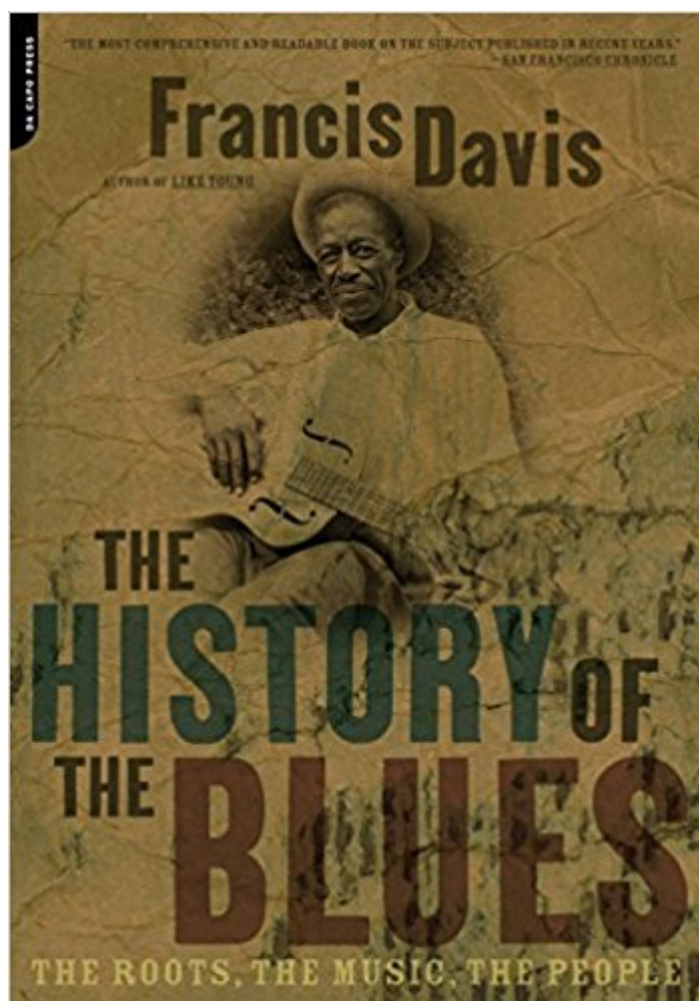


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# The History Of The Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People



## Synopsis

Francis Davis's *The History of the Blues* is a groundbreaking rethinking of the blues that fearlessly examines how race relations have altered perceptions of the music. Tracing its origins from the Mississippi Delta to its amplification in Chicago right after World War II, Davis argues for an examination of the blues in its own right, not just as a precursor to jazz and rock 'n' roll. The lives of major figures such as Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, and Leadbelly, in addition to contemporary artists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray, are examined and skillfully woven into a riveting, provocative narrative.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Davis, music critic for the Atlantic, treats the history of the blues with an emphasis on his own involvement with this music. He believes that attempts to discover the origins of the blues, often based on simplistic theories about slavery and Africa, are inconclusive, and he stresses that the interaction between recordings and the actual music makes it difficult to follow the music's internal development. He touches on the issue of white involvement with the blues and concludes with an elaborate "Blues Timeline" showing how significant dates in blues history relate to developments in jazz, pop, theater and literature as well as to important events in American history, arts, sciences and technology. His impressionistic text rambles at times, but numerous passages on individual performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Leadbelly and others are engaging, as are accounts of his trips to Memphis and Mississippi to see where it all began.

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Since its origin in Mississippi before the turn of the century, the blues has been pronounced dead many times. Davis (music critic of the Atlantic) assures us that it "rises up like Lazarus every ten years or so." This book, published in advance of a three-part PBS companion series scheduled to air in the fall of 1995, is a great starting place in understanding the continued appeal of this uniquely American music. Moving from its roots in field hollers, work songs, spirituals, country reels, and Anglo-Scottish ballads to its present-day uses selling diet soda and laxatives, Davis profiles the major artists and the developmental changes of the music. An extensive discography and bibliography give ample resources for future exploration, while a "Blues Timeline" offers an at-a-glance overview of blues milestones in relation to corresponding events in art and history. This fine introduction to the blues is recommended for most libraries. Dan Bogey, Clearfield Cty. P.L. Federation, Curwensville, Pa. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Overall, I liked this book. I came away from it with a greater understanding of the history of the blues, which was my intent going in. Davis is not afraid to challenge the status quo, which I respect, and back up his assertions with reason. He gives a good cross section of the people and places involved, and he seems to care about the subject (I feel that's important in a writer). The major problem I had with this book is the style of writing. You sometimes have to read around Davis' words to get to the meat of the subject. His style thoroughly expresses his socio-political views, but that's not what I'd expect readers of this sort of book to be looking for. Maybe he misread his audience, or just has (or at least had at the time), a writing style that could not adapt to writing for readers looking to understand history. It's also possible that he purposely wrote it, with sales and marketing in mind, to appeal to an audience that he perceived as being large (i.e., "Clinton democrats"), but I believe a history book needs to transcend sociopolitical whims. A recent reviewer said that Davis puts down African-Americans, but I simply don't believe that's true. In fact, I felt as though he reveres the black blues performers, both male and female. He does point out some of their individual imperfections, but that may actually be a good thing in this era of revisionist historians who are afraid to even mention the imperfections in the oppressed or the good sides of oppressors. By pointing out some of the personal imperfections, he actually leads us to a greater understanding of the people behind the music. As both a blues guitarist, and history researcher and

writer myself, I value that. In short, you can learn about the history of the blues from this book, and I expect that's why you would buy it. But you'll have to get past the perhaps-overly-personal style, especially early on. It shouldn't be the only book you read on the history of the blues, but it should be one of them.

I adopted this book as text for our History of the Blues class. It has a critic's perspective and insights that spice things up a bit and make the topic come to life.

Very Interesting. Was taking a class. The book came in handy

Davis challenges you virtually from page 1. That's one thing a good book should do. A less thick skinned reader might have been a little upset with his characterisation of one of the main groups who love blues music: overweight 50-something white males. I am one. There was more than a faint suggestion that o50swm's have a faintly condescending attitude to those nice lil' darkies plunking away at their guitars. Rather than slamming the book shut, I re-examined my views. He had a point: it was at university when I discovered this music. At the time, I was in one of my more pretentious periods: faux angry young socialist. But all I can do is thank Mr Davis. I have looked at myself. NOW I am sure. I love this music. I just love it. There is much to learn from this book. I don't agree with Davis' contention that white folks can't play the blues. They can. They do and and they do it very well.

Lovely book, well researched and well written. It's got a matt cover. I was wondering why the content was seen as contentious. It turns out it's a race thing. I would recommend reading Blues People by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) also.

Loved it. Very informative and turned me on to some blues I was not aware of. I have a much deeper appreciation for this American music form and the people who created it.

The research in this book was incredible, sometimes I found the author seemed to put in more words and thoughts, in a statement and you had to review the sentence from the beginning.

As a blues fan, this book takes a different approach the understanding the Blues genre of music, which I found quite informative. The author wanders around a bit, but in the end, it all comes

together. A good read!.

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