

SO YOU WANT TO SING THE BLUES

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a black leather jacket, singing passionately into a microphone on a stage. She is illuminated by blue stage lights. In the background, there is a brick wall and a window. A microphone stand and other stage equipment are visible to the left.

A Guide for Performers

ELI YAMIN

A Project of the National Association of Teachers of Singing

**S O Y O U W A N T T O
S I N G T H E B L U E S**

SO YOU WANT TO SING
GUIDES FOR PERFORMERS AND PROFESSIONALS
A PROJECT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

So You Want to Sing: Guides for Performers and Professionals is a series of works devoted to providing a complete survey of what it means to sing within a particular genre. Each contribution functions as a touchstone work not only for professional singers but also for students and teachers of singing. Titles in the series offer a common set of topics so readers can navigate easily the various genres addressed in each volume. This series is produced under the direction of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the leading professional organization devoted to the science and art of singing.

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

S*o You Want to Sing the Blues: A Guide for Performers* is the thirteenth book in the NATS/Rowman & Littlefield *So You Want to Sing* series and the tenth book to fall under my editorship. For this title, we have engaged blues singer and pedagogue Eli Yamin, who travels internationally performing and presenting workshops to both experienced blues musicians as well as newcomers to the style. He brings decades of experience singing and teaching the blues to these chapters, and his wisdom is evident throughout this volume.

While some topics in the *So You Want to Sing* series present us with dozens of prospective authors from which we must pick, the blues is a genre that seems to exist somewhat separately from the traditional voice-teaching community. In conversation with NATS colleagues, I initially had difficulty identifying who would be the “right” author for this book. Then one day, my friend and colleague Jeannette LoVetri gave me the answer: Eli Yamin. Jeanie could not have been more correct, and these pages you are about to read resoundingly affirm that Eli Yamin is the perfect author for this topic.

During the first year of our correspondence, Eli and I communicated with each other only via phone and e-mail. Then, at the NATS national conference in Chicago in 2016, I had the opportunity to meet Eli in person for the first time. Experiencing him “live” was a transforming experience: Eli doesn’t just sing the blues and write about the blues—he *lives* the blues. The genre completely inhabits him. While reading these

pages and exploring Eli's online resources, I truly feel as if he is in the room talking to me. His excitement is contagious.

Like other books in the series, there are several "common chapters" that are included across multiple titles. These chapters include a chapter on voice science by Scott McCoy, one on vocal health by Wendy LeBorgne, and one on using audio enhancement technology by Matthew Edwards. These chapters help to bind the series together, ensuring consistency of fact when it comes to the most essential matters of voice production.

The collected volumes of the *So You Want to Sing* series offer a valuable opportunity for performers and teachers of singing to explore new styles and important pedagogies. I am confident that voice specialists, both amateur and professional, will benefit from Eli Yamin's important resource on singing the blues. It has been a privilege to work with him on this project. This book is an invaluable resource for performers who are interested in adding the blues to their stylistic vocabulary.

Matthew Hoch

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Thank you to my students far and wide who take chances with me, find yourself in the blues, and share it.

Thank you for my grandfather, Samuel Yamin, who as a lawyer for Decca Records from 1948 to 1968 was the first member of my immediate family to encourage me to become a professional jazz and blues musician.

I did not realize at that time how much black music was recorded and distributed through Decca. Now I see how my family directly benefited from the commercial success of this music and have made it my life's work to give back as much as possible.

Thanks to my parents Rebecca and Peter Yamin for playing great music during my childhood and giving me professional encouragement once you saw there was no turning back. Thanks to my sister Ariana for helping me understand what "cool" means.

Thank you to my wife Lorraine Yamin and daughter Mani Yamin. You are the love supreme of my life.

INTRODUCTION

Whether you are a performer, a teacher, or a student, this book is for you. It is one of the first books that looks at blues singing from the standpoint of style, history, and technique. It is a resource for understanding the blues inside of you regardless of your cultural background. This book identifies the source of authenticity in the blues and its rich African American origins. By offering concrete explanations and exercises of key elements of the blues, you will find pathways to go deeper with your ability to express yourself in this infinite art form. If you have already been singing the blues for some time, this book offers pathways for you to increase the freedom in your singing by helping you strengthen your technique, providing you with more stamina and flexibility.

In my work as an American musician, I find the blues everywhere. It is the foundation of popular music, rock and roll, jazz, hip-hop, and rhythm and blues. Even country and bluegrass come from the blues. As an educator, I often find the blues missing from school curricula at all levels in all regions of the United States. It seems that despite its seminal influence on American culture, the blues is seldom thought of as a legitimate subject to teach students. Even college jazz programs tend to give the blues short shrift.

At the Lake Placid (New York) Public Library, I found myself surrounded by a collection of a recent edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* in twenty volumes. Naturally, I went straight to the “B” volume and immediately found “Beethoven.” The entry surprised me

in its length: nearly sixty pages! I braced myself for the blues entry. I could feel a knot form in the pit of my stomach as I shifted through the pages toward the letters “B-L-U.” There it was, a mere six pages! How is it that, in 2018, with all of our supposed progress on racial justice, Beethoven, a great composer no doubt but nonetheless a single man, gets sixty pages in *Grove* and a whole genre of music that gave birth to multiple other genres gets just six? (This edition of *Grove* was published in 2001, but the point stands.)

Thankfully, the National Association of Teachers of Singers (NATS)—in partnership with Rowman & Littlefield—has taken on this project to even the scales by publishing this volume, *So You Want to Sing the Blues*, and others in the series focusing on American singing styles. It is our hope that these books will be used by professionals and educators far and wide so that the world may know more clearly the complexity and beauty of the blues and the genres it spawned.

This is a perfect time to turn a page in the book of racial justice and give credit where credit is due by increasing our knowledge of the importance of the contributions of African Americans to American culture. Whereas these contributions run far and wide beyond the scope simply of music, the musical contributions are a phenomenon recognized around the globe. I have seen it with my own eyes and ears as I have traveled with my blues and jazz bands to give performances and workshops in Albania, Austria, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Holland, India, Japan, Mali, Montenegro, Norway, Panama, Romania, Russia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

I toured many of these places on behalf of the U.S. Department of State. As a blues and jazz ambassador, I have seen the blues buoy a Romanian audience devastated by the world financial crash of 2008 and a Chilean audience by an earthquake. In Montenegro, I have seen the blues be the cause to celebrate the personal strength and the power of hard physical labor. In India, I have seen the blues bring ecstatic communal joy, and in China, I have witnessed the blues as a welcome opportunity for emotional release. In Mali, I got to sit down and play with master musicians of the Bamako Orchestra and witness how closely the elder musicians resembled the African American masters who raised me.

I grew up in suburban New Jersey and first discovered the blues from listening to recordings of Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, Elizabeth Cotten, Taj Mahal, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Elvis Presley. The music grabbed me and would not let go. It was a joy and a mystery. Beyond the recordings, I found further clues at the Crossroads Theatre, one of the premiere black theater companies of the United States. There, I became enamored of the *blues aesthetic* as rendered by classic musicals such as *Bubblin' Brown Sugar* and *Ain't Misbehavin'* but also by plays with music such as *Robeson* and *Slow Dance on the Killing Ground*. The latter showed me, more than any other play, how the blues moves, communicates, challenges, and contains powerful emotions, questions, and deep human concerns.

I sought out guides. Fortunately, I found my way to African American master writers and musicians who grew up in the communities in which the blues was created. On my eighteenth birthday, I started working at WBGO/Jazz 88 in Newark, New Jersey, and soon found myself hosting radio shows and producing programs with top jazz historians and legendary blues producers. I met writers Amiri and Amina Baraka, and they welcomed me into their home and basement club, “Kimako’s Blues People,” where the blues as music, spoken word, dance, and sculpture fused seamlessly. The more I heard and played the blues, the more curious I became to know its source.

On graduating college in 1990 from Rutgers University, drummer Walter Perkins hired me to play in his band at the Skylark Lounge in Jamaica, Queens. Walter was originally from Chicago and came up in the 1950s playing with blues creators Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and Memphis Slim. My college repertoire was of little use in this club where a mostly middle-class African American community gathered to relax after the workweek. Every third tune we played was a blues. Walter would give a title, such as “Hogmalls and Chitlins,” and give a count off, I would call a key, and we were off. I would improvise the melody based on Walter’s rhythms and the energy of the room. Later, it would be a different tempo, key, and title, such as “Macaroni and Meatball,” and once again we would create. Those were magical times, and I learned a ton.

I learned about the purpose of the blues, that is, as Walter always used to say, “Make people feel *gooooood*, Baby Sweets. That is our job.”

I learned about the powerful rhythm of the blues. Walter's shuffle was second to none. I learned about the moan and cry of the blues and how that feeling can be transfigured into ecstatic reverie, release, and joy. I learned how the blues always must *mean something* individually and collectively. Herein lies a paradox. The blues requires you to tune into the people around you—*community*—while at the same time being passionately self-expressive—*individual*. In the Skylark, the tables were so close that the audience was literally on top of us. Their vocal responses and gestures let us know when we were in tune and doing our job to provide communal release. We could feel them breathe. And while our attunement to the audience was of critical importance, I learned that it is also true that to be effective as a blues performer, you have to be truly yourself. No airs, hiding, or holding back.

The bartender at the Skylark was named Joe. I used to order white Russians from him, and he once asked me, "Eli, why you always order *white* Russians? How come you never order *black* Russians?" I said, "Because I *am* a *white* Russian, that's why." We shared a good laugh. Later, Joe honored me by inviting me to play and sing at his family's reunion. I set up my keyboard in the middle of the room surrounded by children and adults—Joe's family members—and did what I knew best: played and sang the blues. There was good feeling all around. When you get the feeling right, the blues always delivers.

Sure, I play and sing other kinds of music—jazz in particular—but I always come back to the blues. The blues is the foundation. The blues is the source. The blues is strength. It connects you with a lineage that goes back hundreds, possibly thousands, of years. The blues is life force and creativity. The blues is personal and collective. The blues makes people move, and the blues is real. When you immerse yourself and share what you have in the blues and your body, mind and soul and those around you are uplifted.

Whereas the blues can do all this, it is not easy. So often, the blues gets defined in small ways. But the blues is not small. The blues is *huge*. Sure, anybody who knows three chords in twelve bars can technically play a blues. But that *ain't it*. To be truly effective, the blues requires a unique level of honesty and emotional range from the performer.

As a singer, the blues presents many challenges. You have to be able to whisper and shout, scream and serenade. You have to let yourself go

in the energy of the music and have a voice the next day for the next gig. This requires preparation. The idea of blues training itself may seem paradoxical; however, professional singers who meet the demands of performing night after night and touring have found some way to care for their voice by hook or by crook. Consciously training your voice to sing the blues in the true spirit of the genre can be highly effective in sustaining your career as an artist and/or teacher. B.B. King always kept his dressing room hot because he was looking out for his throat. He spoke freely about his preference for using the full voice from the top to the bottom. Catherine Russell trained as an actor and classical singer before embarking on a career as a vocalist with Steely Dan and David Bowie and now as a Grammy Award–winning blues performer headlining her own band.

Voice training and blues singing have not historically gone together. There are many reasons for this. From the standpoint of the singer already singing the blues, you might be concerned that voice training could take the soul out of your sound. As with any technique, you have to be careful to not throw away everything you already know once you have some new tools in your toolbox. New technique can help you make needed adjustments for using your instrument more efficiently, but you have to use good judgment so as not to get rid of the good stuff and know the difference. If you want to holler, good voice technique can help. The same is true with scooping, sliding, and even growling.

For me, voice training has been a lifesaver. When I started singing the blues, I knew nothing about how the voice works and would generally squeeze my throat to sing high notes and make something sound bluesy. This worked okay for a while but often left me with little or no voice at the end of the gig. Eventually, it was unsustainable. I trained first with Jeanie LoVetri, the founder of Somatic Voicework™, The LoVetri Method, who showed me how you can treat your voice as an instrument and develop its capacity in conscious ways to make the sounds you want to make singing easier and freer. Jeanie taught me to identify the different registers of my voice, head, and chest and mix and develop a daily routine to keep them balanced.

With characteristic exuberance and no small amount of stubbornness, oversinging, screaming, and talking brought me further vocal challenges and a polyp on my vocal chords. To confront this, Jeanie sent me to

voice therapist Darrell Lauer, who first helped me learn a new way to talk that put much less strain on my voice. He taught me to speak more on the breath at a higher pitch—more in the middle of my range instead of on the bottom—and smooth out my glottal attacks. It worked, and thankfully I was able to heal the polyp without surgery. I have continued voice training with Darrell, who, a longtime member of NATS, graciously volunteered to cowrite chapter 4 in this book. With no prior publication on this particular subject, his contributions are essential in providing you with time-tested tools in functional voice technique that can help you be more equipped to meet the demands of ongoing performance at a high level.

Before we get into vocal mechanics, chapter 1 deals with the prehistory of the blues. Often, the history of blues is told by beginning with slavery. This is essential to understanding where the blues comes from; however, there is an inherent flaw in starting the story here. It promotes the myth that the Africans who were brought to America in chains were somehow a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, shaped only by the trauma inflicted on them. When we start the story of the blues with slavery, we miss the opportunity to delve into the rich cultures from which Africans in the New World were taken and the complex individuals and communities they became in their new world as African Americans.

Since the 1950s, Western music scholars have studied African music and identified antecedents of African American music. We present some key points of their research in chapter 1 with a particular focus on elements of blues singing that we can learn to embody. As a singer, knowing about these elements and listening to some of the examples cited can deepen your blues-ness. It can also give you tools to teach the fundamentals of the singing style.

Chapter 2, by series author Scott McCoy, gives you an introduction to blues and how it relates to voice science, whereas chapter 3 is an overview of vocal health by Wendy LeBorgne. Chapter 4 is where we look at how to apply knowledge of voice function to the particular demands of blues singing.

Chapter 5 looks at the vocal style of early blues women and chapter 6 at that of early blues men. This is followed by chapters on Chicago blues singers and the modern blues sound and a chapter on making a soulful

sound and writing your own blues. Finally, series author Matt Edwards contributes a chapter on audio enhancement technology.

Personally, writing this book has been a tremendous gift. I hope the results of our work will help you go farther on your path as a blues artist and/or educator. Let us use the blues well to offer support and strength to our communities worldwide. And let us always remember to give credit where credit is due.

