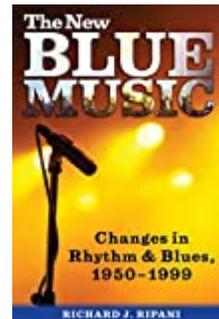




**Richard J. Ripani.** *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950–1999.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. xvi + 261 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-861-6; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57806-862-3.



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## The Evolution of Rhythm and Blues

In *The New Blue Music*, Richard J. Ripani examines the top twenty-five hits of the last five decades of the twentieth century to explain changes in rhythm and blues. He argues that a new musical system, which he calls the “New blue music,” became the dominant force in the creation of American music in the twentieth century. His goals are fivefold: to show that African and European musical elements and aesthetics are responsible for the blended nature of R & B and the musical spectrum; to examine how specific musical elements in R & B changed, therefore tracing the development of musical styles and trends; to explain where R & B fits into American music and its relationship to other styles of American music; to describe common elements of R & B and other American music genres; and to define a musical system that includes those features. Most important, his study shows that he has developed a musical system or framework that can be used to describe the general style of African American music.

Ripani defines the blues musical system as containing the musical features of mode, melody, harmony, form,

and rhythm. The blending of these ingredients in varying amounts is what makes each genre and style distinctive. For example, chords in blues songs do not always resolve where they are supposed to, that is were they are “supposed to” according to the European music tradition. Ripani uses his system to analyze how various songs conform to it. To build his theory, Ripani relies on description-based systems of David Evans, Peter van der Mewre, and Gerhard Kubrik.

Ripani notes that one of the most important features of this blues musical system is its ambiguous nature. This ambiguity can be noticed in pitch and harmony when judged by those schooled in European traditions. According to Ripani, the blues scale should not be interpreted as an altered Western system scale. Instead, he argues that it should be interpreted as a scale containing different configurations of pitch. Ripani uses a transcribed example to explain this ambiguity. One section of the transcribed musical piece would be interpreted as a measure to be played in minor key by European standards but in the blues scale it is neither minor nor major.

One important component of the blues system is that its universal nature cuts across many genres. Jazz, folk, gospel, and rock 'n' roll musicians are expected to know the blues scale because it is a basic part of any musician's vocabulary. Therefore, theoretically musicians from many genres can play together on a twelve bar blues song. The common denominator between these types of music is the blues system, he argues. The findings from the 50s and 60s demonstrate that Ripani has successfully constructed a framework that can be used to show how music changed and therefore can trace the development of styles and trends. His larger conclusion is that the blues system tradition survived over the decades. Some musical traits that make up the system Ripani identified are present in rap, for example.

Ripani's technical analysis of the top twenty-five R & B songs of the 50s lead to several findings. Most of the songs' tempos remain the same throughout the song and the pieces spend 54 percent of their duration on the tonic or I chord. The IV chord is more prevalent than the V chord. These twenty-five songs tend to use the I, IV, and V chords the same amount of the time as they are used in the twelve bar blues progression. The most consistent trait identified is the triplet-swing feel, which is present in 92 percent of the songs. Some of the findings observed from the 50s to the 60s include a 10 percent increase in beats per minute (b.p.m.) and the similar use of the I chord. One huge change is the decrease in the use of the twelve bar blues form; 60 percent of the songs from the 50s used the form at least some of the time but only 12 percent of the songs from the 60s did to any degree. After 1965 none of the songs used the twelve bar blues form. The triplet-swing feel so prevalent in the 50s songs was reduced to 28 percent of the 60s songs and disappeared after 1967. Ripani argues that funk music explains that change because it is built on a foundation of sixteenth notes.

The main problem with this book's conclusions is that

his twenty-five-song data set is too small to support his analysis. Using just twenty-five songs to represent an entire decade of R & B songs is not enough to be statistically valid. In addition, using Billboard charts to select the songs is problematic, because the methods Billboard used to compile their charts did not stay consistent over the years. For example, throughout most of the 1950s, Billboard had three separate R & B charts; then, in 1958, Billboard combined them into one chart. Ripani recognizes these problems and defends his methods by arguing that the Billboard information is the best data available to measure songs' impact on American culture.

Even though Ripani's work suffers from the shortcoming of the small data set, his book does have some value. His main finding is that R & B, jazz, country, blues, rock 'n' roll, and gospel share the same body of elements of style, content, and form. His main finding validates the blues system concept as a way to examine the general style of African American music and its relationship to popular American music. He shows where R & B fits into American music and demonstrates its relationship with other genres. Ripani adds an important caveat that his findings are not exhaustive or conclusive. The results of his study show other researchers where more work needs to be done.

Although it is not necessary to be able to read music to understand and benefit from Ripani's arguments, having that ability will help the reader's understanding. Ripani demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the literature, and his book is well informed by his three decades as a musician. The author has added to our understanding of how R & B evolved over time and has shown the importance of blues in many styles of American music. Ripani's work underscores the importance of understanding the influence of the blues on American music and its contribution to the development of the popular American musical canon.

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