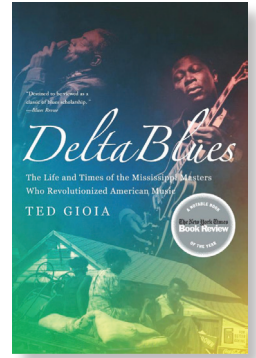


# Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music

By Ted Gioia, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009



“**T**he blues had a baby and they named the baby rock and roll. As for the grandchildren, they are literally too many to name.” So begins Ted Gioia’s carefully planned and lovingly crafted *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music*. The book opens with the story of the country’s ancestral tree, planted as the seeds of religious and cultural tradition in Africa and the Middle East; then nourished, incredibly, by the roots of human experience on slave ships and cotton fields; and sprouting, finally, in the Mississippi Delta, a region as rich and fertile by way of land and soil as it is poor and stunted by way of academic, economic, and scientific development. The backdrop is unlikely: how can a place that has contributed so little to executive and judicial branches of the government, the Dow Jones, or the Fortune 500 have somehow contributed so much to the way we now use, experience, and understand music? Gioia spends the next four hundred pages painting the Delta blues as an indefatigable contradiction to expectations, consistently defying logical explanation and typical industry practices.

Throughout the text, the reader encounters story after story of blues musicians’ lost identities and unknown namesakes. Contrary to the contemporary model of musicians as stars in which talent and artistry take a backseat to fame and fortune, Gioia tells of a time when music was the tradition and a particular song or recording could transcend the notion of an individual singer as a stand-alone entity.

In offering the reader a historical account of characters, relationships, setting, and plot, Gioia frames the journey with a spirit of questioning and curiosity.



In many cases, it was left up to chance who was recorded and who wasn’t, and often the recordings themselves rose to prominence as the characters of interest, disconnected from their performers of origin. Gioia also takes care to point out the striking contrast between the fame and fortune characterizing today’s popular idols and the downtrodden, troubled biographies of the most sought-after blues musicians. From the standpoint of a record company, as a performer’s experience with tragedy, solitude, and a prison record increased, so did sales. And unlike the predictable S-curve governing most cultural trends in which momentum gradually builds towards a critical mass or tipping point, sales trends for Delta blues musicians seemed to follow an alternate law by which popular interest in a performer would only erode the credibility of the down-and-out image. A musician undervalued by the industry and under-

sold to consumers had the perceived authenticity of someone who really had something to sing about.

In offering the reader a historical account of characters, relationships, setting, and plot, Gioia frames the journey with a spirit of questioning and curiosity. As we teach our students “the blues,” we hope to contextualize their experience with an accurate understanding of the tradition’s history in connection with jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, funk, hip hop, and rap. For the reader whose intent is to acquire the who, what, and where of this lineage, Gioia’s book is thorough and satisfying. Furthermore, he also engages the willing reader to a deeper level of discourse, speculating how this evolution took place, and why it might have happened.

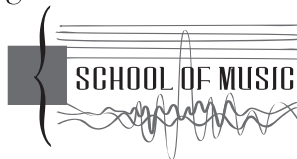
The story tracks the life and legend of musicians on a timeline from Charley Patton and Son House to Tommy Johnson and Skip James, from Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters to Howlin’ Wolf and B.B. King. Gioia tells the story of these and countless other performers heading to places like Memphis, Tennessee; Grafton, Wisconsin; and other cities in Texas, Louisiana, New York, and Mississippi to record with labels including Brunswick, Genett, Paramount, Victor, and Columbia. Characters like W.C. Handy, Henry Spier, John Lomax, and Alan Lomax play a significant role in the story as it thickens and develops beyond a simple biography of the performers themselves into a tale of history in the making. Gioia brings the conversation to a close with speculation on the role of the *Delta Blues* today, post-revival, saying “no one will deny that folks here

still have more than enough to be blue about, and have earned the right to put it into song. Above all, the fans are waiting for the fire to rekindle in the Delta, are half expecting it. Something tells me they will not be disappointed.”

One final feature of note is Gioia’s recommended listening of one hundred essential blues performances, unique in their inclusion as individual recordings and not entire compact discs or LPs. “My hope is that by suggesting a song instead of a CD, I will encourage closer and repeated listening sessions, and that this relatively modest amount of music—perhaps five or six hours’ worth—will become deeply familiar to my readers,” he writes. These recommendations are a welcome addition to this book, itself a great read, and a wonderful resource for all teachers who tell their students the story of the blues. ■

*Kim Holland teaches general music, choral music, and music technology to second- through eighth-grade students at The Prairie School in Racine, Wisconsin.*

## CarnegieMellon



Linda Ahlstedt



Patrick Ware

## Level I and II Orff Schulwerk Teacher Training Courses at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA

Join Linda Ahlstedt and Patrick Ware for nine consecutive days:  
**Monday, August 1– Thursday, August 11, 2011**

Through this compact nine day course on the Orff Schulwerk approach to music and movement you will experience the development of conceptual lessons and process teaching, recorder playing and sequential teaching technique, folk dance and movement training, as well as special topics in children’s literature and music, curriculum planning, assessment and classroom management.

[music.cmu.edu](http://music.cmu.edu)

### Contact:

**Dr. Natalie Ozeas, Course Director**  
[nlozeas@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:nlozeas@andrew.cmu.edu)  
412.268.2382

Each workshop may be taken for three graduate credits or as a certification participant at a lower fee.

College housing and dining is available on this beautiful campus in the renaissance city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Join us in the Golden Triangle where the three rivers meet and you will march to a brand new beat!

## THE ORFFECHO

### Call for Articles

The Orff Echo is now accepting article ideas for the winter 2012 issue on Elemental Music Theory.

To express interest in writing for this issue, contact Editorial Board member Nick Wild at [nick.wild@comcast.net](mailto:nick.wild@comcast.net).

To request submission guidelines for writing for *The Orff Echo*, e-mail [echoeditor@aosa.org](mailto:echoeditor@aosa.org).

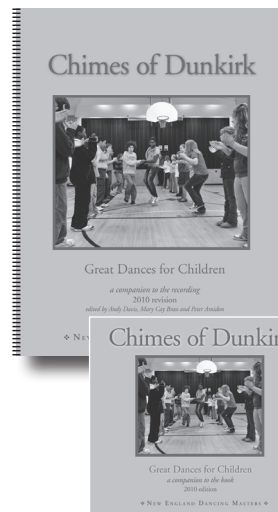
The deadline for submissions for the winter 2012 issue is August 1, 2011.

### Erratum

In the fall 2010 issue, on page 23, the description for Figure 7 should have read "Figure 7. Rhythmic speech chant used as a contrasting "B" section."

## —Just Released—

New 2010 revision of  
New England Dancing Masters’  
classic book & CD:



### Chimes of Dunkirk

Great Dances for Children  
2010 revision • book and CD

Edited by Andy Davis,  
Mary Cay Brass and  
Peter Amidon

All of the same great dances with an updated introduction, improved and clarified instructions, and three re-recorded tracks on the CD.

Order directly from New England Dancing Masters  
[www.dancingmasters.com](http://www.dancingmasters.com)