** - Jazz innovator, pianist & composer, & a creative force in the development of bebop

"They called it race music, but it was the music of our hearts—and everyone eventually came to feel it too." — **Quincy Jones**

1950s–1960s: Rhythm & Blues → Soul

Context: "Race music" rebranded as **R&B**. Gospel meets secular expression. Civil rights era energy permeates music.

Genres: R&B, Soul, gospel-infused blues, Rock 'n' Roll, Hard Bop, Cool Jazz, Soul Jazz

Artists:

- **Ray Charles** – Blended gospel and blues into early R&B
- **Etta James** – Deep emotion and phrasing
- **Sam Cooke** – Soulful storytelling and protest anthems

"The blues had a baby, and they named it rock and roll." — **Muddy Waters**

1970s–1980s: Funk, Disco, Modern R&B

Context: Black dance music explodes in clubs and communities. Rhythmic complexity, groove, & celebration.

Genres: Funk, Disco, Quiet Storm, Electric Blues, Rap/Hip-Hop, Jazz Fusion, Punk & Alt-Rock, Detroit House, Go-Go, Praise & Worship, Christian Rap, New Jack Swing, Electro-Funk,

Artists:

- **Chaka Khan** – Funk & soul powerhouse
- **Al Green** – Romantic, smooth grooves
- **Prince** – Genre-defying innovator rooted in funk and soul

"Funk is the absence of any and everything you can think of, but the very essence of all things." — **James Brown**

1990s–Today: Neo-Soul, Revival, and Fusion

Context: Artists reclaim and remix Black music traditions. Neo-soul and fusion blend the old and the new.

Genres: Neo-soul, alt-R&B, jazz revival, fusion

Artists:

- **D'Angelo** – Groove and emotion in modern soul
- **Janelle Monáe** – Futurist funk, political power
- **Leon Bridges** – Retro soul with modern polish
- **Idkay** – Afro-Cuban, jazz, and electronic fusion

"We carry the stories of our people in our rhythms. When we dance, we remember." — **Toni Morrison**, paraphrased from *Beloved*

Listening = Learning: Let the music guide your dancing. Explore these traditions with respect and joy. Every rhythm, syncopation, and groove has a cultural story behind it.

Reference: <https://timeline.carnegiehall.org/timeline?view=timeline>