

# Blues in the Woods

Introduction to African  
American music and culture





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# Blues in the Woods

- Musical Genres
- Africans in America
- Blues & Jazz
- Culture and Appropriation

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# Musical Genres



# Musical Genre Definition

*‘A musical genre is a set of musical events, real or possible, whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially accepted rules.’* (Fabbri, 1982, p. 136)

FOLK

OPERA

ROCK

- *Are these rules the same in all genres?*
- *Are these rules fixed?*
- *Who sets the rules? How?*





# African-American Music-Making

1900-1950

**BLUES**

**JAZZ**

**GOSPEL**

1950-

**SOUL**

1965-

**FUNK**

# Context

Cultural practices such as musical styles and dances evolve from socio-political contexts and events.

- **Lindy Hop**

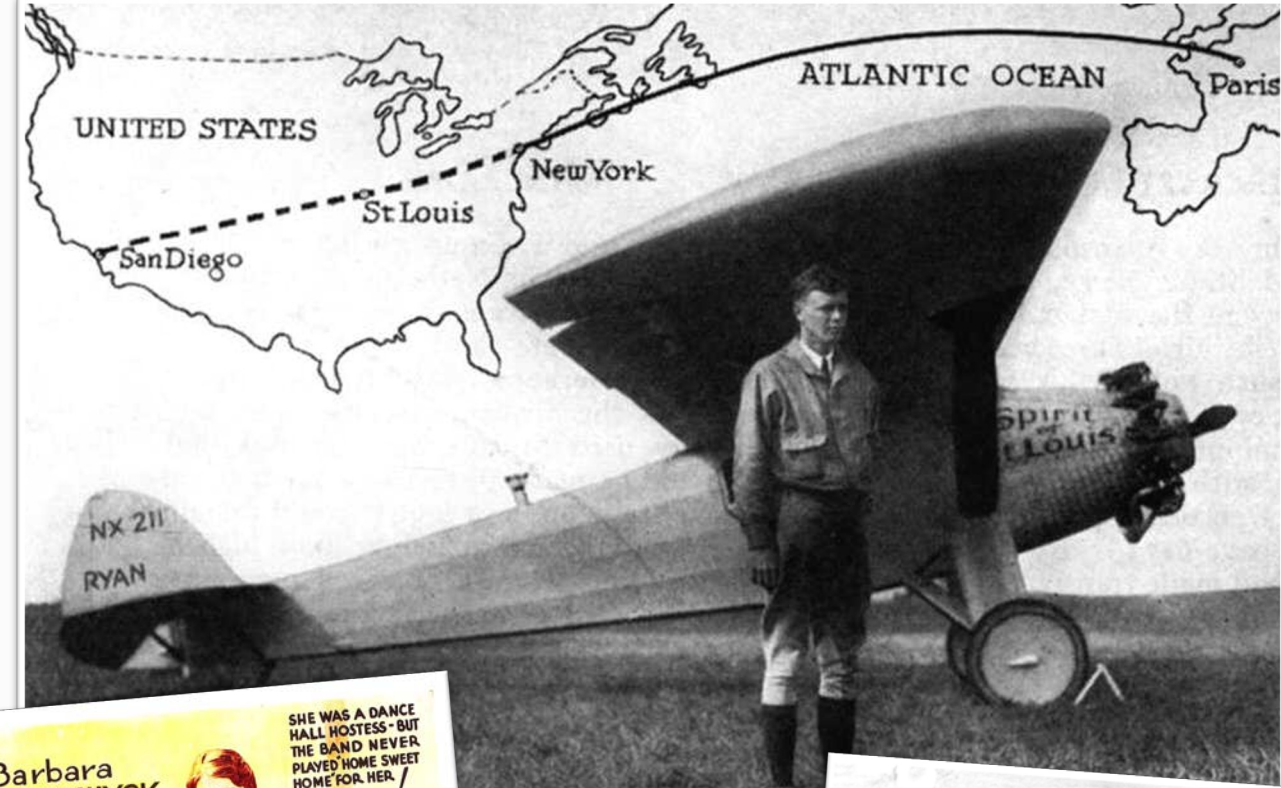
- Charles Lindbergh May 1927, first solo Atlantic flight

- **Segregation**

- Harlem Renaissance
- Vaudeville, jazz & blues scenes

- **Prohibition**

- Taxi Dancers
- Animal Dances





# Africans in America



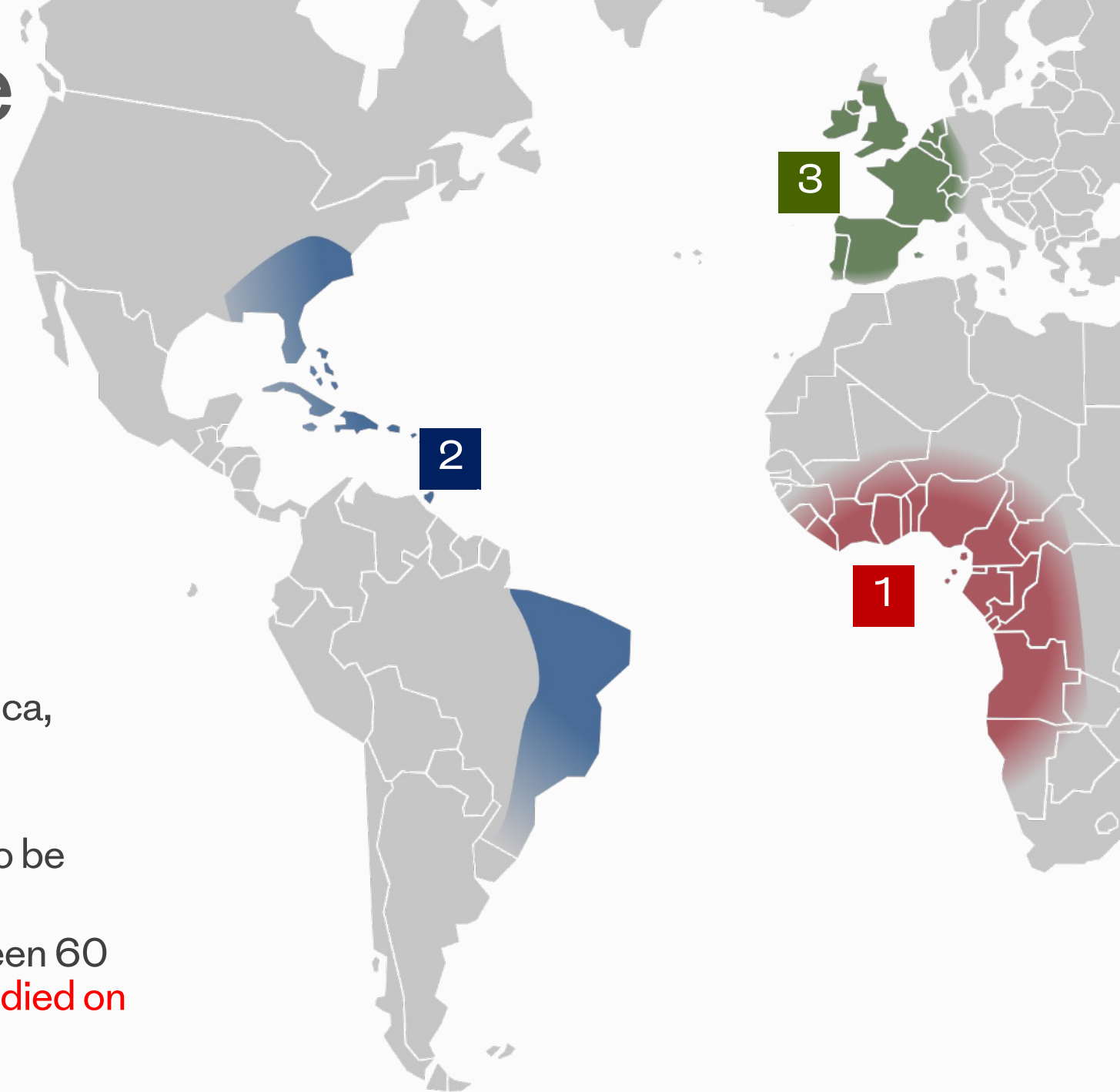
# The Slave Trade

## Forced Migration

- The first slaves arrived in the New World in 1619 to pick cotton and farm the land.
- By 1776, 92% of the black population in the United States were slaves.

## The Middle Passage

1. Manufactured goods from Europe to Africa, traded for slaves
  2. Slaves to America for raw materials
  3. Raw materials from America to Europe to be manufactured into goods
- The journey to the New World took between 60 and 120 days; **4 out of every 10 Africans died on the journey.**



# Influences in slave music

Slavery was initially a **demographic** position, rather than racial.

## ■ Performance

- *African polyrhythms*
- *European diatonic harmony*
- *Drums, fife, banjo*
- *Scottish line dances*
- *Irish reels*

## ■ Sociocultural

- ***Christianity***
- *Legal status*
- *Literacy*
- *Community formation*
- *Multiculturalism*

GLORY,  
GLORY  
HALLELUJAH

Othar Turner & the  
Afrossippi Allstars



(1907-2003)



Slaves were tied to the land or a small geographic area



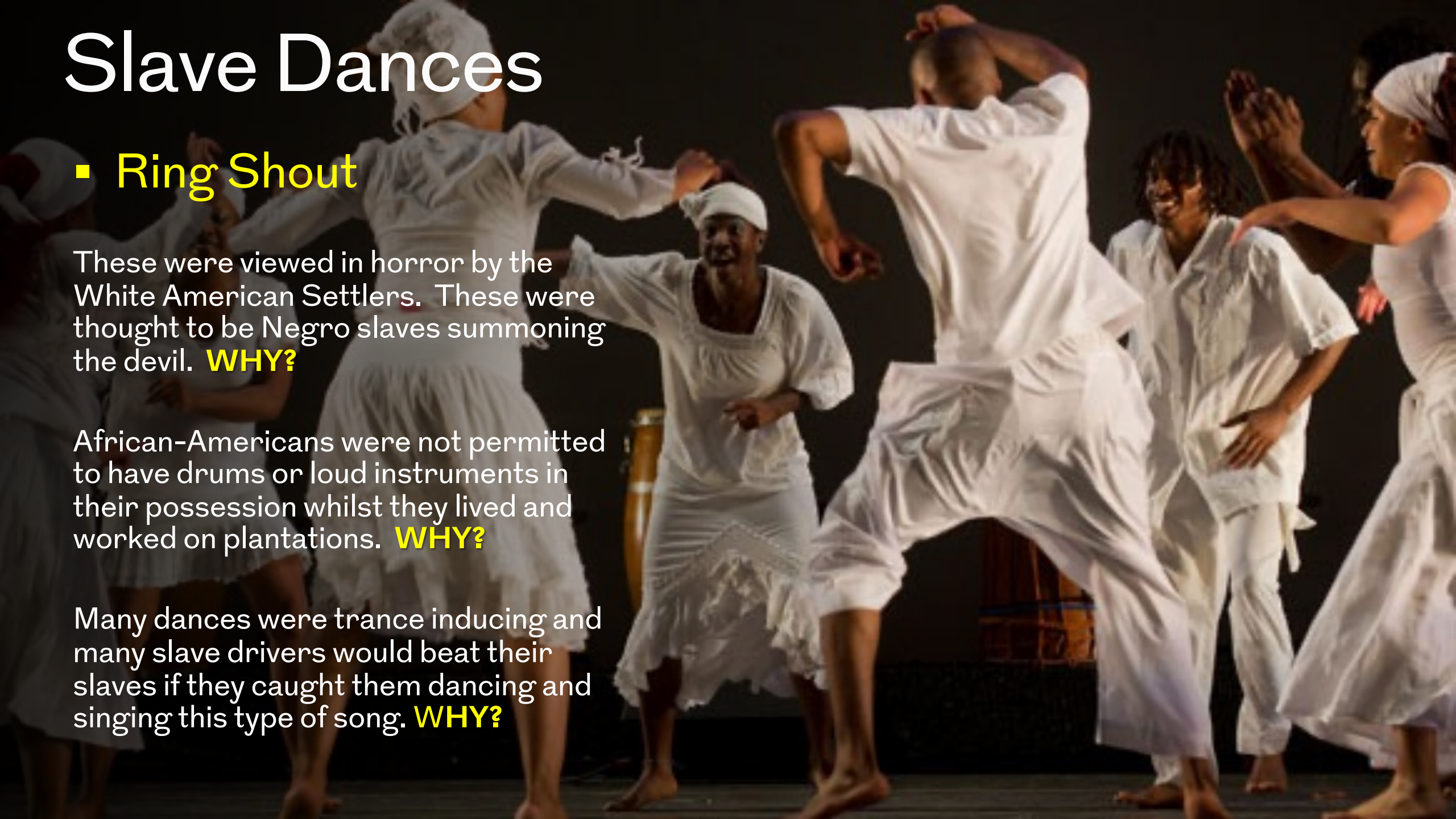
# Slave Dances

## ■ Ring Shout

These were viewed in horror by the White American Settlers. These were thought to be Negro slaves summoning the devil. **WHY?**

African-Americans were not permitted to have drums or loud instruments in their possession whilst they lived and worked on plantations. **WHY?**

Many dances were trance inducing and many slave drivers would beat their slaves if they caught them dancing and singing this type of song. **WHY?**





# The Invisible Church

## ■ Roots

- Africans forbidden to gather without whites
- The Bible becomes a source of support

## ■ Sociology

- Slaves adopt and adapt religious texts
- Worship styles become participatory

*CLAPPING*  
*DANCING*  
*SHOUTING*

*“...Socially  
accepted  
rules.”*

## ■ Function

- Allowing groups to worship and have a direct contact, communion & group identity



Ring Shout Dancers

Gatherings in  
woods, fields,  
barns, safe  
spaces

RING SHOUT

Slaves formulated their own conceptions of God, deliverance and redemption.

# Other Plantation Practices

- **Cakewalk**

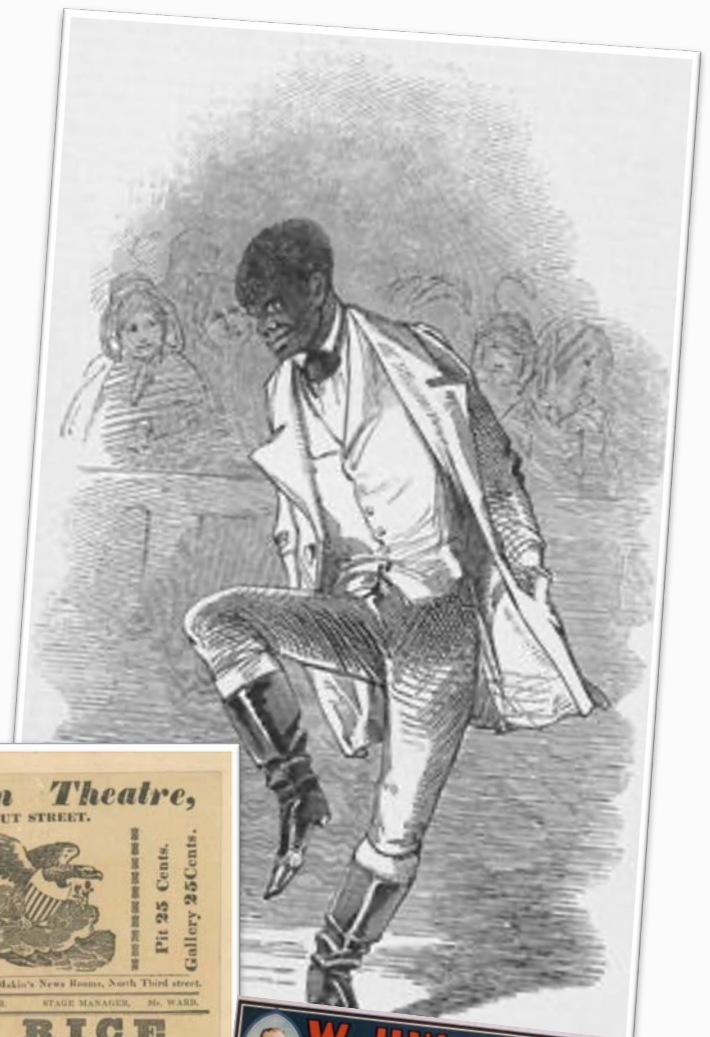
- A prize dance, possibly intended as a mockery of white manners.

- **Pattin' Juba**

- Using the body as an instrument as well as part of the dance.
- William Henry Lane — **Master Juba**

- **Blackface Minstrelsy**

- White (and black) performers in blackface creating stereotypes for the stage
- **T.D. Rice as “Jim Crow”**
- **1830 (US) – 1977 (UK)**



# The birth of the Blues





# What is the blues?

- The blues is a musical form with its **origins** in the music of Afro-American slaves in the southern states
- It is a **secular** music. It is also Afro-American slang for 'a state of mind'.
- “Symbolically, the blues represents the struggle of black people to regain their sense of pride and identity after the humiliations and sufferings of the African **diaspora** and 200 years of slavery.”

*(Oliver, Harrison, & Bolcom, 1986)*

# Blues as a Genre

Genre in popular music is defined by **marketing** and **social convention**.

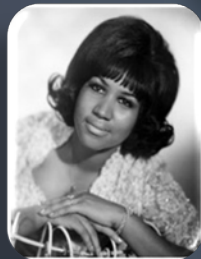
“Blues”, like “R&B”, is a **contested genre categorisation** which has different meanings for different people.



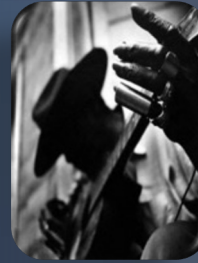
Genre is imposed rather than inherent

# Blues Timeline

Literate  
tradition



1900



Non-Literate  
tradition



1935



1970

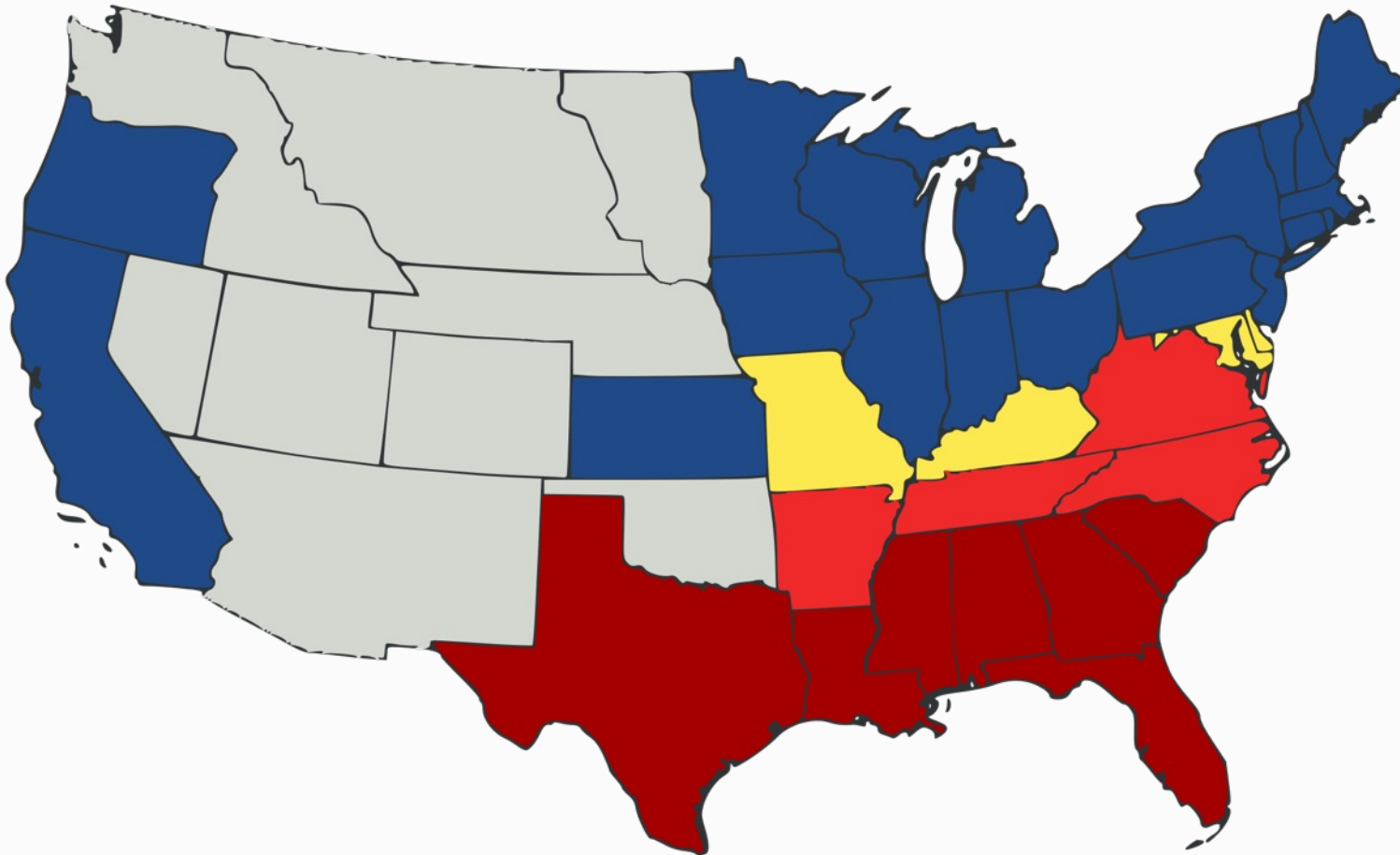




# American Civil War (1861-1865)

The **Southern Confederate states** go to war with the **Northern states of the Union** over the right to:

- Keep slaves in the South
- Expand Westward with the right to keep slaves



- **1860 Abraham Lincoln**
  - Abolitionist, elected 16th president without winning any Southern States
- **1861 Secession**
  - Southern states attempt to leave the union and form their own nation.
  - **Civil war ensues.**
- **1863 Emancipation Proclamation**
  - Freedom of the slaves in the rebel states
- **1865 Thirteenth Amendment**
  - Abolition of slavery and involuntary servitude
- **1870 Fifteenth Amendment**
  - Extension of the vote to all regardless of race, colour or previous condition of servitude





Despite their legal freedoms, following the Civil War, the position of African-Americans was little better than it had been 100 years before.



# Secular Plantation Music

## Field Hollers

Not fixed or formalised songs.

- Singers' voices needed to carry over long distances across plantations

## Work Songs

Sung to provide rhythm and safety for repetitive manual labour;

- Cutting trees, laying railroad tracks

## Recreational Music

Music for dancing and relaxing. The primary function of the music is to provide a background for dancing and socializing.



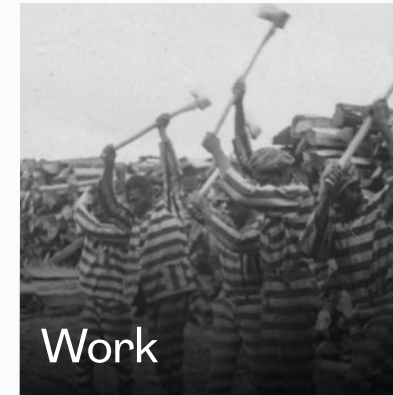
Location and identity

- Antiphony
- Heterophony



Recreation

Listen for the long 'identifier' note



Work

Open-ended rhythmic forms

Music-making provided community, solidarity and individuality.



# Types of early blues musician

## Songster

- An individual who could sing, performing either solo or with an accompanist

## Musicianer

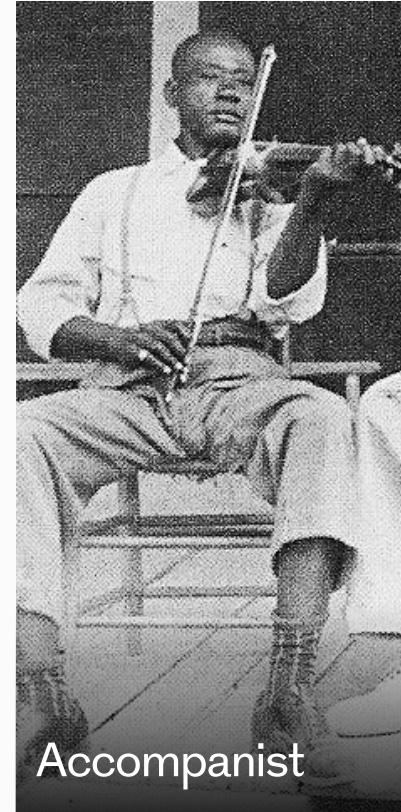
- Able sing and/or play an instrument as a solo performer
- Singer/songwriter

## Music Physicianer

- Itinerant performer, often carrying their instrument with them.
- Mostly male, mostly fiddlers or guitarists.
- WHY?



Acapella vocalist



Accompanist



Player and singer

Musical techniques and material circulated between European and American sources.

# First sightings

Tutweiler, 1902

*"...a lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept.*

*As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars.*

*The effect was unforgettable.*

*His song, too, struck me instantly.*

*'Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog,'*

*The singer repeated the line...accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard."*

*(Handy, 1941)*

- **Use of music technology**

*Steel-string acoustic guitar & slide*

- **Preservation of 'marginalising' ideology**

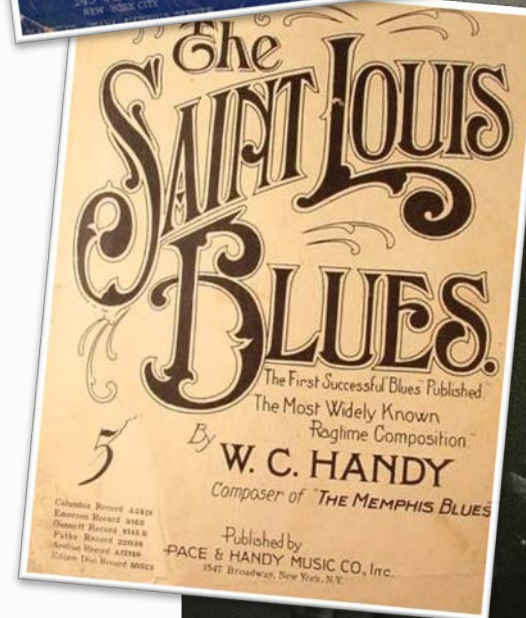
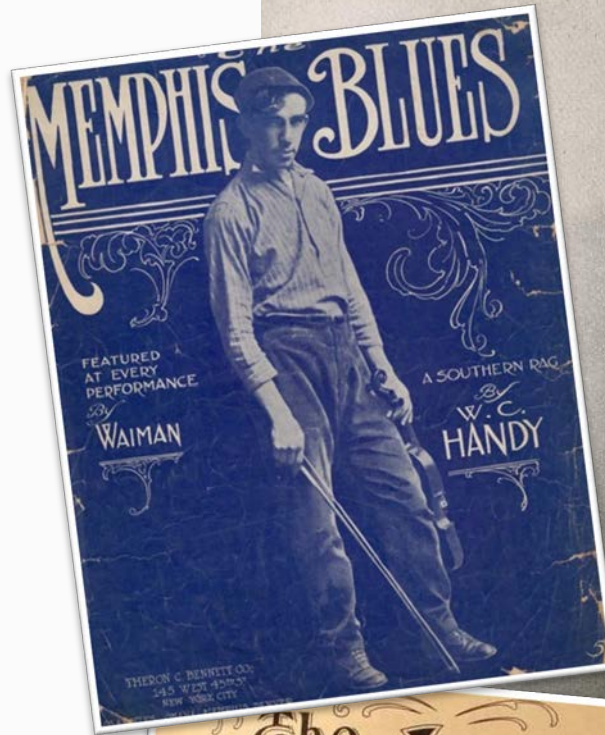


*Dark Was the Night (Blind Willie Johnson)*



# Blues Form

- Handy **notated** the blues as sheet music and incorporated the style in his own 'original' compositions.
- MEMPHIS BLUES (1912) was a nationwide hit, accompanied by a new dance – the foxtrot.
- ST LOUIS BLUES (1914) was another foundational statement in blues as dance music.
  - How does Handy work with the dancers?
- What are the effects of *notating* a piece of music?
  - Formalises and standardises the structure of the music
  - Chord harmony fixed at I, IV, V
  - 12 bar sequence
  - A A B (A) lyric format



William Christopher Handy (1873-1958)

Hooks Bros.  
M.P.H.S.

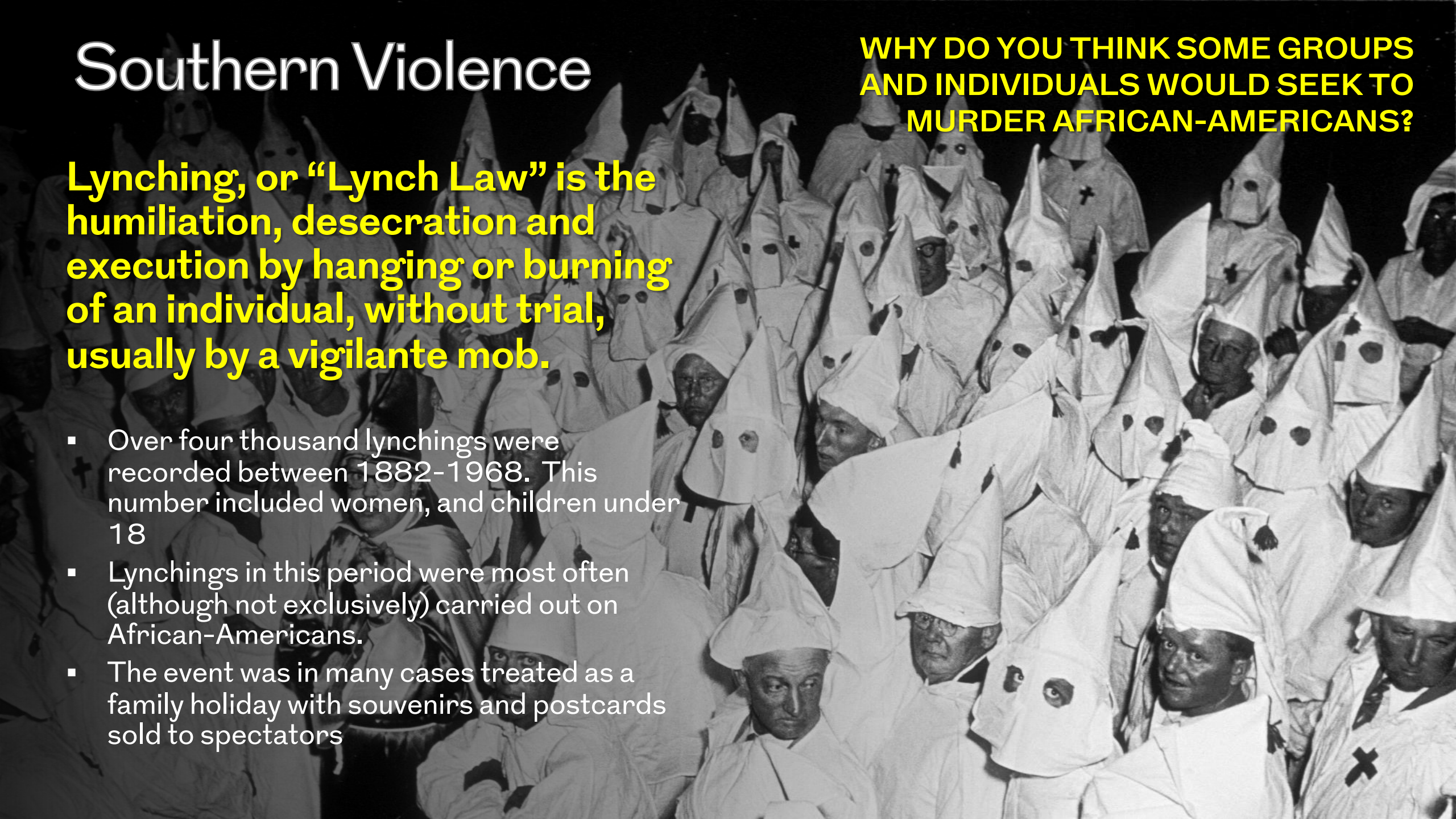


# Southern Violence

WHY DO YOU THINK SOME GROUPS  
AND INDIVIDUALS WOULD SEEK TO  
MURDER AFRICAN-AMERICANS?

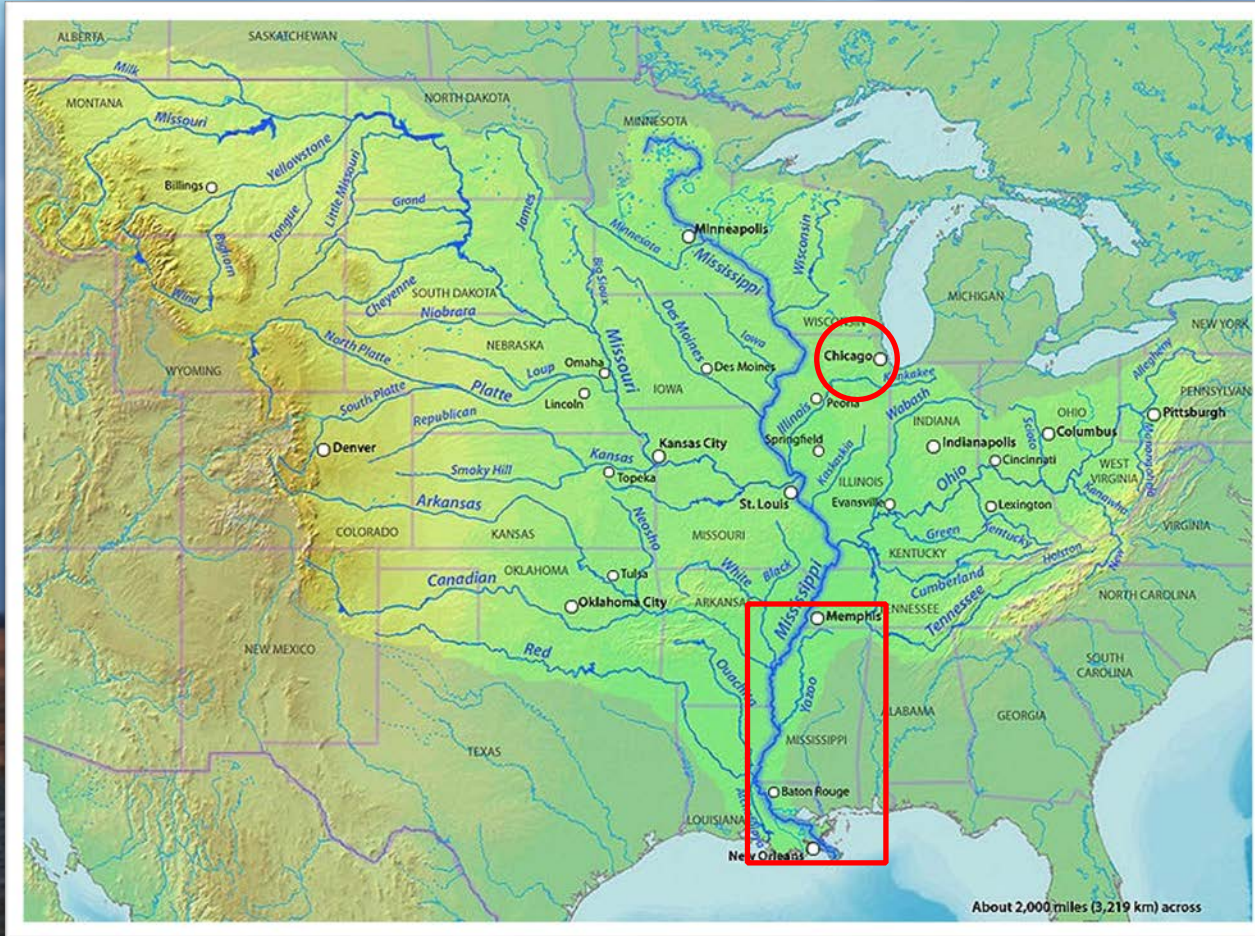
**Lynching, or “Lynch Law” is the humiliation, desecration and execution by hanging or burning of an individual, without trial, usually by a vigilante mob.**

- Over four thousand lynchings were recorded between 1882-1968. This number included women, and children under 18
- Lynchings in this period were most often (although not exclusively) carried out on African-Americans.
- The event was in many cases treated as a family holiday with souvenirs and postcards sold to spectators





# The Mississippi Delta





# The Great Migration

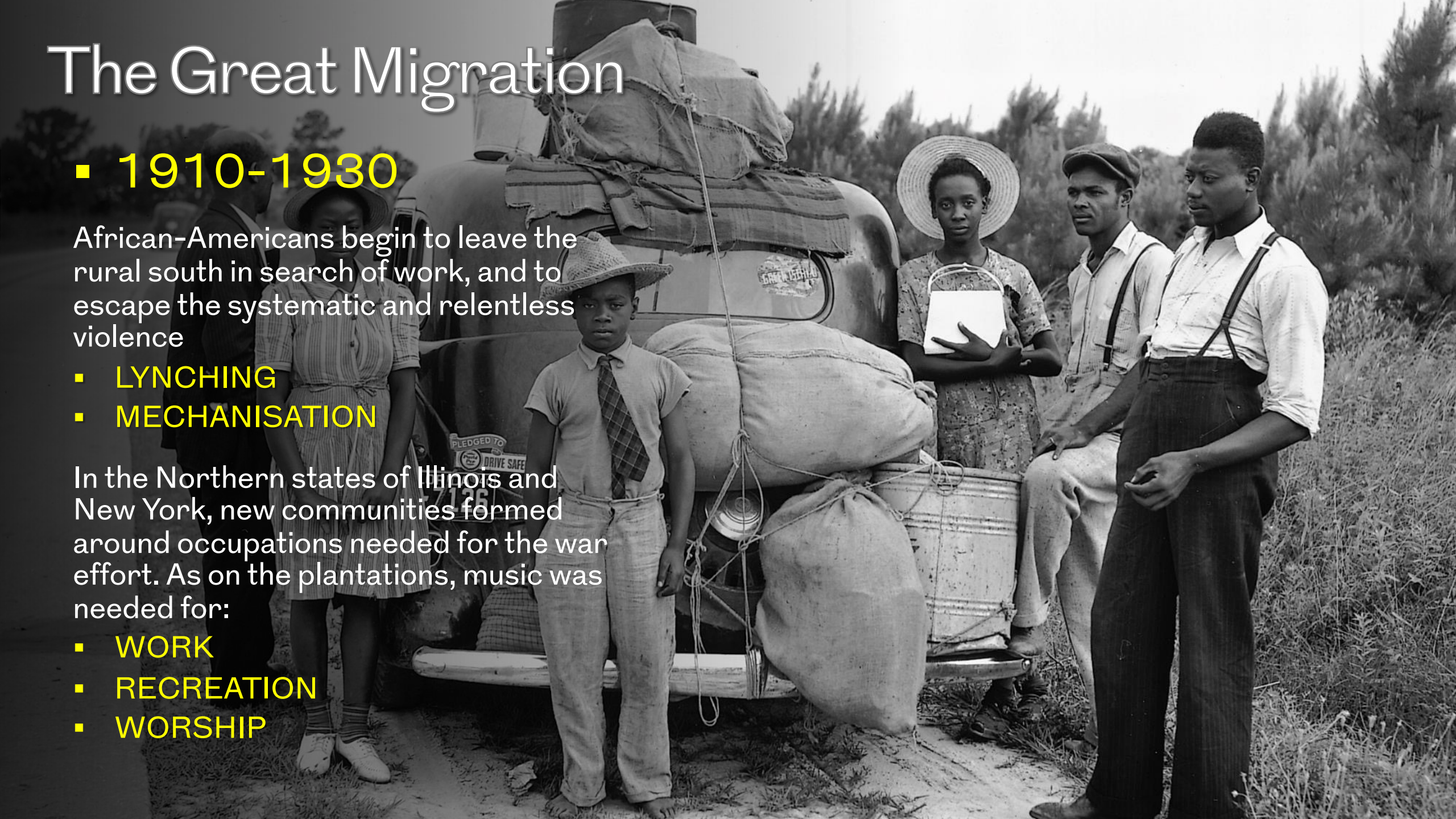
- 1910-1930

African-Americans begin to leave the rural south in search of work, and to escape the systematic and relentless violence

- LYNCHING
- MECHANISATION

In the Northern states of Illinois and New York, new communities formed around occupations needed for the war effort. As on the plantations, music was needed for:

- WORK
- RECREATION
- WORSHIP





# The Great Migration

## Lyric Phrases:

*'Ride the Rods,'  
'Ride the Blinds,'  
'Dust My Broom,'*

**Onomatopœia** (*Ancient Greek: ὀνοματοποιία; ὄνομα for "name" and ποιέω for "I make"*); a word that imitates or suggests the source of the sound that it describes.

The mythological symbol of the train is still a current feature in blues-influenced music.

- SLOW TRAIN  
(JOE BONAMASSA)

- Themes of songs: travel, movement, choice
- Musical Onomatopoeia – rhythm of a train
- Listen for the rhythm of the tracks



# Chicago

## Maxwell Street

- Mixed race area of the city
- Entrepreneurs
- Large Jewish community of shopkeepers

## Chicago Blues

- Acoustic Delta Blues
- Influences of swing
- More people and urban environments require louder sounds
- How many different styles of music can you hear in this clip?



# The Electric Blues

- By the end of the 1940s, a new community of African-Americans were established in the cities of the industrial north — particularly Chicago.
- This group had new expectations of employment and acceptance, and were creating a new soundtrack for their day-to-day lives.



McKinley Morganfield (1913-1983)



# The Urban Jazz Bands

# The Big Bands

## Influential Bands

- Fletcher Henderson
- Count Basie
- Benny Goodman

## Innovations

- Sectional “talking,” call & response
- Emphasis on **rhythm and volume** to reflect and compete with the sounds of the city
- Promotion of singers within the band format
- Radio and phonograph records



Fletcher  
Henderson  
(1897-1952)

TRUMPET

TROMBONE

RHYTHM  
Bass, Drums  
Guitar, Piano

SAXOPHONE  
Coleman  
Hawkins  
Lester Young

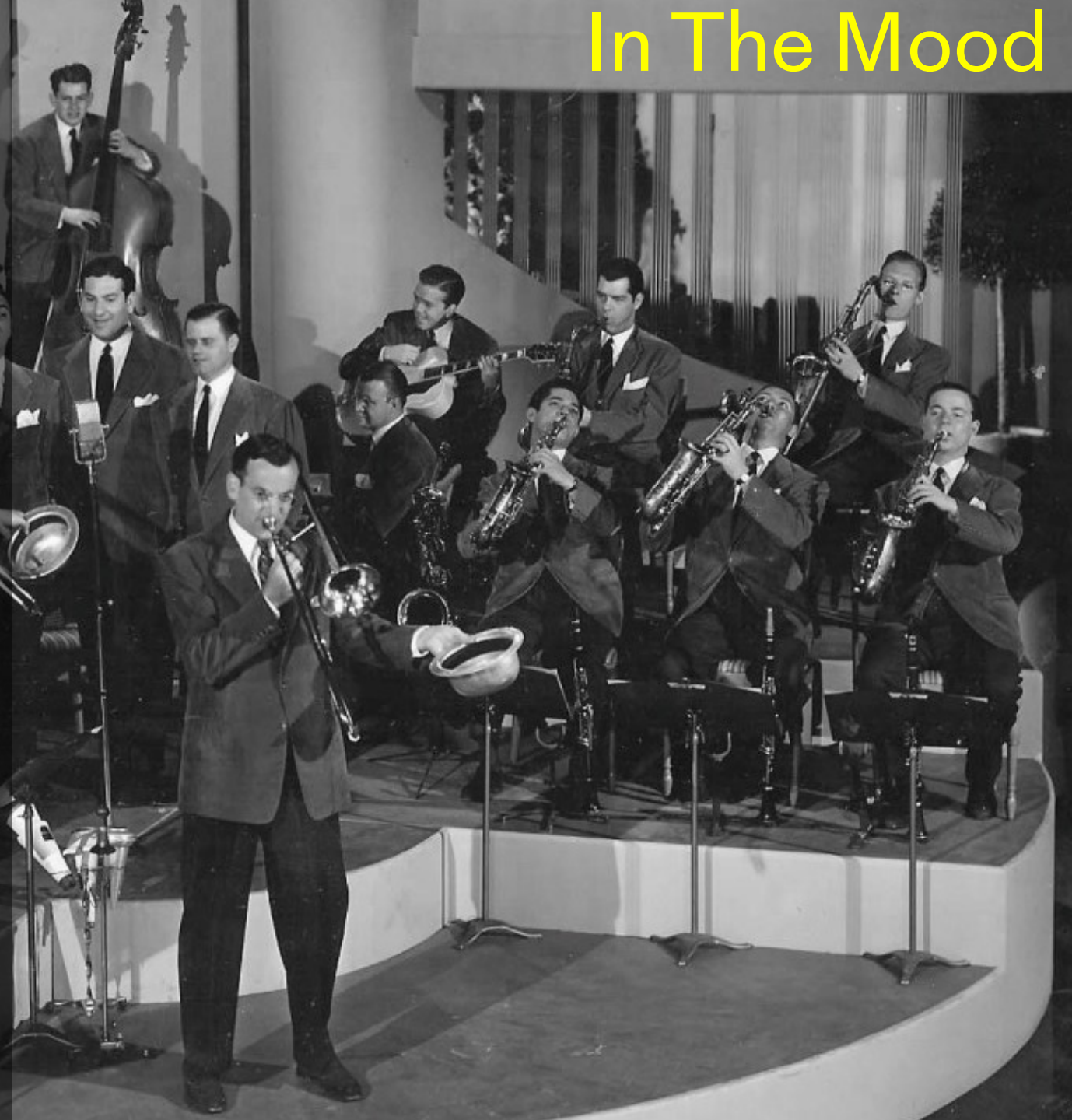
# World War 2

*America's involvement in **WW2** helped disseminate swing and big-band jazz as a style.*

- Europe
  - Russia and Germany
  - United Kingdom

*Totalitarian regimes found jazz **problematic**, and accused the music of being **degenerate**, and part of a regime of **cultural imperialism**.*

In The Mood





# Duke Ellington

## Ensemble

- Large group makes use of the skills of individual soloists & effects

## Improvisation

- Composed parts sound spontaneous

## Innovation

- New harmonies and tight arrangements reflect the dense sound of the city

## Form

- Function of bands is for dancing
- **Clearly defined swinging rhythmic pulse**



Duke Ellington  
(1899-1974)

**KO-KO**  
(1940)

**TAKE THE A-TRAIN**  
(1941)

# Hard Bop

## Sociology

- Blues, Gospel & Soul phrasing and tone production
- More accessible than BeBop
- African- American political associations

## Key Hard Boppers

- Art Blakey
- Charles Mingus
- Sonny Rollins
- Miles Davis



Art Blakey (1919-1990)

**MOANIN'**  
Art Blakey  
& The Jazz  
Messengers  
(1959)

Call & Response  
Danceability  
Heritage  
Identity



# Definitions

# What is culture?

1. *A particular way of life and how that life is acted out each day in works, practices and activities.*
2. *The expressed and shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a social group, organisation or institution.*
3. *'...the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity,' - texts and practices whose principal function is to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning.*

# Cultural Dynamics

- **Appropriation**

*Dominant culture re-makes, re-models, and adapts the culture of a marginalised group*

- **Enculturation**

*An individual is born into the texts and practices of a given culture*

- **Acculturation**

*When an individual or marginalised group takes on the characteristics of a dominant culture*

- **Diffusion**

*The spread of cultural material through a given society over time*



Adele Adkins (1988-)



# Cultural Appropriation

## Definition

*“Appropriation is often seen as exploitative of weaker social and ethnic groups’ music by more dominant cultures, but is often a part of symbolic struggle, through which **disenfranchised** or **marginal** social groups reformulate dominant musical styles as a way of renegotiating their social situation.”*

(Shuker, 2012: 17)

*“...an endless cycle of **appropriation**, **commoditisation** and an end to **innovation**.”*

(Horner & Swiss, 1990)

- Instrumentation, Vocal styling, physical performance, marketing
- **Are African-Americans equally guilty of cultural appropriation?**



Stevie Ray Vaughan (1954-1990)

# Conclusion

# What is the argument?

1. Blues is a 'black music' created by and for African-Americans, and only black Americans have the right or ability to perform in this style with authority.

*White performers may well perform the music or dances but fundamentally, any non-black performer is a skilled copyist.*

2. Whilst the blues may have its origins in the Black American experience, the music is now a universal style which is colour-blind.

*Black blues musicians and dancers do not have a monopoly on suffering and privation and, as a result, blues may be performed with authority by any individual regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.*



The blues is a living  
cultural practice.



*Perpetuate and disseminate the cultural practice, mindful of its origins and socio-political history.*

*You do not have to solve the cultural appropriation argument - just be aware that it exists and is taking place.*

*Life is short. If you have found something that brings you comfort and which resonates with you, do it wholeheartedly and with joy.*



Thank You!  
Spotify playlist

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