

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



*History of the Blues*. Clearvue, Inc..

Reviewed by Floyd D. Barrows

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**User-friendliness**: This program has only seven icons to deal with, each easily understood. Load the CD into the drive and click on the drive icon; then click on the program icon and the program is loaded. At the main menu screen, there are only the four parts of the total program, each with its own graphic—a click on the graphic brings up that part. There is also an Index icon that brings up lists in five alpha groups of all people, songs and major terms used in the program. Selecting any item in the Index takes the user directly to that portion of the program, regardless which of the four parts it is in. **User Level**: High School, college and general public. What use this program may have for instructional purposes beyond illustration is not clear. Straight video segments would be of more use. **Documentation**: There is no manual—only the 3-fold insert that describes in general terms, for the four parts of the program: “Roots”, “The Twelve Bar Blues”, “Classic Blues”, and “City Blues.” There is also a file on the CD called “Transcripts” that contains the text of all four narratives as well as a brief description of the information contained in the program. This description is, indeed, very brief; it does not augment the story of the blues with any additional information. In addition, the narrative text appears by default in every screen page. This can be toggled on/off by clicking on the text icon. **Summary Comments**: If memory serves me correctly, the contents of this CD were originally broadcast over PBS, as a program narrated by Billy Taylor. However, I find no record that the program has been released as a videotape for general sale as was Taylor’s *History of Jazz*. Adapting a video program to CD-ROM poses unique difficulties: a video program is a seamless continuity from start to finish, but a computer program must be developed in “pages.” The consequence is that in *History of Blues* there are contin-

uous drop-offs between each frame. And in some instances, the drop-off occurs before the narration completes that frame-page. Clicking on the “turn the page backward” icon can get the frame-page repeated which usually picked up the missing portions. But this could be a nuisance and deflect from the overall enjoyment of the program—or concentration on the basic information contained in it. As with most Billy Taylor features, *History of the Blues* packs an awful lot of information. We get not only the story of the Blues from its origins, but also the background of Africa and slavery of the Black people who originated this unique form of music. In addition, Taylor gives us basic descriptions of the structure of the Blues making very good distinctions between Mississippi Delta blues, Texas style/country blues, rhythm and blues, and the blues that evolved in the major cities from Kansas City and Memphis to Chicago, New York and the West Coast. Not all the people involved in this story are mentioned—admittedly there are too many! But Taylor’s narrative does highlight the most important ones along with many others of significance: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson among the early singers; Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine and on down to B.B. King and Elvis Pressley. And each segment of the story is clearly delineated so the user of this program will have little doubt as to how the story of the blues developed from black, African roots to become a major form of American music that would be exported around the world. Unfortunately, nothing in this CD-ROM program identifies the narrator—it is only my familiarity with Billy Taylor’s voice and style that gives me a clue. Nor do the publishers of this CD-ROM identify any of the sources used in the making of the program. Nor are there any video segments—each frame is illustrated with a still photo or graphic that sometimes doesn’t quite fit the course of the narrative, which may have a passing

allusion to that image and goes on, leaving the user staring at a still photo while the narrative or music continues. <p> Since this seems to have originally been created as a program for television, it doesn't translate very well to the computer. One wonders why bother trying to watch a TV program on a computer. Given a choice, I would purchase the original video if it were available—it would make for a more enjoyable experience. <p>

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