

## Blues Glossary – A Short Introduction to the Language of the Early Blues

Angel	Sometimes refers to a literal angel, sometimes a figurative or allusive reference to a person
Back door (creep around)	Used by a man as a euphemistic expression of romantic interest, as in “creep around your/her backdoor”
Backdoor man	A married woman’s lover
Bended knees	Stock expression for praying
Black	Dark-skinned, in blues idiom, generally down on one’s luck (see brown, yellow)
Black horses	Symbolic of death, probably literally refers to black horses used for drawing hearses/funeral wagons
Boar-hog's eye	Euphemism for a vulva, as in “I got something underneath those legs/Wink like a bo' hog's eye.” (See “Bo' Hog Blues,” “Skinny Legs Blues”)
Bolted meal	Corn meal which has been sifted to remove the corn bran (see meal)
Box-back suit	A type of suit fashionable among white men in the 1890s and black blues musicians in the 1910s and 1920s, characteristically had a peplum jacket with box pleats at the back
Brown	Of medium skin colour; in the blues, generally the most desirable colour to be (see black, yellow), sometimes used as a noun, as in “Can’t spare you no angel, but I swear I’ll send you a teasin’ brown”
Burial	Usually refers to a literal burial, although a number of blues songs include directions on what to do with the speaker after his/her death (“When I die...”), sometimes which specify that the speaker does <i>not</i> wish to be buried. (“When I die/Don’t bury daddy at all/Just pickle my bones/In alcohol”)
Burying ground	Graveyard, cemetery, maybe not necessarily what we’d think of as a formal cemetery

Cat	Sexual euphemism (used mostly by women about themselves)
Churchbell	Symbolizes loneliness, perhaps because many blues musicians came from a very religious culture but were transgressive outsiders
Clay	Usually used in the context of a funeral burial, as in “under(neath) the clay”
Clothes and shoes	Often used synecdochally to refer to a person’s wealth in general, or to express care-taking in general, as in “I buy your clothes and shoes”
Come down	Come near, descend from heaven, return to previous poor conditions
Cooling board	A bier
Coon	A black person; lyrical holdover from 19 <sup>th</sup> C. “coon songs,” largely written by white Tin Pan Alley songwriters
Crossroads	A place of supernatural power in blues (and other) folklore. Allegedly, one could summon and deal with the Devil at a crossroads. (The blues musician Robert Johnson allegedly acquired his talent by making a deal with the Devil at a crossroads, in exchange for a short life. He was murdered at the age of 27.)
Cutting up	Boisterous activity, troublemaking, or euphemistically, sex
Daddy/Papa	When used by a woman, refers to her boyfriend; sometimes used by a man to refer to himself
Doctor	A common stock figure in the blues, usually sort of “off-camera.” A source of bills and authoritative pronouncement. May symbolize white authority’s relation to blues culture, as in “there but mostly avoidable”
Farm	When used as in “the farm,” usually refers to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also called Parchman Farm (see Parchman)
France	May be a literal reference to the place, or an allusion to a faraway utopian land; bolstering this interpretation may be that some black blues musicians may have served in France during

	WWI, and American black soldiers under French command during WWI were treated much better than those under American command. Journey metaphors in blues often symbolise freedom, or at the very least, improved conditions, arguably even when associated with a death.
Holler	Shout, sing
Jaybird	Seems to symbolise white people – loud, powerful, and will drive other birds away from resources
King	An allusory figure who usually appears in drug-related songs, refers to the feeling of power created by the drugs as opposed to the actual circumstances of the speaker
Laid down/away	Buried, as in after death
Leave home	Either a literal or figurative departure, may refer to being dumped by one's daddy/mama, being a vagrant, dying, or driven out by natural or other disasters
Letter	Often a central component in a blues song involving a death (see Son House's "Death Letter Blues"); cross-reference with "The Letter Edged in Black," Hattie Nevada, 1897  Cross-reference with low literacy rates among AAs (~10% in 1910)
Line	A rail route or line
Mama	When used by a man, usually refers to his girlfriend (see Daddy/Papa), sometimes also used by a woman to refer to herself
Meal	Cornmeal (see bolted meal)
Mississippi River	Refers literally to the river itself, or figuratively, a separation or distance from something or someone

Murder ballad	A technical term for a blues piece which features a murder as its central image; the importance of murder in blues culture cannot be overstated, since during the approximate period and place most of these songs were written, murder rates for nonwhites were ~1-2/1000. (Not a typo.)
New Orleans	Sometimes a literal reference to the city, sometimes a figurative reference to a fantastical place with cultural connections
Parchman	Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm (see Farm)
Praying ground	In rural black southern culture, a private place (usually not a church) where a person goes to pray
Quit	Break up with
Road	Often means a railroad or a rail line (usually apparent from context)
Spoonful	Cocaine, ambiguous sexual euphemism
Stack O'Lee/Stagger Lee/Stackolee	A Trickster figure loosely based on an actual murderer and pimp, Paul Oliver connects him to similar figures from songs dating back to England of the late Middle Ages
Train	Railway train, can symbolise freedom, loneliness, travel, vagrancy
Used-to-be	Ex-boyfriend/girlfriend
Washing/scrubbing	Sexual euphemism
Weep and moan	Stock expression denoting grief
Worry	Roughly synonymous with “bother” in modern usage, both in the “annoy” and sexual senses
Yellow	Light-skinned, in blues idiom, generally portrayed as “too good” for everyone else (see black, brown)

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