

## The Evolution of the Blues

**1500s to mid-1800s** - Millions of Africans were enslaved and brought from West Africa to America bringing with them musical and cultural traditions. It was on the plantations throughout the American South that these musical and cultural traditions would lay the foundations for early blues music.

**1865** - The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment is ratified, abolishing slavery throughout the United States.

**Late 1800s** - Jim Crow laws mandated state sanctioned segregation of the races throughout the southern United States. In effect until 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, these laws prevented African Americans from living in white neighborhoods, attending white schools, working the same jobs as whites, eating at white restaurants, or even using the same restrooms as white people. Jim Crow



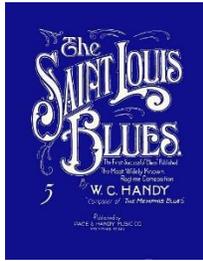
Laws further created a second-class citizenship for African Americans, putting their life; liberty and pursuit of happiness in jeopardy. Many were beaten, imprisoned, and lynched and often suffered unspeakable daily turmoil. The economic, physical, and emotional strife caused by these laws provided inspiration for much of the lyrical content found in early blues music.

**C. 1900** - Player Pianos are introduced bringing music out of clubs and theatres and into people's homes. With no musical training necessary, music can now be enjoyed in the comfort of one's home.

**March 1903** - While traveling in Mississippi, W.C. Handy first sees a guitar player playing early blues music at a train station.

**c. 1910** - Mass migration of African Americans from the South to the North begins. Many left *hoping* to escape Jim Crow laws and the racism rampant throughout the southern United States and to find work in the North, bringing with them their rich musical traditions. This mass movement of African Americans became known as the *Great Migration* and helped spread the blues from the Mississippi Delta to other regions of the United States like St. Louis, Chicago, Kansas City, and Detroit.

1912 - "Baby Seals Blues", written and composed by Baby F. Seals, is published. It is the first time the word "blues" is used in print to describe a style of music.



1914 - The song "St. Louis Blues", written and composed by W.C. Handy, is published. Handy, commonly referred to as the "Father of the Blues", was inspired to write the song sometime in 1892 or 1893 after hearing a woman distress about hard times between her and her husband. The song has been played and recorded by hundreds of artists over the years and is often referred to as the "jazzman's

*Hamlet*". Two versions of the song, one by Bessie Smith and the other by Louis Armstrong, have been inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

1920 - "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith becomes the first recording by an African American vocalist. It sells over a million copies in the first year, putting blues music on the map. The blues explosion that followed helped propel the careers of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and many others. The success of the song led to the creation of a new category of music, known as "Race" music. "Race" music was used to describe African American music and its legacy can be found in other musical genres including Soul, R&B, Rap and Hip Hop. "Crazy Blues" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1994.



Mamie Smith



Bessie Smith

1923 - Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith make their recording debut. Ma Rainey, known for her strong vocals and energy, was often billed as the "Mother of the Blues" and was among the earliest blues recording artists. Bessie Smith would go on to become the most popular female blues singers in the 1920s and 1930s and earned the moniker "Empress of the Blues".

1925 - Victor and Columbia Records begin issuing the first discs of music recorded electrically with a microphone. This innovation made music easier to record and made it possible to listen to music recordings at home which furthered the spread and popularity of blues music, as well as other forms of popular music.

**1925/1926** - Blind Lemon Jefferson makes his recording debut. Born Lemon Henry Jefferson in Texas, Blind Lemon Jefferson would become one of the first solo guitarists with vocal accompaniment to find widespread commercial success earning him the nickname "Father of the Texas Blues".



Blind Lemon Jefferson

**1930** - Earliest electric guitars are designed and produced. Early electric guitars were most commonly played by jazz guitarists in big bands who needed to amplify their sound to be heard amongst the other, louder instruments. The electric guitar would go on to become one of the cornerstones of electric blues music.

**1932** - The first records by Bluebird Records are released. A subsidiary of RCA Victor, Bluebird released primarily jazz and blues records. Notable Bluebird artists include Big Bill Broonzy, Roosevelt Sykes, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Tampa Red. The first three, along with Washboard Sam, would make up the Bluebird session band that would ultimately be responsible for the "Bluebird Sound". The "Bluebird Sound" would go on to be a major influence on Rhythm and Blues and early Rock N Roll.



Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter

**1933** - American teacher and folklorist John Lomax and his son Alan begin traveling across the southern United States to record and catalog American folk music for the Library of Congress. Many of his recordings were done in fields, barns, or prisons and would be the first and only time many of these artists were recorded. Others, like Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, would go on to find success. These recordings were some of the first to record the raw sounds being played throughout the Mississippi Delta.

**1941** - Muddy Waters makes his first recordings. Recorded by Alan Lomax on behalf of the Library of Congress, these early recordings were conducted in the middle of Muddy Waters' house in Stovall, Mississippi. Born McKinley Morganfield in Issaquena County, Mississippi in 1914 or 1915, Muddy Waters would go on to become one of the most influential blues artists.

**November 21, 1941** - The *King Biscuit Time* radio show debuts on KFFA in Helena, Arkansas with performances by Sonny Boy Williamson II and Robert Lockwood Jr. At the time, it was the only radio show featuring African American music. KFFA reached a wide audience throughout the Mississippi Delta. The success of *King Biscuit Time* would pave the way for other African American radio stations and programming. *King Biscuit Time* is still broadcast daily on KFFA in Helena.

**1943** - Hoping to find success as a musician, Muddy Waters leaves Mississippi for Chicago. While in Chicago, Waters goes electric helping to create the Chicago blues sound. Largely centered around electric guitar, the electric sound of Chicago blues would serve as a major influence for many artists to follow including the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton.



Muddy Waters

**1948** - After the success of *King Biscuit Time* in Arkansas, WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee debuts the *Tan Town Jubilee*. WDIA is the first radio station with an all African American staff. It is also the first radio station to feature only programming intended for African American audiences. B.B. King got his start early on as a deejay for WDIA.

**1949** - Billboard creates a "Rhythm and Blues" category, thus creating the term "Rhythm and Blues" to describe music. Rhythm & Blues, or R&B, replaced "Race" music as a term used to describe music made by African Americans. Early on, R&B was primarily used to describe jazz and blues but the term would later go on to include gospel, soul, and funk music as well.

**1950** - Phil and Leonard Chess establish Chess Records in Chicago. Specializing in blues records, Chess Records was instrumental in spreading electric Chicago blues across the country. Notable artists include Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Chuck Berry, and Little Walter amongst many others.

**1951** - "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats is released and reaches number 1 on the Billboard R&B chart. Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats was actually a pseudonym for Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm. Essentially a sped-up blues song, "Rocket 88" is *considered* by many to be the first Rock N Roll song.



B.B. King

**1952** - "3 O'Clock Blues", written by Lowell Fulson in 1946, is recorded and released by B.B. King for RPM Records. It spends five weeks at number 1 on the Billboard R&B charts and is B.B. King's first hit. "3 O'Clock Blues" introduced B.B. King to a national audience propelling his career as "King of the Blues".

**1954** - Elvis Presley releases his first record, "That's All Right". Released by Sun Studios, "That's All Right" was a 1946 blues song by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Presley and his sped-up version of the song soared in popularity and helped introduce the blues to a wider white audience.

**1955** - Chuck Berry records and releases "Maybelline" on Chess Records. It is Chuck Berry's first commercial release. The song reached number 1 on the Billboard R&B chart and number 5 on the Billboard Pop chart. It is one of the first songs to gain widespread popularity with both white and black audiences. Much like "Rocket 88", "Maybelline" is essentially a sped-up blues song and is also *considered* by many to be the first Rock N Roll song.

**Early 1960s** - The blues begins reaching larger audiences leading to the creation of blues festivals throughout the country. These blues festivals brought white and black audiences together and brought greater exposure to many blues artists by introducing them to younger audiences. *is, Missouri*

**1961** - Columbia releases *King of the Delta Blues Singers* comprised of recordings made by Robert Johnson in 1936. In the mid-1960s, the album would reach England and make a lasting impression on British musicians. His songs have been recorded by artists such as the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and Led Zeppelin. Due to these recordings, Robert Johnson is considered one of the biggest blues influences on Rock N Roll.

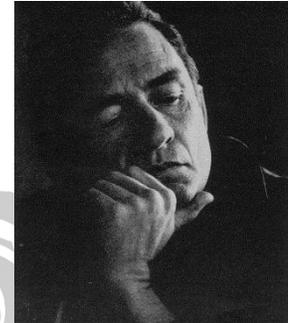
**July 12, 1962** - The Rolling Stones play their first concert at the Marquee Club in London. The Rolling Stones, along with other British bands during the 1960s, are often credited with reintroducing blues music to America. They will go on to become one of the most popular bands in the world and credit the blues as their biggest influence. They even got their name from a Muddy Waters song, "Rollin Stone".



The Rolling Stones

**1964** - "Little Red Rooster", a song originally recorded by Howlin' Wolf, is released by the Rolling Stones. It reaches number 1 on the UK Singles Chart. To this day, it is the only blues song to do so.

**1970s** - A new generation of singer-songwriters merge country influences with the blues to create "Outlaw Country", a genre made popular by Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams Jr., and Willie Nelson.



Johnny Cash

**1970s** - "Southern Rock" emerges as a popular genre of music. Much like "Outlaw Country", "Southern Rock" combines blues influences with country as well as Rock N Roll. Pioneers in this genre include Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band.

**1971** - Bruce Iglauer establishes Alligator Records in Chicago, providing a record label for many blues artists who had either declined in popularity or were cut from other labels. It also launches the careers of many 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation blues stars. Since 1971, Alligator Records has released albums by Buddy Guy, Robert Cray, Koko Taylor, and Shemekia Copeland.

**1980** - The Blues Foundation is established. With its headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee, the Blues Foundation is a nonprofit affiliated with roughly 200 blues societies throughout the world.

*St. Louis, Missouri*

**1980** - The Blues Foundation establishes the Blues Hall of Fame and inducts its first class of inductees including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King, and Robert Johnson. Initially, the Blues Hall of Fame didn't occupy a physical building until the Blues Hall of Fame Museum was opened in Memphis in 2015.

**1983** - Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble release their first album, *Texas Flood*. Born in Texas, Stevie Ray Vaughan helped lead somewhat of a blues revival in the 1980s. He was and still is considered by many to be the best blues guitar player of all time. He enjoyed great success until his untimely death in a helicopter crash in 1990.



Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble

**1986** - The first class of inductees are inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame including artists Chuck Berry, James Brown, and Ray Charles. Legendary blues singer and guitarist Robert Johnson was inducted under the category of "Early Influence". The obvious influence of the blues on the first class of inductees speaks to the influence of the blues on the entire genre of Rock N Roll and popular music.

**1990** - Robert Johnson's recordings from 1936 and 1937 are released on CD. The album was certified gold in the first year and to date has sold over a million copies.

**2003** - The U.S. Congress declares 2003 "Year of the Blues" to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of W.C. Handy's first encounter with blues music.

**2006** - President George W. Bush awards B.B. King the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his contributions to American culture. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest award given to civilians by the United States government.

**2008** - B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center opens in B.B. King's hometown of Indianola, Mississippi.

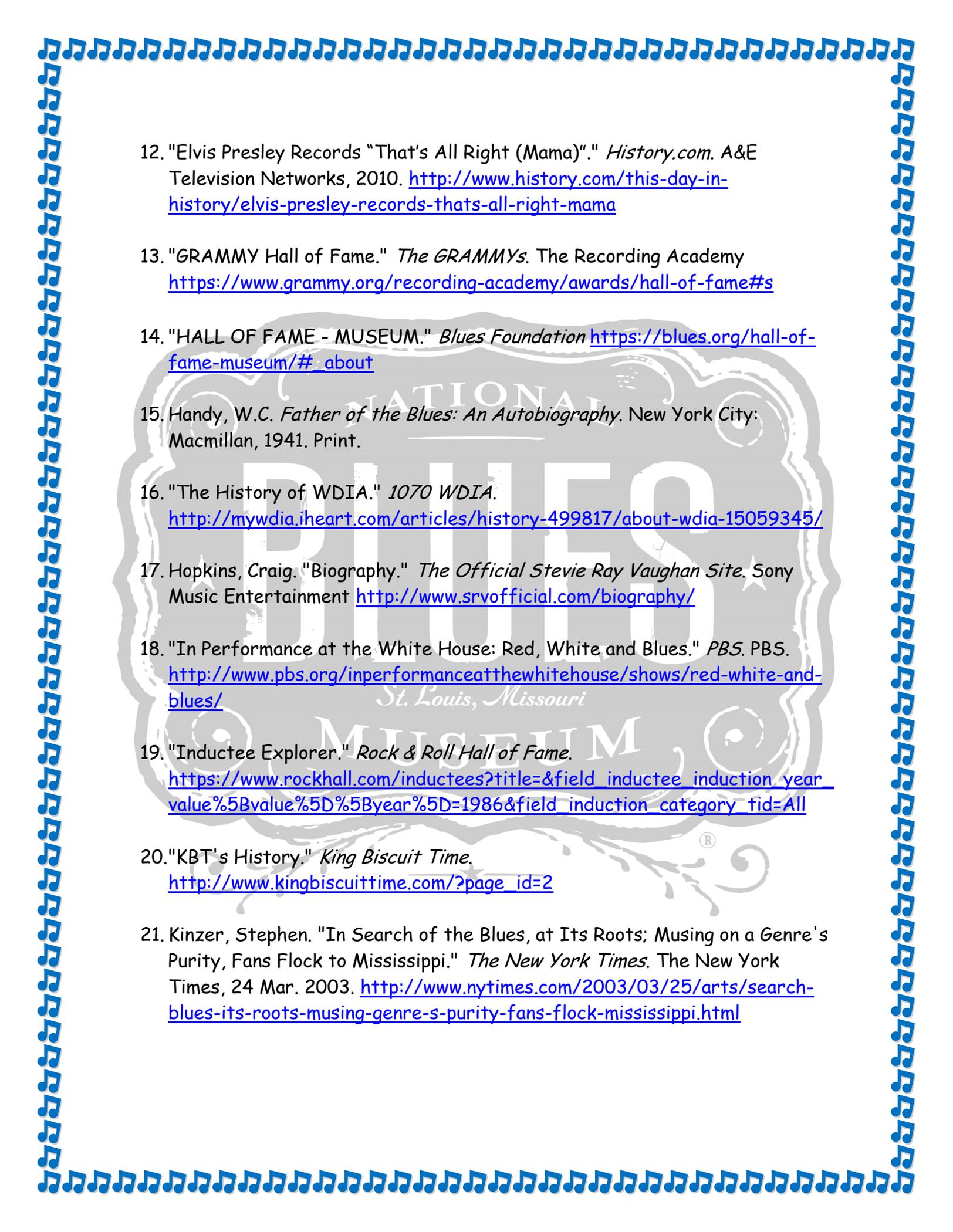
**2012** - President Barack Obama honors the impact of the blues on American culture by hosting *Red, White, and Blues* at the White House. The concert featured performances from Mick Jagger, B.B. King, and Buddy Guy. President Obama himself even joined B.B. King for a verse of the Robert Johnson song "Sweet Home Chicago".

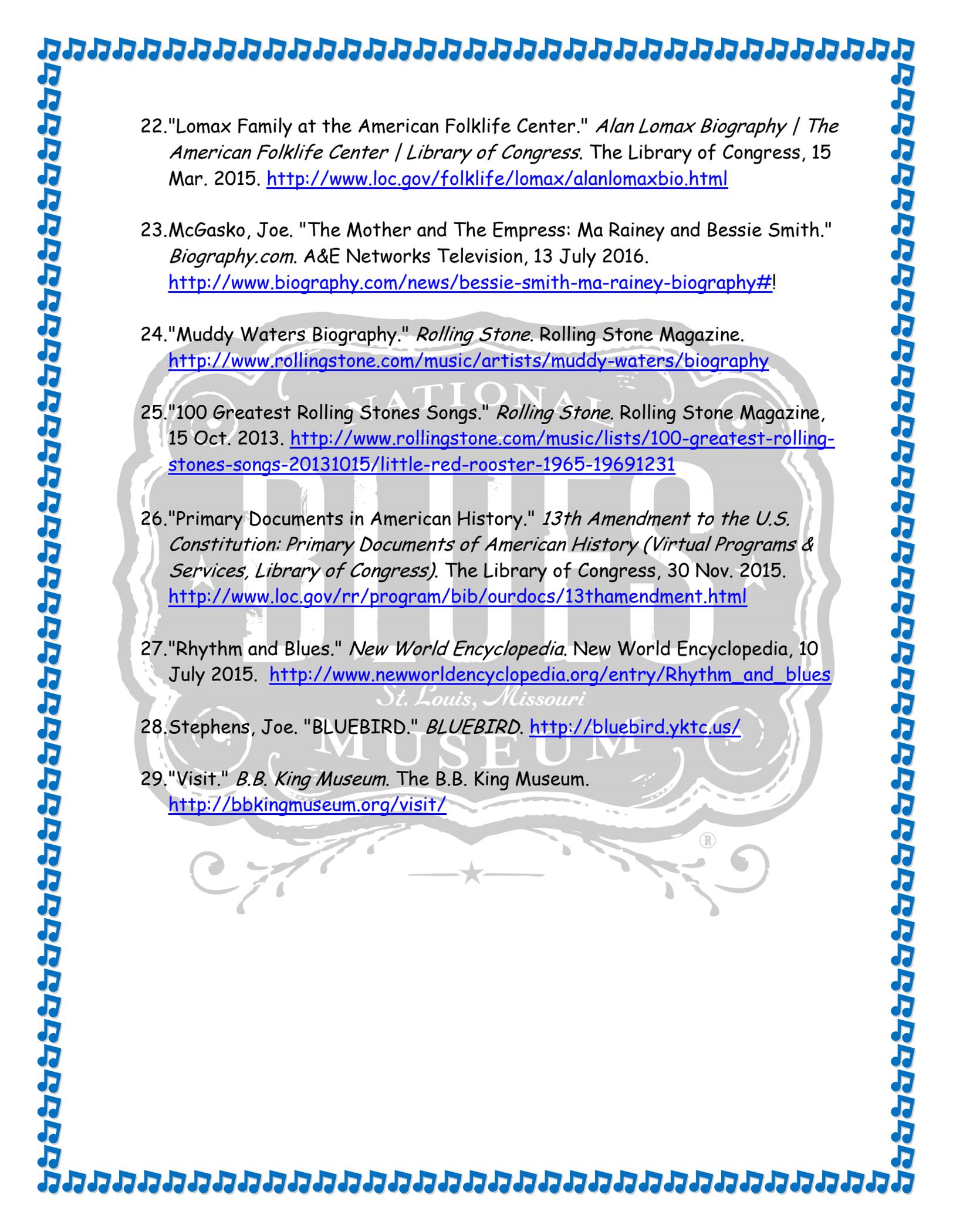
**2016** - The National Blues Museum opens in St. Louis, Missouri with its mission "to be the Premier Entertainment and Educational Resource Focusing on the Blues as the Foundation of American Music."



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