THE BLUES: ROOTS AND BRANCHES
(TWO SEMESTERS)

OLLI EAST
CLASS SYLLABUS

LARRY D. TANNENBAUM, FACILITATOR
COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The breadth of the subject matter of the course makes it preferable that the course be offered as a two-semester course. The first semester is also being offered at OLLI East in Winter Semester, 2020. The second semester will be offered in a subsequent semester, probably Spring or Fall, 2020. Since The Blues is not necessarily linear in its time frame, the course will not proceed in an absolutely logical time progression.

In this course (both semesters), we will examine and explore the musical genre that became known as The Blues. We will look at those musical, historical, sociological, economic and other factors and events that created, fostered and contributed to the origins and evolution of The Blues over the years. Make no mistake about it, there will be substantial focus upon the music itself. We will listen to a lot of music during the eight weeks of Semester I of the course. In the first semester, we will trace the origins of the music, the lyrics and musical form of the music and the “feel” of The Blues. We will listen to and discuss many of the progenitors of The Blues, including W.C. Handy, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Lead Belly, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Reverend Gary Davis, Charley Patton and Robert Johnson. We will also discuss many individuals who impacted The Blues, including H.C. Speir, Barry Melrose and the Chess Brothers (Chess Records).

During our two-semester journey through the history and evolution of The Blues, we will visit a number of places where The Blues took root, flourished and evolved, such as the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont region, Texas, Memphis, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Great Britain. We will study and discuss historical events and developments that impacted The Blues, such as the advent of slavery, Jim Crow laws, the Great Migration (1915-1970), publication of sheet music, recording, race records, radio and television, each of which was important in the development of and evolution of The Blues.

As the course progresses, we will meet, watch, listen to and discuss many of the musicians whose music and styles enabled The Blues not only to flourish, but to evolve and branch into and influence other musical genres, such as jazz, country music, rock ’n’ roll, American Folk Music, blues-rock and soul. Over two semesters, we will visit and listen to such diverse and important musicians as Son House, Johnny Shines, Robert Johnson, Lonnie Johnson, T-Bone Walker, Muddy Waters, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Lonnie Donegan, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Buddy Guy, Stevie Ray Vaughn and Joe Bonamassa, all of
whom were connected to and influenced by The Blues and all of whom contributed to the evolution of The Blues. The course will culminate with an exploration of current Blues, which I believe is alive and well and producing excellent music, some of which we will enjoy via video and current concert footage.

**PORTFOLIO:**

There are no required materials for *The Blues: Roots and Branches*. The University of Denver, through OLLI, has provided a web page and I have downloaded a number of articles, songs and videos onto the Portfolio page for this course. You might even find a podcast or two. The materials are intended to supplement the sixteen classes of the course and, if you enjoy The Blues or are curious about the events, people and music that comprise The Blues, you might enjoy reading the various articles and listening to and viewing the downloaded music. The materials are arranged so that there is an introductory tab for each semester of the course and sixteen additional tabs, one for each of the sixteen weeks of the course. Each tab will take you to that week’s material. The left column contains a brief outline of the subject matter of that week’s class. The right column contains downloaded articles, music, video and podcasts relating to the subject matter to be covered.

**THE WEEKLY PRESENTATIONS (SEMESTER I):**

**Week 1:** What the Heck is The Blues?

**Week 2:** More Blues Roots and Early Blues.

**Week 3:** Early Country Blues: Texas Blues and Piedmont Blues.

**Week 4:** My Home is in the Delta.

**Week 5:** Robert Johnson and His Progeny

**Week 6:** The Influence of Leadbelly; John and Alan Lomax.

**Week 7:** The Blues Evolves: Chicago Electric Blues.

**Week 8:** Women in Blues and Chess Records.