Music Paragraphs

**50 Greatest Traditional Blues Songs**

50 James Baker and gang – [Black Betty](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiCEVl_9-MM)  
First, something that gives a sense of the roots of blues. One of the most important antecedents was African American worksongs. This earliest recording of Black Betty was made by John and Alan Lomax in 1933 at Central State Farm, Sugar Land, Texas. The call and response of the work gang is led by convict James Baker. The song was popularised by Leadbelly who recorded it in 1941, and reinvented as a rock song by Ram Jam in 1977.

49 Larry Davis (1936 – 1994) – [Texas Flood](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boulE-ihcoY&feature=PlayList&p=DF79F030F90B9E19&index=46)  
Recorded in 1958 with [Fenton Robinson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fenton_Robinson)on guitar, this song was later popularised by Stevie Ray Vaughan.

48 [Memphis Minnie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memphis_Minnie)(1897 – 1973) – [Kissing In The Dark](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH8_WH5aRqo)  
She recorded over a forty year period, almost unheard of for any woman in show business at the time, and was an important part of the early Chicago blues scene.

47 [Victoria Spivey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria_Spivey)(1906 – 1976) – [Detroit Moan](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKGuHCWWYU0)  
Blues singer and pianist who described her own vocal style as the “tiger moan”.

46 [Bukka White](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bukka_White) (1909 – 1977) – [Parchman Farm Blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsJTOY67vlk)  
Written while serving a sentence at Parchman Farm prison for killing a man (he claimed in self defence).

45 [Casey Bill Weldon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casey_Bill_Weldon) (1909 – 196?) – [Flood Water Blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBokDBf_8vU)  
Slide guitarist from Chicago – singing about the [great Mississippi flood of 1927](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/05/0501_river4.html).

44 [Charlie Patton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charley_Patton) (1891 – 1934) – [High water everywhere](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xP2SFa1zmhc)  
And this too is about the great Mississippi flood, by the “father of Delta blues”.

43 [Memphis Slim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memphis_Slim) (1915 -1988) – [Beer Drinking Woman](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvAa38Yv3f8)  
Blues pianist who moved north to Chicago in 1937 where he performed with many of the greats.

42 [Blind Willie Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Willie_Johnson) (1897 – 1945) – [God moves on the water](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb6b0EKI_yE)  
Blues and spirituals singer on the sinking of the Titanic.

41 [Otis Spann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otis_Spann)(1930 – 1970) – [T’Aint Nobody’s Business If I Do](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejbxAfPGvHk)  
Blues pianist, singing a slow blues.

40 [Arthur Big Boy Crudup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Crudup) (1905 – 1974) – [My mama don’t allow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNaBDmrIrKM)  
Despite writing songs covered by Elvis Presley, he never received the wages or the royalties to which he was entitled, and some of his last decade of life was spent bootlegging and working as an agricultural labourer.

39 [Buddy Guy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddy_Guy) (1936 – ) – [What kinda woman is this](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9Wy7CaZLX0)  
“Buddy Guy has been called the bridge between the blues and rock and roll. He is one of the historic links between Chicago electric blues pioneers Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf and popular musicians like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page as well as later revivalists like Stevie Ray Vaughan.” – Wikipedia

38 [Lightnin´ Hopkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightnin'_Hopkins) (1912 – 1982) – [My starter won´t start this morning](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3SXKLas-ko)  
Prolific Texan blues guitarist.

37 [Sonny Terry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonny_Terry) (1911 – 1986) & [Brownie McGhee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownie_McGhee) (1915 – 1996) – [Cornbread, Peas And Black Molasses](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0kjUW5T_qE)  
In the 1940s this duo became part of the New York folk scene, performing alongside artists such as Leadbelly, Josh White, and Woody Guthrie.

36 [Jimmy Reed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Reed)(1925 – 1976) – [Little Rain](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPDk0W1cUmI)  
Slow paced guitar and harmonica song

35 [Albert King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_King) (1923 -1992) – [Born under a bad sign](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKY8KIt9kqc)  
Electric guitar bluesman from Mississippi.

34 [The Mississippi Sheiks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_Sheiks) – [Sitting On Top Of The World](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqeW7-tmVU4)  
Recorded in 1930, this song was later covered by many artists and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2008.

33 [Reverend Gary Davis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverend_Gary_Davis) (1896 – 1972) – [The Angel’s Message To Me](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpPs6xUbHZo)  
Ordained as a minister in 1933, nearly all of his blues and gospel recordings are from the late 1950s onwards, when he was already over 60. He performed at various folk festivals in the 1960s, but for him the important thing about the music he made was its religious content.

32 [Etta James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etta_James) (1938 – ) – [I just wanna make love to you](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUgvVAFFzN8)  
Written by Willie Dixon and first recorded by Muddy Waters, this number has been covered on numerous occasions including a version by the Rolling Stones.

31 [Otis Rush](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otis_Rush) (1934 – ) – [Got To Be Some Changes Made](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDhGVhspcl4)  
“His distinctive guitar style features a slow burning sound, jazz-style arpeggios and long bent notes… his sound became known as West Side Chicago blues and became an influence on Michael Bloomfield, Eric Clapton, Peter Green and Stevie Ray Vaughan.” – Wikipedia

30 [Blind Willie McTell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Willie_McTell) (1898? – 1959) – [Statesboro Blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnWxZtI3ONY)  
His most famous song, covered by various artists, most notably the Allman Brothers Band.

29 [Robert Lockwood Jr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Lockwood) (1915 – 2006) – [Kindhearted Woman Blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbAXWKDxjiA)  
This was the first song that Robert Johnson recorded, and was composed as if in answer to Cruel Hearted Woman Blues by Bumble Bee Slim, which in turn was based on Mean Mistreater Mama by Leroy Carr . Lockwood, who sings this version, was taught how to play guitar by Robert Johnson.

28 [Mississippi Fred McDowell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_Fred_McDowell) (1904 -1972) – [Goin Down to the River](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TyzAAwJnIw)  
Delta blues singer

27 [Ma Rainey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ma_Rainey) (1886? – 1939) – [Call Me Anything, But Call Me !](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiTUD0SRNnY)  
“If Bessie Smith is the acknowledged “Queen of the Blues,” then Gertrude “Ma” Rainey is the undisputed “Mother of the Blues.” As music historian Chris Albertson has written, “If there was another woman who sang the blues before Rainey, nobody remembered hearing her.” Rainey fostered the blues idiom, and she did so by linking the earthy spirit of country blues with the classic style and delivery of Bessie Smith. She often played with such outstanding jazz accompanists as Louis Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson, but she was more at home fronting a jugband or washboard band. ” – Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

26 [Keb Mo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keb_Mo) (1951 – ) & [Corey Harris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corey_Harris) (1969 – ) – [Sweet Home Chicago](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-XEQrp-kAg)  
This Robert Johnson number is an essential part of any self respecting bluesman’s repertoire.

25 [Robert Wilkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wilkins)(1896 – 1987) – [Rollin’ stone (part 1)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1keZ4NqW5Zs)  
Written by Muddy Waters, whose version was appropriately chosen by Rolling Stone magazine as number 459 on its list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time in 2004.

24 [BB King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BB_King) (1925 – ) – [You Upset Me Baby](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJ4qY6JSrvA)  
“His half-century of success owes much to his hard work as a touring musician who consistently logged between 200 and 300 shows a year. Through it all he’s remained faithful to the blues while keeping abreast of contemporary trends and deftly incorporating other favored forms – jazz and pop, for instance – into his musical overview … As a guitarist, King is best-known for his single-note solos, played on a hollowbody Gibson guitar. King’s unique tone is velvety and regal, with a discernible sting. He’s known for his trilling vibrato, wicked string bends, and a judicious approach that makes every note count … King doesn’t play chords or slide; instead, he bends individual strings till the notes seem to cry. His style reflects his upbringing in the Mississippi Delta and coming of age in Memphis.” – Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He’s still touring in 2009.

23 [Big Joe Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Joe_Williams) (1903 – 1982) – [Baby please don’t go](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikxLNaAYu5k&feature=related)  
First recorded by Big Joe in 1935; covered by Van Morrison, AC/DC and Aerosmith among others.

22 [Robert Petway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Petway)– Catfish blues  
There is no record, official or unofficial, of Petway’s death. As such, he may still be alive, though he would be roughly 100 years old. The last record of his public life is a quote from Honeyboy Edwards: “nobody I know heard what become of him.”

21 [Big Bill Broonzy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Bill_Broonzy) (1898 – 1958) – [Just A Dream](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPsdEI5GiiM)  
“I dreamed I was in the White House, sittin’ in the president’s chair  
I dreamed he’s shaking my hand, and he said ‘Bill, I’m so glad you’re here’  
But that was just a dream, Lord, what a dream I had on my mind…”

20 [Tommy Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canned_Heat_Blues) (1896 – 1956) – Canned heat blues  
The song is about an alcoholic who has taken to drinking Sterno – a fuel with a toxic mixture of ethanol and methanol, which when combined with liquids such as water was known as canned heat. The product is squeezed through a rag to extract the alcohol.

19 [Big Mama Thornton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Mama_Thornton) (1926 – 1984) – [Ball n chain](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-rNX1DKuMI)  
Willie Mae Thornton toured the south as a blues singer in the 1940s, then settled in Texas. She wrote and sang blues songs, played the harmonica and taught herself to play the drums. In 1953 she had a hit with Hound Dog, soon to be a smash for Elvis. In the intro to this live recording she refers to the fact that Ball n chain was also covered, by Janis Joplin.

18 [Mississippi John Hurt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_John_Hurt)(1892? – 1966) – [Payday](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3tm2qxpDBc)  
“Mississippi John never pursued success. In 1928 a mobile unit of the Vocalion company came to Avalon, Mississippi to look for new talents. An audition in Avalon resulted in John being called several months later to go to New York for a recording session under the direction of Lonnie Johnson. The depression led to the reduction in pressing of records and John stayed in Avalon and lived quietly on his farm with his 14 children.  
Guided by the words of one of the titles recorded in 1928 by Hurt, Avalon My Home Town, the folklorist Tom Hoskins decided in 1963 to go to Avalon. He met Hurt, who was shocked to see that someone remembered his 1928 recordings that had brought him only twenty dollars a song. John Hurt’s new career lasted only three years, but at Newport Festival, on college campuses, and in the folk clubs of Washington D.C., he displayed his talents as storyteller, entertainer, and singer. He overwhelmed the public with his outstanding mastery of the guitar.” (Source: Encyclopedia of the Blues by Gerard Herzhaft)

17 [Sonny Boy Williamson II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonny_Boy_Williamson_II) (1908? – 1965) – Slowly Walk Close To Me  
“By the time of his death in 1965, he had been around long enough to have played with Robert Johnson at the start of his career and Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and Robbie Robertson at the end of it. In between, he drank a lot of whiskey hoboed around the country, had a successful radio show for 15 years, toured Europe to great acclaim, and simply wrote, played and’ sang some of the greatest blues ever etched into black phonograph records. His delivery was sly, evil and world-weary, while his harp playing was full of short, rhythmic bursts one minute and powerful, impassioned blowing the next. His songs were chock-full of mordant wit, with largely autobiographical lyrics that hold up to the scrutiny of the printed page. Though he took his namesake from another well-known harmonica player, no one really sounded like him.” – Cub Koda

16 [Blind Lemon Jefferson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Lemon_Jefferson) (1893 -1929) – [Black Snake Moan](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3yd-c91ww8)  
One of the most popular bluesmen of the 1920s.

15 [Willie Dixon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Dixon) (1915 -1992) – [Back door man](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UuChTazs9Q)  
Willie Dixon’s name came up again and again when researching this list : I am beginning to appreciate what an extraordinary songwriter he was. This is one of his compositions, written for Howlin’ Wolf, and later recorded by the Doors.

14 [Son House](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_House) (1902 – 1988) – [Pearline](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQ-kRDX-fvc)  
Delta blues singer and innovative slide guitarist. The White Stripes dedicated their debut album to Son House, and Jack White frequently acknowledged his huge influence.

13 Vera Hall (1902 – 1964) – [Trouble so hard](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9SENzRLk_M)  
Alabama blues and spirituals singer, recorded by John Lomax in the 1930s for the Library of Congress. This song will be familiar to some from having been remixed by Moby on his single, Natural Blues.

12 [Little Walter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Walter) (1930 – 1968) – [My Babe](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_en6CMpRmBU)  
This number was written by Willie Dixon for Little Walter. Released in 1955, it became “the only Dixon composition ever to become a no. 1 R&B single, and it was one of the biggest hits of either of their careers. The song was based on the traditional gospel song This Train (Is Bound For Glory), which Sister Rosetta Tharpe recorded in the 1939 hit, This Train. Dixon reworked the arrangement and lyrics from the sacred, the procession of saints into Heaven, into the secular, a story about a woman that won’t stand for her man to cheat: ‘My baby, she don’t stand no cheating, my babe, she don’t stand none of that midnight creeping’. – Wikipedia

11 [Lonnie Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonnie_Johnson) (1899 – 1970) – [Got the blues for murder only](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dY0h9OLb-g)  
Humorous song by one of the earliest great blues guitarists

10 [T-Bone Walker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-Bone_Walker) (1910 – 1975) – [Mean old world](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSOYOFQgVMs)  
Pioneer of the electric guitar, and a childhood hero of Jimi Hendrix. He played a large Gibson hollowbody guitar, held straight out from his chest and parallel to the floor (which contributed in part to his unique tone) but would cut loose and play behind his back, between his legs or do the splits in an effort to get the crowd going.

9 [Skip James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skip_James) (1902 – 1969) – [Crow Jane](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytVww5r4Nk0)  
Skip James recorded some songs for Paramount in 1931, but was not fully paid for this work, and sales soon slumped with the onset of the depression. He did a variety of jobs and was ordained as a minister. Then in the mid 60s blues collector John Fahey “discovered” him in a Mississippi hospital . One thing led to another, and he played in the Newport Folk Festival that year, and went on to record some of the finest music of his career, including this traditional song.

8 [JB Lenoir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JB_Lenoir)(1929 – 1967) – [Alabama blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvilFSMVHTs)  
In September 1963 four black schoolgirls were killed when a bomb exploded during a church service in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama. Martin Luther King called Birmingham “by far the worst city for race relations in America”, and John Coltrane wrote a song called Alabama. In March 1965 civil rights marchers were brutally assaulted by state troopers and deputies as they left Selma Alabama, causing many serious injuries. Later in 1965 JB Lenoir recorded this searing anti-racist anthem.

7 [Leadbelly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadbelly) (1888 – 1949) – [Where Did You Sleep Last Night? (In the Pines)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blI2dXHyBj0)  
In 1930 John and Alan Lomax met Leadbelly during a visit to Angola Prison Farm. John Lomax was to prove instrumental in launching Leadbelly’s career as a recording artist. Leadbelly mixed blues and folk. His signature instrument was the 12 string guitar, and in his songs he commented on a wide range of subjects. In the Pines is in fact a traditional folk song, not a Leadbelly composition. It was subsequently recorded by Doc Watson, Mark Lanegan, Nirvana, Dolly Parton and many others.

6 [Elmore James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elmore_James) (1918 – 1963) – [Dust My Broom](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKo80b-QfK0)  
“When one thinks of the classic blues tune Dust My Broom one tends to think of the legendary Robert Johnson who along with his Sweet Home Chicago created two of the signature blues songs of the pre-World War II period. However, my first hearing of Dust My Broom was on a hot LP vinyl record (the old days, right?) version covered and made his own by the artist under review, Elmore James. I have heard many cover versions since then, including from the likes of George Thorogood and Chris Smithers, and they all reflect on the influence of Elmore’s amazing slide guitar virtuosity to provide the heat necessary to do the song justice.” – American Left history blog

5 [Bessie Smith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Smith) (1894 – 1937) – [Gimme a Pigfoot](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBzkXFFcBik)  
“Bessie Smith earned the title of ‘Empress of the Blues’ by virtue of her forceful vocal delivery and command of the genre. Her singing displayed a soulfully phrased, boldly delivered and nearly definitive grasp of the blues … Smith sang raw, uncut country blues inspired by life in the South, in which everyday experiences were related in plainspoken language – not unlike the rap music that would emerge more than half a century later. She was ahead of her time in another sense as well. In the words of biographer Chris Albertson, ‘Bessie had a wonderful way of turning adversity into triumph, and many of her songs are the tales of liberated women.'” – Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

4 [John Lee Hooker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lee_Hooker) (1917 – 2001) – [Boogie Chillen](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDBz4ASw6uU)  
“John Lee Hooker is a giant of the blues and the father of the boogie. Beginning in 1948 with his first single, Boogie Chillen, he introduced the world to the persistent, chugging rhythm of boogie music, a form of country blues Hooker learned back home in Mississippi. His foot-stomping boogie was adapted and amplified in the Sixties and Seventies by a great number of rock and roll artists, including the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, Canned Heat, John Mayall, Ten Years After, Foghat, ZZ Top and George Thorogood. Beyond his ability to lock into a hypnotic boogie groove, Hooker is renowned for the gruff emotionality of his voice and the stark intensity of his guitar playing.” – Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

3 [Howlin’ Wolf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howlin%27_Wolf)(1910 – 1976) – [How Many More Years](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ou-6A3MKow)  
“Howlin’ Wolf ranks among the most electrifying performers in blues history, as well as one of its greatest characters. He was a ferocious, full-bodied singer whose gruff, rasping vocals embodied the blues at its most unbridled. A large man who stood more than six feet tall and weighed nearly 300 pounds, Howlin’ Wolf cut an imposing figure, which he utilized to maximum effect when performing. In the words of blues historian Bob Santelli, ‘Wolf acted out his most potent blues, becoming the living embodiment of its most powerful forces.’ ” – Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

2 [Muddy Waters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muddy_Waters) (1913 – 1983) – [Mannish boy](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5IOou6qN1o)  
This is Muddy Waters version of the Bo Diddley hit I’m a man. The driving muscular song and the macho lyrics guaranteed that it would soon become a rock classic, and I see that Muddy Waters has also [performed this song with the Rolling Stones](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYO2oxDv_ZU).

1 [Robert Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Johnson_(musician)) (1911 – 1938) – [Hellhound On My Trail](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqgcM_CmhdA)  
Legendary Delta blues singer, described by Eric Clapton as “the most important blues musician who ever lived”. However this reputation was not established until long after his death. Columbia Records released a collection of his songs in 1961, [King of the Delta Blues Singers](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Delta-Blues-Singers-Robert-Johnson/dp/B000023ZO5), which has remained his definitive work, and was more recently listed at number 27 on Rolling Stone’s 500 Greatest Albums of All Time .

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**History of Rock n’ Roll**

Many people may not know the roots of rock ‘n’ roll are woven deep within an eclectic assortment of musical genres. Blues, gospel, rhythm and blues and other forms of black music styles are the roots for rock ‘n’ roll. A huge factor for this was the large migration of blacks from the South to the North throughout the 1940s. Music associated with blacks was originally called “race” music and was later called rhythm and blues to be more politically correct. With many men participating in World War II most big jazz bands were forced to break up, and most of those bands were predominately white. Not only did men leaving for war cause a big break in jazz bands but a strike from artists against the music companies caused continued strife for bands at the end of the way. With the strike and the war the bands were obsolete. Single performers and small groups became the norm.

It wasn’t until 1951 that Alan Freed coined the term rock ‘n’ roll. Freed was a disc jockey from Cleveland, Ohio on WJW. Although the term was referenced in songs from the 1940s, Freed used the term to talk about the genre of music. Many white Americans enjoyed the sounds of rhythm and blues, but the genre and its black artists would only be played on “race music” outlets and were hardly heard by mainstream audiences. Freed was able to play black artists’ music on his radio station by calling it rock ‘n’ roll. Because the term incorporated so many artists and was catchy to many artists, both black and white, used the phrase and developed singles and considered it rock ‘n’ roll.

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