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# 12 ESSENTIAL CONTEMPORARY BLUES ARTISTS

Blues is the foundation of much American music, but it's often seen as a legacy genre. These 12 blues artists make the case for its continuing relevance and vitality.



By [George de Stefano](#) / 15 April 2022

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*“The blues are the roots and the other musics are the fruits. It’s better keeping the roots alive because it means better fruits from now on. The blues are the roots of all American music. As long as American music survives, so will the blues.”*

Willie Dixon

“

*“Fearless, unadorned realism is a distinctive feature of the blues. Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition. Romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues.”*

Angela Davis

“

*“If you don’t know the blues... there’s no point in picking up the guitar and playing rock and roll or any other form of popular music.”*

Keith Richards

**B**lues is the foundation of so much American music, but it’s often pegged as a “legacy” genre, not a vital, contemporary one. What Willie Dixon called “the fruits”—R&B, soul, rock ‘n roll, funk, country, hip hop—long have eclipsed it in popularity and critical attention. Though broadly accurate, that assessment overlooks the fact that the blues is very much a living style that did not disappear with the passing of the 20th-century figures who defined it—Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, Koko Taylor, Sonny Boy Williamson, Etta James, Jimmy Reed, T-Bone Walker, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Big Mama Thornton, Elmore James, and many more.

The vitality of today’s [blues](#) music is evident in the number of artists, new and veteran, who are recording and performing; the many blues festivals in the United States and abroad, as well as “roots” music festivals featuring blues artists; the proliferation of print and online publications dedicated to the music; and the “best traditional blues” and “best contemporary blues album” Grammy categories. The use of blues in advertising might not be a telling

indicator of its vitality. But a Viagra commercial featuring Howlin' Wolf's "Smokestack Lightning" or Muddy Waters' "I Can't Be Satisfied" in an Outback Steakhouse ad exposes blues, even if just a taste, to huge audiences.

The blues today exhibit wide stylistic variety. Some artists play in the older styles established in the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont region, and Chicago, to name just a few geographic wellsprings; others incorporate soul, jazz, funk, and hip-hop. Contemporary blues artists acknowledge the legacies of those who preceded them while building on them with newer performing and recording techniques. As has always been true, the most compelling bluesmen and women are those who bring distinctive personal perspectives on life and storytelling flair to the music.

The digital age certainly has its discontents, but the Internet has been a boon to the blues. The technology has collapsed time so that fans and musicians can immerse themselves in the 1920s recordings of a founding father like Charley Patton and a newcomer like Christone "Kingfish" Ingram with the click of a mouse. Thanks to the Internet, "the great music of the past is more available than ever before," observes music historian [Elijah Wald](#). "Modern fans can hear recordings and watch videos by the finest performers of previous eras, and some young artists have used those tools to learn classic styles and connect with peers who share their tastes." The new artists "have included a wave of young African American musicians" who connect "blues to country, ragtime, jazz, and contemporary pop and alternative styles."

Wald says that the communities that "produced blues a century ago are still producing a wealth of new music." "From small neighborhood clubs to stadium stages—and the virtual stages of the Internet—the cultural heirs of Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith are reaching larger audiences than ever before." If, as Wald notes, "the most popular blues style in the United States is a rowdy, bar-band sound featuring fast tempos and screaming electric guitar solos," it is hardly the only one being performed and appreciated.

Race and racism are crucial to any discussion of the blues, as they always have been.

Although the blues is an art form created by Black people under the oppression of American apartheid, most of its fans are white (and that's not a new development), as are many of today's performers. White people mostly own the means of production, distribution, and

performance. The white-run music industry exploited the work of Black creators; Leonard and Phil Chess giving Muddy Waters and other Chess Records artists Cadillacs instead of fair compensation (depicted in the film *Cadillac Records*) is a metaphor for Chess' —and the industry's—[“questionable business dealings that left these pioneers all but broke, save for the brand-new Cadillacs.”](#)

And as with jazz, white males have dominated journalistic and critical writing about the music.

Corey Harris, a Black blues artist, stirred up an online controversy with a blog post that asked, [“Can White People Play the Blues?”](#) His answer: although whites can and do play blues music, “a white singer can never sing the same songs as a Black singer and have the songs keep the same meaning. The reverse is also true! Why? Culture...Culture and heritage are the dirt that the blues grows out of. That culture and heritage are Black. The blues is Black music!”

One can debate the merits of Harris' culture-bound argument. But there's no disputing one of his observations: “The concept of the ‘guitar hero’ is a purely white introduction into the music, a product of an individualistic culture which is the opposite of the communal nature of Black music... This is totally alien to traditional blues where lengthy solos were not common and the interplay between the players was more important than highlighting one individual.” If you've endured the musical equivalent of prolonged fapping served up by white blues guitarists, stars and journeymen, their “screaming” solos in the “rowdy, bar band” style, you know Harris speaks the truth.

The blues has been strongly associated with men ever since Blind Lemon Jefferson in the 1920s became [“the first to epitomize the iconic figure of the solo, guitar-playing male blues singer”](#). But the first hit blues records were made by women, “blues queens” like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mamie Smith, and also lesser-known singers who enjoyed considerable popularity, such as Virginia Liston, Laura Smith, Ora Criswell, and Trixie Smith. Other notable blueswomen include Alberta Hunter, Memphis Minnie, Victoria Spivey, Ida Cox, Gladys Bentley (openly lesbian, in the 1920s), Sippie Wallace, Lucille Bogan (her raunchy 1935 recording “Shave 'em Dry” makes her a godmother of Cardi B and Megan Thee

Stallion), Rosetta Tharpe, Koko Taylor, and Beverly “Guitar” Watkins.

What follows is a list of a dozen contemporary blues artists, divided evenly between women and men, ranging in age from Christone “Kingfish” Ingram (born 1999) to Little Freddie King (born 1940). The list is by no means definitive; there are far more talented bluesmen and women than can be covered here: veterans like Buddy Guy, Robert Cray, Bobby Rush, Robert Finley, Keb’ Mo’, Susan Tedeschi, Corey Harris, Taj Mahal, and Robert Randolph; and younger artists like Gary Clark, Jr, Samantha Fish, Beth Hart, and Eric Gales. The dozen listed here, in alphabetical order, comprise up and coming artists, established ones known mostly to aficionados, and a few with wider recognition. They all are active recording and performing artists who represent the diversity and vibrancy of blues in the 21st century.

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## Shemekia Copeland

[Shemekia Copeland](#) is currently the most popular and acclaimed contemporary blues singer. Born in Harlem, she is the daughter of Texas blues guitarist and singer Johnny Copeland. She began singing and performing as a child and turned professional as a teenager. She was her father’s opening act on his tours, which helped establish her on the circuit of blues clubs and festivals. Copeland has released ten albums and won numerous awards. She made her recording debut with *Turn the Heat up!* in 1998, on Alligator Records, followed by *Wicked* (2000) and *Talking to Strangers* (2002), the latter produced by [Dr. John](#).

On Copeland’s most recent album, *Uncivil War* (2020), “her artistry has reached a new level”, according to [Downbeat](#). Most of the 12 tracks (seven co-written by producer Will Kimbrough) tackle social and political themes—the lasting impact of slavery (“Clotilda’s on Fire”), religious intolerance (“Give God the Blues”), gun violence (“Apple Pie and a .45”), and coming out as lesbian (“She Don’t Wear Pink”). “Dirty Saint”, with its New Orleans funk, pays tribute to Dr. John (“Played so sweet / Make a woman faint / There’ll never be another / Like the dirty saint”).

Copeland pays homage to her father with the Johnny Copeland composition that ends the

album, “Love Song”. The album’s biggest surprise is Copeland’s gender-switched, the tables-are-turned version of the Rolling Stones’ infamous “Under My Thumb”. *Uncivil War*, although steeped in the blues, moves beyond it to incorporate stylistic elements and instrumentation associated with that catchall genre, Americana—mandolin, lap steel guitar, and dobro. It features guest appearances by Christone “Kingfish” Ingram (“Money Makes You Ugly”), [Jason Isbell](#) (“Clotilda’s on Fire”), Steve Cropper (“In the Dark”), and rock ‘n roll guitar pioneer Duane Eddy (“She Don’t Wear Pink”).



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## Bob Corritore

Bob Corritore is one of the hardest-working figures in contemporary blues, a highly regarded harmonica player, bandleader, producer, radio host, and club owner. A Chicago native, he began collecting blues albums and going to shows—including a [Muddy Waters](#) gig at his high school—when he was in his early teens. Corritore hung around and learned from such great “harp” players as Big Walter Horton, Junior Wells, and Carey Bell. When he was old enough to go to blues clubs, he caught performances by Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, Billy Boy

Arnold, John Brim, Sunnyland Slim, and Eddie Taylor.

Corritore made his debut as a producer in 1979 with *Swingin' the Blues* by harmonica player Little Willie Anderson; since then, he has produced many albums, by single artists and compilations. In 1999, he released *All-Star Blues Sessions*, his first album as a frontman, accompanying Bo Diddley, former Howlin' Wolf drummer Chico Chism, Robert Lockwood Jr., Henry Gray, and 12 other artists.

Recent additions (2021-2022) to his ample and distinguished discography include *The Gypsy Woman Told Me*, *Spider in My Stew*, *Tell Me 'Bout It* (with Louisiana Red), and *Down Home Blues Revue*, a compilation of Southern blues and juke joint dance numbers. In 2022, Corritore was nominated for two Blues Music Awards, harmonica player of the year, and traditional blues album for *Spider in My Stew*.



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PAGES

1

2

3

TAGS

adia victoria

amythyst kiah

blues

Bob Corritore

Caron "Sugaray" Rayford

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Christone "Kingfish" Ingram

country blues

Dianna Greenleaf

janiva magness

Jontavious Willis

list this

little freddie king

Marquise Knox

r&b

ruthie foster

shemekia copeland

soul blues



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## 12 Essential Contemporary Blues Artists

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---

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---

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---

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## Marquise Knox

Marquise Knox, from St. Louis, Missouri, was born to the blues. His grandmother taught him the guitar, and he played with an uncle who was an important influence on his life and career. He has shared stages with B.B. King, Pinetop Perkins, and David “Honeyboy” Edwards and has appeared at many blues festivals and toured throughout Europe.

While in Clarksdale, Mississippi, he met Sam Lay, the drummer best known for his stints with Muddy Waters and Paul Butterfield and as a member of Bob Dylan’s electric band at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Impressed by Knox, Lay pushed to have him appear at Bluesmasters at the Crossroads, a prestigious showcase for blues musicians in Salina, Kansas. Marquise was a hit with the audience and with the older blues players who turned out to hear him.

His first album, *Manchild* (2009), was nominated for a Blues Music Award for Best New Artist Debut. Knox’s second album, *Here I Am* (2011), features three Muddy Waters covers (“I Can’t Be Satisfied”, “Two Trains Running”, and “Feel Like Going Home”) and nine of his compositions, including what has become his signature tune (and statement of purpose), “Can a Young Man Play the Blues?” His most recent album, *Black and Blue* (2017), is a live set recorded at Bowlful of Blues in Newton, Iowa.



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## Janiva Magness

[Janiva Magness](#) is a singer and songwriter from Detroit whose life story would seem to have prepared her to adopt a musical style as emotive as the blues: her parents committed suicide when she was in her early teens, and she grew up in a series of foster homes. Magness first heard blues from records in her father's collection. An Otis Rush concert made her a devotee; the teenage Magness was thrilled by the Mississippi-born singer and guitarist known for his searing, emotionally intense performances.

Magness has recorded 15 albums, the first, *More Than Live* in 1991, followed by *It Takes One to Know One* (1997). After three independent releases, she was signed by the Canadian label Northern Blues Music, which issued *Bury Him at the Crossroads* (2004) and *Do I Move You?* (2006). In 2008, Magness signed with Alligator Records. The blues-oriented label put out the

albums *What Love Will Do*, *The Devil Is an Angel Too* (2010), and *Stronger for It* (2012); the latter was the first since *More Than Live* to feature her compositions.

Magness left Alligator in 2014 to launch her label, Fathead, and its first release, *Original*, included seven songs she co-wrote. *Love Wins Again* (2016) became her most successful album, reaching the Top 10 on blues and Americana charts and earning Magness a Grammy nomination. But before that milestone, she had already racked up prestigious awards, from the Blues Foundation, which in 2009 named her the B.B. King Entertainer of the Year (she was only the second female artist, after Koko Taylor, to be so recognized) and seven Blues Music Awards. On *Blue Again* (2018), she brought her earthy and commanding voice to material by Etta James, Bo Diddley, Freddie King, Nina Simone, and Al Kooper.

Its follow-up, *Love Is an Army* (2018), combines southern soul reminiscent of the great Stax hits of the 1960s with Americana. Her latest, *Change in the Weather* (2019), comprises covers of 12 John Fogerty songs.



## Caron “Sugaray” Rayford

Caron “Sugaray” Rayford from Smith County, Texas, specializes in soul-blues. The singer-songwriter began singing as a child in a church in nearby Tyler. Childhood poverty and his mother’s death from cancer marked his early years. Things improved when he moved in with his gospel-loving grandmother in San Diego, California. After stints with two California R&B and blues groups, he self-released his first solo album, *Blind Alley*, in 2010. The following year, he joined the Los Angeles-based blues band the Mannish Boys, singing lead vocals on their album, *Double Dynamite*.

Between 2013 and 2022, Rayford released five albums: *Dangerous* (2013), *Southside* (2015), *The World That We Live In* (2017), *Somebody Save Me* (2019), and *In Too Deep* (2022). *Living Blues* magazine praised his “old-school vocal approach” that “brings to mind such legends as Muddy Waters, Otis Redding, and Teddy Pendergrass”. Rayford is a physically imposing performer with a vivid stage personality. On “The Revelator”, from *Somebody Save Me*, the six-foot-five, 300-pound Rayford declares himself “a freak of nature”. “I ain’t no honeybee,” he announces. “I’m an unknown creature / The like you’ve never seen.”

Rayford has taken home five Blues Music Awards, including B.B King Entertainer of the Year and Soul Blues Male Artist of the Year. *Somebody Save Me* was nominated for a Grammy as Best Contemporary Blues Album. His latest, *In Too Deep*, is a soul-blues session on which he augments his core instrumentation of guitar, bass, keyboards, and drums with a horn section and flute, flugelhorn, violin, and cello.



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## Adia Victoria

[Adia Victoria](#), a singer, songwriter, and guitarist from Spartanburg, South Carolina currently based in Nashville, has created her own “gothic blues” style. Since 2014, she has released three EPs —Baby Blues (2017) including one of Robert Johnson’s best-known songs, “Me and the Devil”—and three albums: *Beyond the Bloodhounds* (2016), *Silences* (2019), and *A Southern Gothic* (2021). *Rolling Stone* called *A Southern Gothic* “stunning”, a “declarative and delicate work of roots reclamation, the latest compelling chapter in Victoria’s artistic project of expanding and re-centering the blues in a contemporary framework.”

As brands go, “gothic blues” is an apt one for the album’s sound and mood: “Magnolia Blues”, “You Was Born to Die”, and “Deep Water Blues” create a mysterious, haunted sonic world that entrances. Victoria has been outspoken about the neglect (and worse) of Black artists by Nashville and the Americana world. On her podcast “Call and Response”, she’s had conversations about the issue with musicians like Brandi Carlile and Rhiannon Giddens. For *A Southern Gothic*, Victoria enlisted Americana stars Margo Price and Jason Isbell as

collaborators, and she has been an opening act on Isbell's shows, with him and Price joining her during her set.



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## Jontavious Willis

Jontavious Willis grew up singing gospel with his grandfather in their Baptist church in Greenville, Georgia. When he was 14, what church people call “the devil’s music” seduced him. He saw a video of Muddy Waters performing “Hoochie Coochie Man” and the blues claimed him. Willis learned country blues styles—Delta, Piedmont, Texas—and developed formidable chops as a fingerpicker, flatpicker, and slide player. He also taught himself harmonica and five-string banjo.

In 2015, [Taj Mahal](#) invited Willis to join him on stage, praising him afterward as “my wonderboy, the wunderkind”. After receiving Mahal’s blessing, he was invited to perform at festivals, and, in 2017, he released his first album, *Blue Metamorphosis*. In 2018, the Blues Foundation recognized it with a Best Self-Produced CD Award. Willis released his second

album, *Spectacular Class*, in 2019, on the Kind of Blue Music label, with Taj Mahal as credited as executive producer and Keb' Mo' as producer. Consisting of ten tracks written by Willis, the album features his vocals and acoustic guitar, with Keb' Mo' on electric guitar. *Spectacular Class* was nominated for the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album.

In a *Living Blues* interview with Corey Harris, Willis remarked that although “Delta blues and Chicago blues will always be the first two things when it comes to blues,” he had recently discovered blues by “people in my region”. “So, when I started finding all these Georgia players, I was like, ‘Whoa!’ These are some big cats like Tampa Red, and Ma Rainey and Blind Willie McTell, and I was like, ‘Oh my goodness.’”

“The Blues Is Dead?”, from *Spectacular Class*, expresses Willis’ feelings about the state of the blues today. “People been talkin’, and it made me scratch my head / I said people been talkin’, and it made me scratch my head / They been sayin’ over and over that the blues is dead / Well the blues ain’t goin’ nowhere, goin’ be here for a great long time.”



PAGES

1

2

3



**TAGS** [adia victoria](#) [amythyst kiah](#) [blues](#) [Bob Corritore](#) [Caron "Sugaray" Rayford](#)  
[Christone "Kingfish" Ingram](#) [country blues](#) [Diunna Greenleaf](#) [janiva magness](#)  
[Jontavious Willis](#) [list this](#) [little freddie king](#) [Marquise Knox](#) [r&b](#) [ruthie foster](#)  
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