Blues Revision

Origins of the Blues:

The blues is a style of music that formed in America at the end of the 19th century. It came about as a result of the **fusion** of African and European music. Africans had been brought to America throughout the 19th century to work as slaves or on cotton plantations. They brought a rich musical tradition with them which in turn was mixed with the western music of America. The result was the Blues.

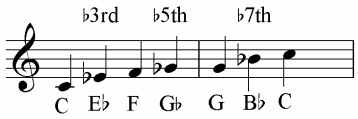
The slaves' songs tended to focus on the terrible conditions in which they lived. Their songs were about **grief** and **sorrow** and were initially played on simple instruments such as guitars or banjos.

African Traditions:

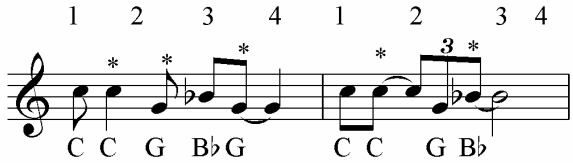
- **Call and Response** (typically found in African work songs): one person calls, the group responds.

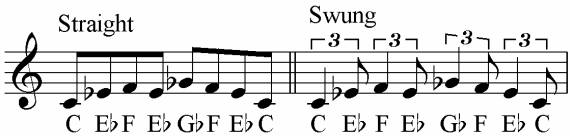
Calls		Responses	
C	C	C	C
F	F	C	C
G	F	C	C

- **Blues notes:** African singers tended to flatten slightly the 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the scale. White people interpreted this as being a full semitone resulting in the **blues scale** (b3rd b5th b7th)



- **Complex rhythm:** from African drumming. This translated into **syncopation** and **swing.**





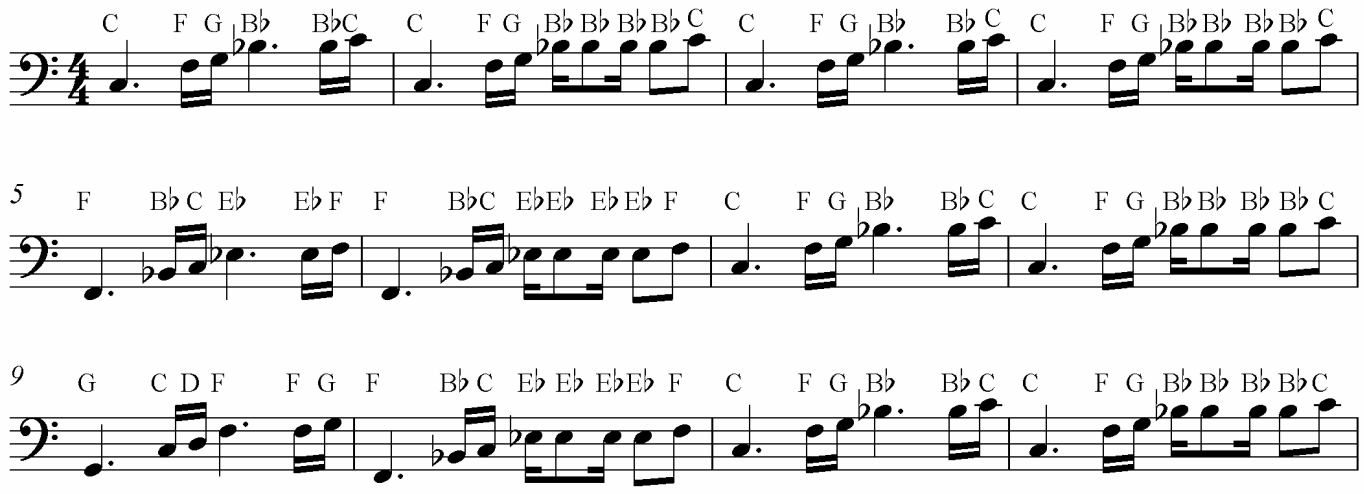
- Singing whilst working and singing about everyday things.

Western Traditions:

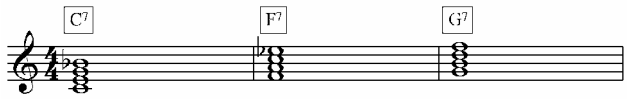
- Western harmony: **primary chords** (I, IV, V). The blues is based on a 12-bar sequence based on these chords.
- **Instruments:** guitars, pianos etc. Africans used these in their songs.

Other Features:

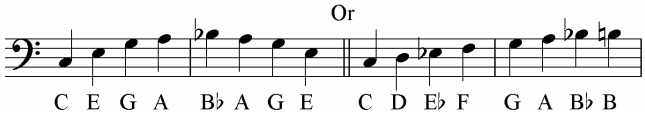
- It was never written down. Like most folk music, it was learnt by ear.
- Blues songs tended to have an **AAB word structure**, where the first line (sang over the first 4 chords) was repeated over the second 4 chords with a different lyric over the third line.
- Many African slaves converted to Christianity and absorbed the European hymn style. They added their own traditions (see above) to hymn music which led to the creation of the **spiritual**, the predecessor of **gospel**.
- The Blues style was the basis for **Rock 'n roll**
- **Riffs** are short repeated patterns that usually act as an accompaniment. You are most likely to hear riffs being played by guitars.



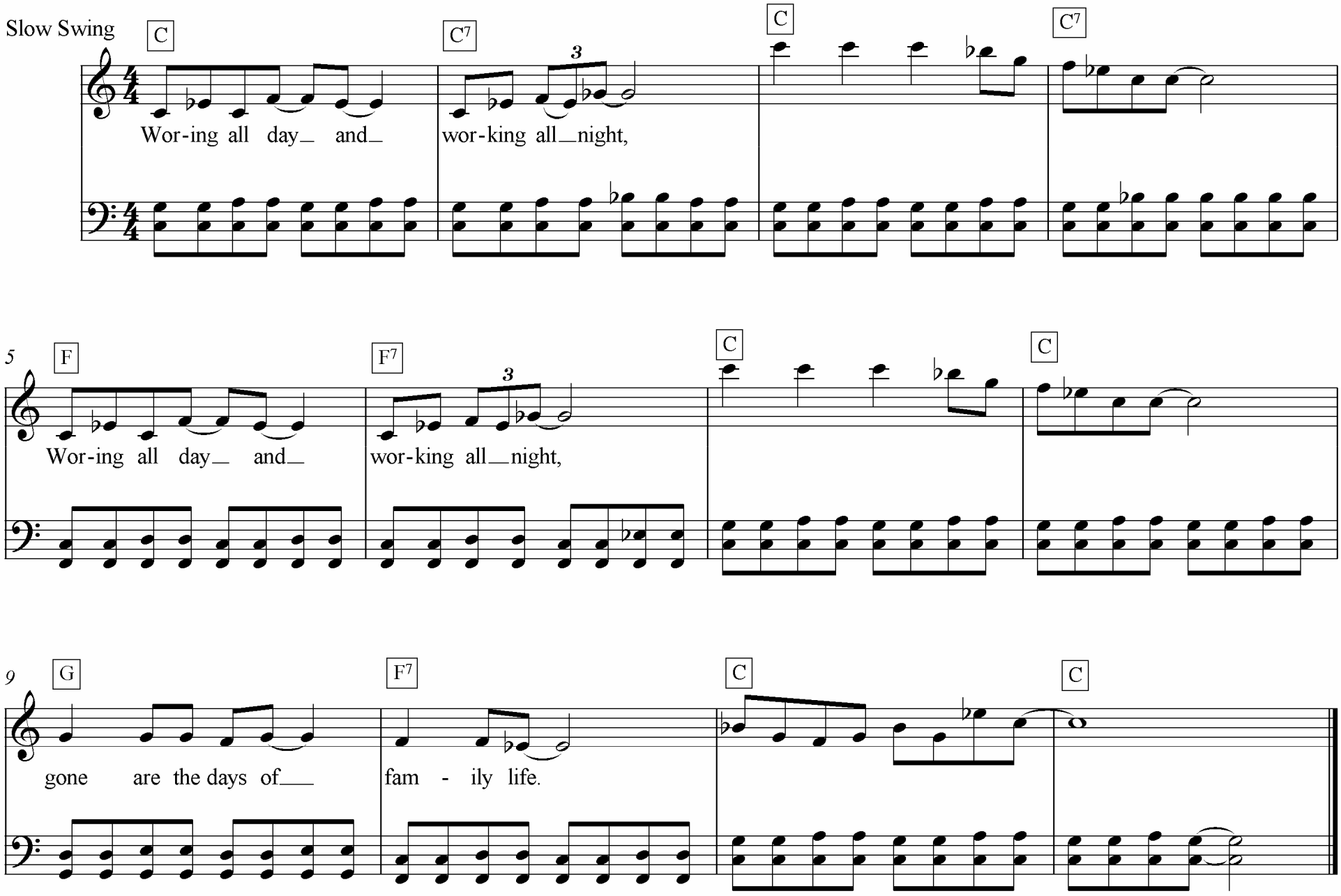
- As blues began to develop, the harmony became more complicated with the use of **substitution** (where one chord is substituted for another) and **7th chords.** 7th chords are formed by adding a minor 7th interval above a chord:



- **Walking bass** is another feature of blues where the base line plods up and down the scale or arpeggio in straight crotchets.



The blues example on the next page demonstrates many blues features. Can you spot them ?


Slow Swing
C
C7
C
C7
Wor-ing all day and
wor-king all night,
5
F
F7
C
C
Wor-ing all day and
wor-king all night,
9
G
F7
C
C
gone are the days of
fam - ily life.