

FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

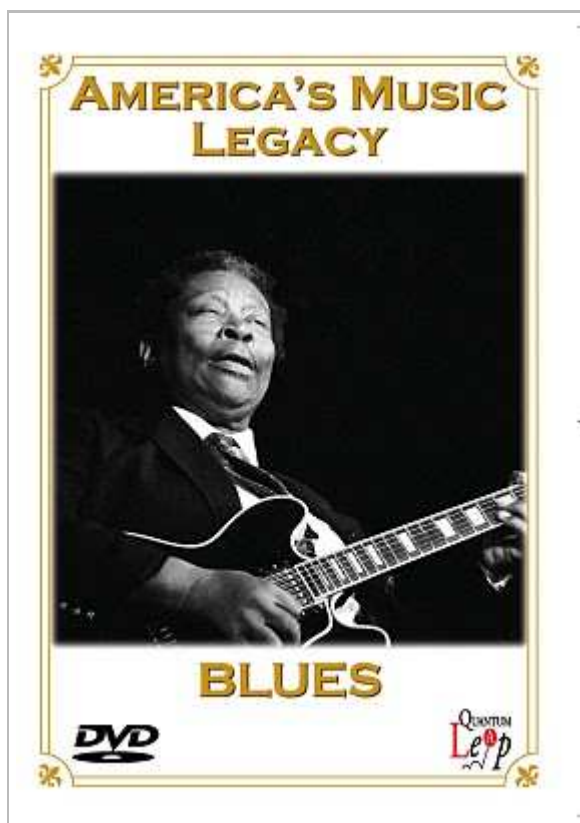
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 8, 2011

DVD Reviews: Two of the America's Music Legacy Series, Part 3: Blues; Soul

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Images from the Internet*

Part 3: This is just two of a series of six DVDs that have been released to promote a collection of television specials from the 1980s that highlight specific genres of music, with each disc focusing on a one at a time. Note that links to other performances are not present on these compilations.



America's Music Legacy: Blues

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1982 / 2010

115 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

Blog Archive

- ▼ 2011 (6)
 - ▼ January (6)
 - [Punk Primer #2: The British Second Wave](#)
 - [Bruno Arts Bank and All Citizens' Cafe, Jan 14, 20...](#)
 - [DVD Reviews: Two of the America's Music Legacy Ser...](#)
 - [Celebrating Leo Francos on his 90th Birthday](#)
 - [DVD Reviews: Two of the America's Music Legacy Ser...](#)
 - [DVD Review: David Bowie: Rare and Unseen](#)

- ▶ 2010 (152)
- ▶ 2009 (78)
- ▶ 2008 (70)
- ▶ 2007 (22)

About Me

Robert Barry Francos
c/o 62 Timber Ridge Rd,
Commack, NY 11725. From 1977-88, I used to publish a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). And the beat goes on.

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Qleap.co.uk
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There are so many subgenres of blues, such as Delta (mostly acoustic), Chicago (electric), Harlem (swing), and Kansas City/Memphis (R&B/R&R). This is sort of a gross definition, and there are many crossovers, but most blues has the same I-IV-V progression (e.g., C-F-G: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chord_progression) that instilled and enabled early rock and roll. As put by the host of this blues-focused show, Brock Peters, "Three basic chords, 12 basic measures." The topics within the genre tend to be gender specific ("s/he done me wrong"), though money-related matters is a close second.

The collection here, which is comprised of two performance shows and clips edited together, easily flips among the many subgenres with ease, and starts strong with a short film of the late Bessie Smith (d. 1937). The musical action starts in full with Linda Hopkins performing "St. Louis Blues" (a completely different one than with which Louis Armstrong would have a hit), a boogie holler. She certainly has the voice to carry it off, as well.

Chicago-style gets a boost from one of its founders, as B.B. King just wails through "Payin' the Cost to Be the Boss," "How Blue Can You Get," and "All Over Again." These burners exemplify why he is held in such high respect, as he moans and growls the lyrics, wrings the guitar, and pounds the top of the instrument with his fists in emotional fits. He may have the blues, but he is a joy to watch.

Following a clip of Billie Holliday (d. 1959) is Leata Galloway, who sings "Fine and Mellow" and "Stormy Monday" in a similar Harlem chanteuse style. Not surprising as Galloway was born in Brooklyn and raised in Harlem. She also has an interesting body language, as she sometimes dips waaaaay down. On the second song, the Gerald Wiggins Band, which does the backing throughout, gets an opportunity to also shine.

Likewise, after a clip of Jimmy Rushing (1972), of the Count Basie Orchestra, Ernie Andrews does a Basie-big-band-swing-style "Ernie's Blues." He's followed by alto saxer Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson (d. 1988), who performs the humorous and also self-named "Cleanhead Blues."

Linda Hopkins returns for three songs after a short filmed interview with her discussing Bessie Smith. First up is "Born on a Friday," in which she gets to make use of her powerful voice. Next, she has a duet with B.B. King on "Everyday I Have the Blues," where she handles most of the singing and he does *all* the guitar. Last is another duet, this time with saxist Vi Redd, where she once again does "St. Louis Blues," but this time it's all her vocals, and Vi does some wild playing on her instrument.

Reminiscent of T. Bone Walker, Connie Carter "Pee Wee" Crayton (d. 1985) handles the standard "After Hours," which is closer to rock and

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roll, or Tex-Mex. Of course, I enjoyed this immensely.

For the finale of the first part, all the artists come out for a jam of "Jammin' the Blues," with Hopkins on point.

Leading off the second half, also hosted by Brock Peters, is smooth-as-silk Joe Williams (d. 1999), who sings "Come Back" with a smattering of scat. This should come as no surprise as he was the vocalist for the Count Basie Orchestra for six years. He comes back later to do the equally silky "Tell Me Where to Scratch."

My memory of actress Paula Kelly is from the film *Sweet Charity* (paired with Chita Rivera) and a memorable *Playboy* pictorial around the same time, when I was at an impressionable age. She proves she can sing with a perky (for blues) "Ain't Nobody's Business." She performs in a sultry manner, and is obviously comfortable in her body as she moves around to the music.

A more nasal boogie blaster, along the lines of Nell Carter, is "Little" Esther Philips (d. 1984), with "Early in the Morn." This a jazzy, nearly a-melodic and dissonant number, followed by the slower "Cherry Red." Philips passed away soon after this from complications of drug abuse.

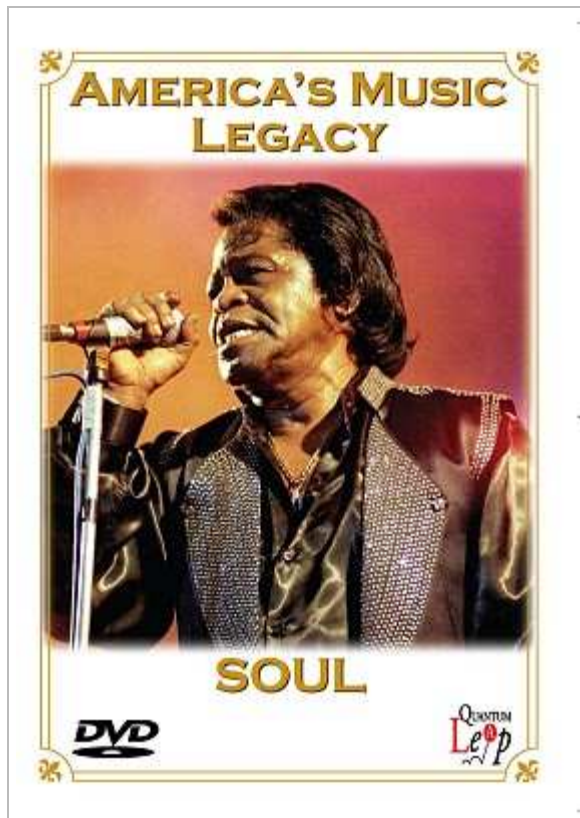
Brownie McGhee (incorrectly listed as Bobby McGee) is a solid Delta-style guitarist and singer who does the strong and wonderful "Life is a Gamble." After him, unlisted in the credits, is the sole white performer, Addie Clement, previously of the all female rock band Fanny. She plays a Chicago electric style Willie Dixon cover of "I Think I Got the Blues" that reminds me of the likes of John Scofield.

Introduced as "the original Blues Brothers," Buddy Guy (vox) and Junior Wells (guitar; d. 1998) flex their muscle through "Who's Lovin' You Tonight?" This is a more rockin' vein of the blues, along the likes of Sam and Dave.

Dorothy Donegan (misspelled on the box!; d. 1998) plays a jellyroll boogie piano along the lines of Little Richard and Jerry Lee, except she has horns backing her. She absolutely rocks through "After Hours," mixing in a bit of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Bye, Bye Blackbird." The way she plays sounds nothing short of controlled raucous; it's great.

For the finale, Joe Williams and Esther Philips duet on "Nobody Knows You When You're Down," which has an improvised feel; it is a scorching ballad with some power moments.

The blues is feel-bad music that makes the listener feel good. Yes, it's an oxymoron, but it certainly works here. There are some brilliant moments here, and none that hits a bad note or untrue to the genre.



America's Music Legacy: Soul

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1983 / 2010

95 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

Qleap.co.uk

Soul is an emotional style of music that is poppier than the blues, is more melodic than disco, and generally has high emotional peaks. It took me a while to appreciate the form; it came when VHS was new, and I rented out a tape of live performances called *The Soul Experience* (there wasn't as large a selection as would come later). I was blown away by a very subtle and moving solo Bill Withers doing his classic "Ain't No Sunshine" (youtube.com/watch?v=tldlqbv7SPo; different than the tape), a song as I found irksome until that moment. With an epiphany, I suddenly found an appreciation for the form, and went back to watch James Brown do "Please, Please, Please" on the *T.A.M.I. Show* (youtube.com/watch?v=54y_XDKNxPg), and it was a whole different experience. Yeah, sometimes I'm a slow learner (and in the Brown example, so were the Rolling Stones, but that's another story).

Appropriately, James Brown (d. 2006) opens up this program, introduced by host then-actor/now-minister Leon Isaac Kennedy. Brown starts off strong, of course, with "Rap Payback." Definitely a dynamic performer, and even the band is in constant motion while they're playing and interacting using call and response with Brown; there is solid drumming and horns to enforce the sound, as he slides into "Jam," relying on simple repetitive rhythms, riding it for many minutes while never being boring. When he returns later for "The Man Understands," the audience is on its feet and swaying; heck, so was I. The band member introducing him looks a lot like Rick James, and as is usual, there is someone in the entourage just to say "James Brown" over and over and over and over and... Vibrant stuff.

He is followed by Ben E. King, who rose to fame in the Drifters, and then had his own hits, including "Spanish Harlem," which he opens with here. Kennedy precedes him with the personal descriptor of "Uptown R&B." Before his second number, there is a brief interview with King where he describes recording "Spanish" with Phil Spector, and how it only took two takes. His sophomore song here is the crooner standard, "I Who Have Nothing," which he infuses with soul via minor chords, without losing any of the song's feel or emotion.

Kennedy then presents Mary Bond Davis as "The future of soul," when in actuality she is more symbolic of the death of disco with "This is It." In the early '80s, disco was (too) slowly fading into hip-hop (not much better), which was more R&B than soul (in my opinion), but it was the sound of the time. She has a good voice with some theatrical punch, which is appropriate considering she appeared often on the Broadway stage.

Atlantic Records signed Tyrone Davis (d. 2005), but with "Turn Back the Hands of Time," a big hit for him, his sound could be considered Motown, with its Temptations vibe. His interview piece is about performing, as he sits on a couch weighed down in almost Mr. T levels of gold jewelry. He comes back later for a second tune, a sultry ballad that's somewhere between Marvin Gaye and Barry White.

Between performers, Kennedy gives history lessons on soul, as is common of the hosts in this series, while also presenting clips. He states (reads) that soul started in 1954 with Brown vs. The Board of Education ruling, and then kick started by the likes of Ray Charles.

Maxine Nightingale starts off with "Lead Me On," which shows she has the pipes, and then slows it down for the lovely ballad, "I Don't Miss You At All." Then, unfortunately, of course she resorts to her big disco hit, "Right Back Where We Started From" (one of the reasons why they invented 2x speed), even though she does a more soulful version of the tune than her original recording.

Along with her Pips, Gladys Knight takes over the stage in the first performance that can come close to the level of James Brown, but without all the (literal) sweat. She starts upbeat with "I Will Fight," leading into her hit ballad, "You're The Best Thing that Ever Happened to Me," in that style that she has made her own. It is further exemplified by her next number, the outstanding "Midnight Train to Georgia," which shows off the Pips a bit more in the return and call.

While recording at Sun around the time Elvis walked in, Rufus Thomas (Jr., d. 2001) shows with "Do the Push and Pull" that he has a sound that is similar in style to James Brown (as did Joe "I Gotcha" Tex, who passed away in 1982, shortly before this show was recorded: [youtube.com/watch?v=zEYL8TtckjI&feature=related](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEYL8TtckjI&feature=related)). Despite his age here, he is also fashionably bombastic like Brown, dressed in yellow cape, shorts (!), shirt, and knee-high high-heel boots. And then he drops the cape... His daughter, Stax Records artist Carla Thomas, shows up next with "I Like What You do to Me," a borderline disco number. Her voice is in fine shape, but I wish she had done some of her earlier material, as "Gee Whiz," a fine example of "northern soul."

Jerry Butler, known as "The Ice Man" due to his cool and suave style, sings "Hey, Western Union Man." He is similar to Ben E. King in presentation, but a bit more upbeat. Following him is Freda Payne, known especially for her "Band of Gold," which she has been singing for nearly 15 years at the time of this taping, and just about 40 years now. She is apparently enjoying being on the stage and getting a chance to sing, as she has an underrated voice, but she also seems to have lost the meaning of the song. It is *not* a happy song despite its upbeat melody. Yet she's all smiles and sings it with little emotional backing, which is kind of as heartbreaking as the song.

Speaking of glad to be there, Percy Sledge, who did the powerful "When a Man Loves a Woman," which can still give me goosebumps, does not do that song, but rather "You Had to Be There." His voice has a nasal quality, but remains solid. He also has an ear to ear grin throughout. While I prefer his blues, he carries off the song well.

Though he died in 1967, the film of Otis Redding doing an exciting soul-encased cover of the Stones' "Satisfaction" shows why he is regarded enough to have a full song presented rather than just a clip.

To close the show, Gladys Knight and the Pips return to the stage for the upbeat "Save the Overtime," which made it to No. 1 in the R&B charts. For her cover of Marvin Gaye's "Heard It Through the Grapevine," she starts and a number of the performers come back on stage to join in for a rousing finale.

As is common with this series, there are some songs that are listed that never made it past the DVD editing, in this case one by Tyrone Davis's, Rufus Thomas's "Walking the Dog," Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home," and Gladys Knight's "Neither One of Us," all songs I would have genuinely liked to have heard.

Despite that, this collection is exciting (sans disco), and fun watch.

Posted by Robert Barry Francos at [12:01 AM](#) 

Labels: [America's Music Legacy](#), [BB King](#), [Blues](#), [DVD review](#), [Esther Philips](#), [FFanzeen](#), [Gladys Knight](#), [James Brown](#), [Linda Hopkins](#), [Otis Redding](#), [Robert Barry Francos](#), [Soul](#)

Reactions: interesting (0) cool (0) informative (0)

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