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## About *The Blues Project*

The blues is one of America's greatest musical treasures. A roots-music form that evolved out of African American work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and early string band sounds more than a century ago, the blues is the foundation of virtually every major American music form born in the 20th century, including jazz, rhythm & blues, rock 'n' roll, hip-hop, and even neo-classical. As profound as the blues has been to the national music experience, it has only occasionally entered the American classroom, mostly by individual teachers who, as committed blues fans, work to independently create ways to integrate the music into curricula. The much anticipated series, *The Blues*, executive produced by Martin Scorsese, presents a unique opportunity to extend the reach of blues in the classroom, bringing this seminal music form into high school classrooms as never before.

### THE FILM SERIES

Under the guiding vision of Martin Scorsese, seven directors explore the blues through their own personal styles and perspectives. Premiering Sunday, September 28, the films in the series are motivated by a central theme: how the blues evolved from parochial folk tunes to a universal language.

*Feel Like Going Home* Director Martin Scorsese (*The Last Waltz; Raging Bull; Gangs of New York*) winds his way from the banks of the Niger River in Mali to the cotton fields and juke joints of the Mississippi Delta to trace the origins of the blues in a lyrical combination of original performances (including Corey Harris, Willie King, Taj Mahal, Keb' Mo', Otha Turner, Habib Koité, Salif Keita, and Ali Farka Touré) and rare archival footage. Written by Peter Guralnick.

*The Soul of a Man* Director Wim Wenders (*Buena Vista Social Club; Wings of Desire; Paris, Texas*) looks at the dramatic tension in the blues between the sacred and the profane by exploring the music and lives of three of his favorite blues artists: Skip James, Blind Willie Johnson, and J.B. Lenoir. Part history, part personal pilgrimage, the film tells the story of these lives in music through an extended fictional film sequence, rare archival footage, present-day documentary scenes, and covers of their songs by contemporary musicians such as Shemekia Copeland, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Garland Jeffreys, Chris Thomas King, Cassandra Wilson, Nick Cave, Los Lobos, Eagle Eye Cherry, Vernon Reid, James "Blood" Ulmer, Lou Reed, Bonnie Raitt, Marc Ribot, The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Lucinda Williams, and T-Bone Burnett. Written by Wim Wenders.

*The Road to Memphis* Director Richard Pearce (*The Long Walk Home; Leap of Faith; A Family Thing*) traces the musical odyssey of blues legend B.B. King in a film that pays tribute to the city that gave birth to a new style of blues. Pearce's homage to Memphis features original performances by B.B. King, Bobby Rush, Rosco Gordon and Ike Turner, as well as historical footage of Howlin' Wolf and Rufus Thomas. Written by Robert Gordon.

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* Director Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep; My Brother's Wedding; To Sleep with Anger*) explores his own past as a young boy who was shuttled back and forth between Los Angeles and Mississippi, and who was musically torn between a mother who loved the blues and a grandmother who believed that the blues was the devil's music. Burnett's film boldly mixes fictional storytelling with documentary footage in a tale about a young boy's encounter with his family in Mississippi in 1955, and tensions between the heavenly strains of gospel and the devilish moans of the blues.

*Godfathers and Sons* Call them the Blues Brothers 2003—in director Marc Levin's (*Slam; Whiteboys; Brooklyn Babylon*) lively verité-driven film, hip-hop legend Chuck D (Public Enemy) and Marshall Chess (son of Leonard Chess and heir to the Chess Records legacy) return to Chicago to explore the heyday of Chicago blues as they unite to produce an album that seeks to bring veteran blues players together with contemporary hip-hop musicians such as Common and members of The Roots. Along with never-before-seen archival footage of Howlin' Wolf are original performances by Koko Taylor, Otis Rush, Magic Slim, Ike Turner and Sam Lay.

*Red, White and Blues* Director Mike Figgis (*Stormy Monday; Leaving Las Vegas; Timecode*) explores the circumstances of the 1960s when the UK was the location for a vibrant social revolution. The post war traditional jazz and folk revival movements produced fertile ground for a new kind of blues music. Certain key musicians took the blues and molded it in an entirely personal way while at the same time paying homage to the originators of the music and making a huge global audience aware of the likes of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Freddie King. A series of personal interviews with the key players of this blues movement is augmented with a live session at the famous Abbey Road Beatles studio. Tom Jones, Jeff Beck, Van Morrison and Lulu all improvise around some classic blues standards—they are accompanied by a superb band made up of younger and not so younger musicians. The results are electrifying.

**Piano Blues** Director—and piano player—Clint Eastwood (*Play Misty for Me; Bird; Unforgiven*) explores his life-long passion for the piano blues, using a treasure of rare historical acts, as well as interviews and performances by such living legends as Ray Charles, Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Dr. John.

Programs can be videotaped and used for up to one year after broadcast. Check your television listings or call your local public television station to confirm broadcast dates and times. Visit [pbs.org/theblues](http://pbs.org/theblues) for information on ordering the entire seven-part *The Blues* series.

### THE BLUES WEB SITE AT PBS.ORG/THE BLUES

The Web site will complement the film series and extend the personal exploration of each director by offering in-depth historical context to the music, musicians, and geographical locations introduced in each of the films. Visitors to the site can:

- Watch preview video clips, read director and producer biographies, and check the local broadcast times/schedule to learn more details about the film series.
- Explore an interactive map that traces the evolution of the blues in various areas (including the Mississippi Delta, Louisiana, Texas, Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and Great Britain), as well as follow the musical journeys of significant musicians such as Robert Johnson, B.B. King, T-Bone Walker, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker.
- Read biographies of key blues musicians.
- Access a discography of key blues songs.
- Download **The Blues Teacher's Guide** components, as well as additional lesson plans and activities.

### THE BLUES COMPANION BOOK

Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, is publishing a distinctive appreciation of the blues: *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey*. This hardcover volume is both a complement to the television series and a stand-alone for the general reader—part history, part celebration—that includes a sweeping historical essay by Robert Santelli; illuminating archival materials culled by Peter Guralnick; captivating interviews with the series' directors; original articles by *Time* music writer Christopher Farley; and numerous original "personal essays" from literary and music luminaries Hilton Als, Peter Guralnick, David Halberstam, Elmore James, Suzan-Lori Parks, Luc Sante, Studs Terkel, John Edgar Wideman, among others.

### CDS AND DVDS

Sony Music's Columbia/Legacy division and Universal Music Enterprises have formed a unique partnership, sharing catalogues and all associated costs, to create a series of CDs and value-added DVDs to complement *The Blues*. They will produce and distribute in the States and abroad a five-CD box set, a "best of" CD, and up to 12 individual soundtrack CDs with tracks selected by the directors to accompany each film. In addition, Sony Music's Columbia/Legacy division and Universal Music Enterprises will produce value-added DVDs—both as a box set featuring all seven films and individual DVDs—that will be available for sale when the series airs this coming fall. Special pricing will be offered to educators.

### THE BLUES RADIO SERIES

Premiering September 28 on Public Radio International, this 13-part series will be the most comprehensive blues-based radio series ever. Hosted by Grammy Award-winning Keb' Mo', each 60-minute episode will explore a geographical location of importance to the blues, together revealing the history of the blues from its origins to the present, as well as its legacy as the foundation of American popular music. Interviews with blues artists, historians, and record producers will complement historic blues recordings, while contemporary performances of classic blues songs from current artists will serve notice that the blues is alive and well in 2003. Produced by Experience Music Project (EMP) and Ben Manilla Productions, and presented by WGBH Radio Boston, this radio series will support *The Blues* television series and is compatible with *The Blues* educational components.

### THE BLUES—YEAR OF THE BLUES (YOTB)

In 1903, composer W.C. Handy first heard the blues, igniting an expansion of its influence that now reaches worldwide, both on its own and through its reverberations in the many genres of which it is a foundation, including jazz, rhythm & blues, rock 'n' roll, soul, and hip-hop. In celebration of the 100th anniversary of this encounter, and in recognition of the ongoing impact of the blues on music and cultural history both in America and around the world, the United States Congress proclaimed the year beginning January 1, 2003, the Year of the Blues. To mark this important occasion, partners Experience Music Project (EMP), the Blues Foundation, Blues Inc., Vulcan Productions, along with other partners, have designed a year-long series of interrelated events, multimedia projects, and education initiatives to raise awareness of the blues and its uniquely American heritage. Visit the Year of the Blues Web site at [yearoftheblues.org](http://yearoftheblues.org).

## Using the Guide

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The back of the guide contains two essays, “What Is the Blues?” and “Understanding the 12-Bar Blues.” Distributing these readings prior to embarking on the lesson activities will give students a good introduction to the blues. In addition, a blues glossary appears at the end of this guide. Definitions of common blues terms used in the films and lessons are provided here. A more extensive glossary and liner notes on each music selection on *The Blues Teacher’s Guide* CD can be found at [pbs.org/theblues](http://pbs.org/theblues).

### LESSON ORGANIZATION

The lessons in this guide, designed to complement the seven-part film series *The Blues*, explore four central thematic strands. The first two strands, **Approaching the Blues** and **Making the Blues**, are definitional in nature, seeking to address the question “What are the blues?” **Blues in Society** and **Blues as Culture**, the second two strands, broadly consider the question “What are the meanings of the blues?” and are meant to delve deeper into the contexts and cultural meanings of the blues. While the lessons build upon one another, individual teachers are encouraged to use those lessons or lesson pieces that best complement their curricular goals. Teachers seeking an interdisciplinary approach can incorporate social studies, English, and music activities within the same thematic strand.

	Social Studies <sup>S</sup>	English <sup>E</sup>	Music <sup>M</sup>
<b>DEFINITIONAL LESSONS: What Are the Blues?</b>			
<b>Approaching the Blues</b> How might different disciplines explain the blues?	Blues as African American History	Poetry: Blues Style	The Beat of the Blues
<b>Making the Blues</b> What are the various factors that have shaped the form and content of the blues?	Blues, Urbanization, and Technology	Oral Tradition and the Blues	Playing the Blues
<b>INTERPRETIVE LESSONS: What Are the Meanings of the Blues?</b>			
<b>Blues in Society</b> What is the relationship between the blues and wider social institutions and divisions?	Men, Women, and the Blues	Identity, Oppression, and Protest: <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> and the Blues	A Snapshot of Delta Blues: Skip James and Robert Johnson
<b>Blues as Culture</b> How do the blues shape a particular set of values and ideas?	Folk Traditions in the Blues	Crossroads Blues	Blues Lyrics

## LESSON TERMINOLOGY

Each lesson contains the following elements:

- **Overview** Thumbnail sketch of the lesson.
- **Learning Objectives** 3–4 ideas or skills students will learn by completing the lesson.
- **Standards** National Curriculum Standards addressed by the lesson.
- **Resources Needed** List of resources including music (see enclosed *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD), readings, instruments, and Web sites.
- **Film Tie-Ins** Portions of *The Blues* films that connect to the lesson. Specific information on where the recommended sections appear in each film can be found at [pbs.org/theblues](http://pbs.org/theblues). **Note:** because some of the films include language and/or situations that may not be appropriate for every classroom, teachers are encouraged to preview the films prior to showing them to students.
- **Introductory Exercise** Exercise designed to hook students into the topic by relating it to their lives and interests; approximately one class period.
- **Focus Exercise** Exercise which builds upon the **Introductory Exercise** and enables students to explore the general topic, related issues, and ideas; approximately two class periods.
- **Research and Analysis** One research activity that enables students to take a closer look at aspects of the lesson topic.
- **Synthesis and Assessment** 1–2 assessment tools which require students to demonstrate their learning.

## EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

Additional lessons and activities for each included lesson are online at [pbs.org/theblues](http://pbs.org/theblues).



# Blues as African American History

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for

### Social Studies

Primary: II, V

Secondary: I, VI, X

## Overview

This lesson enables teachers to use blues music to explore the history of African Americans in the 20th century. By studying the content of blues songs, students can learn about the experiences and struggles of the working-class Southerners who created the music, including the legacies of slavery and the cotton economy in the South, the development of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the Civil Rights Movement.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Familiarize him/herself with some of the major events of African American history since the Civil War, including the development of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the development of black nationalism.
- Comprehend some of the political and social issues involved in African Americans' struggle for equality in the United States.
- Evaluate blues songs as primary sources.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- ***The Blues Teacher's Guide*** CD

Web Sites

- <http://wire.ap.org/APpackages/20thcentury/66meredith.html>
- <http://www.newseum.org/pulitzer/html/4/>
- [http://www.galegroup.com/free\\_resources/bhm/timeline.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/bhm/timeline.htm)
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aointro.html>

**FILM TIE-INS****Events and Time Periods in African American History**

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segments featuring Jim Crow trains, black prison work gangs, the 1927 Mississippi River flood, and railroad building)

*Godfathers and Sons* (segment in which Marshall Chess and Chuck D discuss Chicago as a destination for African Americans as well as Europeans)

*The Soul of a Man* (historical footage of sharecroppers and poverty in first segment featuring Skip James; Civil Rights Movement footage in second segment featuring J.B. Lenoir)

**Waning of Blues' Popularity in the Late 1950s**

*The Road to Memphis* (segment titled "Like Being Black Twice," in which B.B. King discusses the changing appeal of blues to blacks)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

Traditional political history examines the past in terms of those who led society, drawing on the personal papers, public speeches, and decisions of well-known people, often in government. But for African Americans, who for 200 years were systematically denied both leadership roles in society and the kind of education that would produce a rich body of written thought, other kinds of sources are often needed. In particular, scholars have often turned to creative expression—poetry, song, dance—for insight into the thoughts and experiences of African Americans in the past. This exercise, which asks students to study three different sources for the shooting of civil-rights activist James Meredith, will show that the blues can be an important source for this kind of historical work.

First, ask students to read the initial Associated Press news report about the shooting. Discuss what kinds of information the article contains and why. What is its tone or attitude toward the shooting? What kinds of words or terms are used? [*The document can be found on the Web at <http://wire.ap.org/APpackages/20thcentury/66meredith.html>.*]

Second, study the famous news photograph of Meredith lying on the ground after having been shot. Ask students how the photograph shapes an understanding of the event. On what, exactly, did the photographer focus his camera lens? What is the quality of the photo? Does it look posed or spontaneous? Did the photographer have time to compose the photo? [*The photograph is in many history textbooks; it is also available online at <http://www.newseum.org/pulitzer/html/4/>.*]

Finally, listen to J.B. Lenoir's "Shot on James Meredith." Ask students what information is conveyed in the song through the lyrics, the style of playing and singing, the rhythm and "feel" of the song, and the overall tone or attitude of the singer toward the event. How does its content and message compare to the news article and the photograph?

Conclude this exercise by evaluating the merits and limitations of songs as historic sources. What can songs add to the historic record? What do print and photographic sources offer that songs cannot? Students can make a chart to illustrate the benefits and drawbacks of news reports, photographs, and song lyrics in studying history.

## Focus Exercise

Building on the **Introductory Exercise** about the value of music for outlining African American attitudes and values in history, play the following songs from different points in blues history:

- “Trouble So Hard” *early 1900s*
- Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” *1930s*
- Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy” *1950s*
- Chris Thomas King, “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here” *early 2000s*

Without revealing information about the songs, break students into small groups to discuss the lyrics, sound, and feeling of each. What do the songs suggest about the condition of the people who sang them and listened to them? Are they happy, sad, frustrated, tired, etc.? What are the performers’ attitudes toward the experiences they sing about? Are they resigned, angry, skeptical, etc.? What did the singers and listeners of these songs value? One can, after all, sing about anything; why did singers choose certain subjects and approaches to those subjects? What does that tell you about their outlook or perspective?

After listening and discussing, inform students of the dates that these songs were created, without identifying which song was written in what time period. Have student groups speculate, given the content and feel of each piece, the time in which each song was created, and make a timeline that illustrates their predictions. The timeline should include what these four songs indicate about the trajectory of African American experience across the 1900s, ’30s, ’50s, and 2000s, and a justification of their choices using particular references to each song.

Once students have shared their timelines, give the correct date for each song, commenting on important historical clues in each piece. Obviously, one song can’t possibly sum up the experiences of all African Americans in a given time period, which is something to make clear to the students. But each song can be used to suggest general eras in African American history and provide a foundation for analyzing changing attitudes toward segregation and racism over time. *[For detailed talking points related to each song, read the online version of this lesson at <http://www.pbs.org/theblues>.]*

After discussing each song in detail, finish up by asking students to compare their understanding of African American history gained from these four songs with fuller, more detailed timelines. They might research timelines overnight. Following research, discuss the extent to which the songs captured a larger historical chronology. *[Timelines can be found in textbooks on African American history or at [http://www.galegroup.com/free\\_resources/bhm/timeline.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/bhm/timeline.htm). Segments from several of the films in **The Blues** series can also be used to illustrate time periods and events in African American history. See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information.]*

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

In the 1920s, the blues was often seen as a source of “race pride,” a movement meant to enable blacks to take pride in their ancestry and elevate their status in American society. But the blues began to wane in popularity in the late 1950s in the African American community, a point that can be introduced by showing the segment “Like Being Black Twice” from the film *The Road to Memphis*. Assign students to research African American history in both the 1920s and ’50s, and to come up with a list of reasons why the blues might have held a larger appeal to blacks in the ’20s than in the ’50s.

### Good starting points for research include:

- The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aointro.html>
- Jones, Leroi. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow, 1963
- Kelley, Robin D.G. and Earl Lewis. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000
- Scott, William R. and William G. Shade. *Upon These Shores: Themes in the African-American Experience, 1600 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2000

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students to select a blues song (either from the accompanying CD or from another mutually agreed-upon source) and have them explain in an essay or oral presentation how the piece reflects the time period in which it was written.



# Poetry: Blues Style

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 6, 9

Secondary: 2, 3, 8

## Overview

This lesson focuses on how the blues both operates as poetry and informs the poetry of many prominent African American poets. Students consider the poetic devices and recurring themes in blues lyrics and the significance of the poetry of the blues as part of the African American oral tradition. Given the tie to this tradition, blues music inevitably impacted the writing of many African American poets, both formally and thematically.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Consider songs as poetry.
- Identify poetic devices used in blues songs and African American poetry.
- Consider prominent themes in blues lyrics and how these themes influenced African American poets.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

Readings

- Langston Hughes' "The Weary Blues," "To Midnight at Leroy's," "Blues Fantasy," and "Po' Boy Blues"

Web Sites

- <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/crossroadblues.html>
- [http://mathrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L\\_Hughes.html](http://mathrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L_Hughes.html)
- <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmlD=1472>
- <http://www.mtsu.edu/~vesper/afampoet.htm>

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**FILM TIE-INS****Blues Themes**

*Red, White and Blues* (“Was the UK Blues Scene Significant?” segment, which discusses what the blues is about)

*Godfathers and Sons* (segment where Koko Taylor discusses how blues for her is therapy)

*The Soul of a Man* (segment of Alvin Youngblood singing “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues,” J.B. Lenoir’s performance of “I’ve Been Down So Long,” T-Bone Burnett’s performance of “Man, Don’t Dog Your Woman,” and Eagle Eye Cherry’s performance of “Down in Mississippi”)

*Warming by the Devil’s Fire* (discussion at the end of the film about “having the blues”)

**Introductory Exercise**

As a way to reinforce student understanding of poetic devices, this exercise considers the use of these devices in song lyrics, from both popular music and the blues. Start by asking students to bring in the lyrics to one of their favorite songs (reminding them, of course, of the importance of selecting a song appropriate for classroom study). Using their song selections, have students identify poetic devices within the lyrics. Some devices to include: alliteration, imagery, metaphor, personification, simile, rhyme, repetition, apostrophe, echo, allusion, hyperbole, euphemism, and paradox.

Similar to the devices in the songs brought in by students, a wealth of poetic devices appear in blues songs. To reinforce student understanding of both poetic devices and the use of these devices in song lyrics, write the following blues lyrics on the board. Then, as a class, identify the devices evident in each:

- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” *simile*
- “Sun going down, dark gonna catch me here” *personification, imagery*
- “They got me accused of forgery and I can’t even write my name” *paradox*
- “You’ve got a good cotton crop, but it’s just like shootin’ dice” *simile, paradox*
- “I had religion this very day, but the whiskey and women would not let me pray”  
*internal rhyme, personification*
- “I can hear the Delta calling by the light of a distant star” *personification, imagery*
- “Woke up this morning with the jinx all around my bed” *metaphor*
- “Go down, old Hannah; don’t you rise no more. If you rise in the morning, bring judgment sure” *personification, apostrophe*

To further discuss the notion of blues as poetry, play Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” As students listen, ask them to write down all of the devices they hear employed. Students should recognize the use of rhyme, repetition, allusion, apostrophe, and personification. If necessary, distribute lyrics to the song, which can be found at <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/crossroadblues.html>.

Conclude the exercise by discussing song lyrics as poetry. How do such lyrics compare to other poetry studied in school? Can all song lyrics be considered poetry? Why or why not? Should teachers incorporate song lyrics into their poetry units?

## Focus Exercise

The blues impacted the writing of many African American authors, perhaps most famously Langston Hughes. Pass out copies of the poem “The Weary Blues” without telling students that Hughes is the author. Ask students to analyze the poem as they have examined blues songs in the previous exercise, specifically identifying poetic devices.

Inform students that the “song” they just analyzed is actually a poem by Langston Hughes. Discuss why poets like Hughes would have been so influenced by the blues. Sharing facts from Hughes’ life can help explain Hughes’ connection to the blues.

- *Hughes came from humble origins, which gave him an appreciation for poor people who worked hard to rise above their circumstances. These people had a tremendous impact on his poetry.*
- *Hughes loved African American music, especially the blues, which he listened to in Chicago, New York City, Kansas City, and Washington, DC, clubs. He recalled first hearing the blues in Kansas City with his grandmother when he was six.*
- *Hughes lived at a time when blues music was popular. He hoped to capitalize on its popularity by connecting his poetry to the blues.*
- *In 1927, he accompanied author Zora Neale Hurston, a close friend, on travels through the South. She introduced him to rural folk artists while she collected and recorded their folklore. This trip helped Hughes to unite oral and written traditions.*

Inform students that several elements of the blues can be found in works of African American literature. Specifically, much of this literature uses the traditional blues song forms (refer to the “[Understanding the 12-Bar Blues](#)” essay in this guide for a brief description of blues song form); shares the subject matter of the blues, including hard times, love, oppression, alienation, and the search for identity; honors blues singers, places, and instruments; addresses the suffering of African Americans; incorporates the rhythm and music of African American vernacular speech. After introducing these elements, briefly discuss how “The Weary Blues” uses all four of them.

Finally, distribute copies of three additional poems by Hughes—“To Midnight at Leroy’s,” “Blues Fantasy,” and “Po’ Boy Blues”—which incorporate blues elements. Ask students, in small groups, to analyze these poems in terms of their incorporation of the blues elements discussed above. Discuss student findings as a whole class. *[Copies of the first two poems can be found at [http://mathrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L\\_Hughes.html](http://mathrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L_Hughes.html). The third can be found at <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmlD=1472>.]*

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the Langston Hughes poems studied in the **Focus Exercise**, many of Hughes’ other poems explore the same themes prevalent in blues lyrics. Introduce prevalent blues themes by showing several segments from *The Blues* films. After viewing, assign students to research Hughes’ work, looking specifically for poems that illustrate the following themes: North vs. South, physical violence, skin color, death, travel (and the train). Students should be prepared to share their findings with the class in either a written paper or oral presentation. *[See **Film Tie-Ins** section for recommended viewing segments.]*

### Good starting points for research include:

- African American Writers: Poets and Poetry at <http://www.mtsu.edu/~vvesper/afampoeet.htm>
- Tracy, Steven C. *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Assign students to select a prominent theme in society today and write either a poem or blues song about it. Whether students select a poem or song, they should make sure to incorporate a blues format (AAB blues format is easiest; “Po’ Boy Blues” could serve as a poetry model, while “Cross Road Blues” represents a good blues song model), as well as poetic devices. For students struggling to identify a prominent societal theme, assign them to write their pieces about an event or daily occurrence in life.



# The Beat of the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for **Music Education**

Primary: 2, 6

Secondary: 9

## Overview

This lesson focuses on how students can learn basic blues percussion patterns by considering the polyrhythms of African drumming and investigating how and why such drums were banned during slavery. Students will listen to several blues and non-blues recordings to practice recognizing the “backbeat” in each song. Hands-on exercises will show students how to identify and create a backbeat rhythm.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Understand the musical and cultural importance of African drumming.
- Demonstrate steady rhythms in a variety of blues styles.
- Recognize the role of the backbeat in blues music.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

Instruments

- African drums (*conga, bongo, timbale are all acceptable*)
- Standard five-piece drum kit (*if available*)

Web Sites

- <http://www.blueman.com>
- <http://www.stomponline.com>

**FILM TIE-INS**

African Drumming

*Feel Like Going Home* (segments showing tribal drumming)**VIEWING GUIDE**Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues)

for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

The rhythm of the blues has its roots in African drumming. This lesson explores the connection. Start by playing the following recordings: “The Panama Limited” by Bukka White, “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters, and “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here” by Chris Thomas King. While listening, have students write descriptions of the rhythmic variations they hear from song to song, both in execution and in musical “feel.” Questions for students to consider: Do they hear a steady, “flat” beat or erratic “explosions”? Do the drums seem just to keep time or do they interact with what else is happening in the song? Does the pattern and intensity of the drumming communicate any type of emotion (anger, happiness, fear, etc.) in each song?

Suggest that the rhythmic elements they just recognized in the songs above have their roots in Africa. Provide students with a brief history of the African drum and how it was perceived in slave states. Key points to include in this overview:

- *The sheer size of Africa has contributed to the diversity of its music.*
- *Specific characteristics of different regions of Africa reveal a diversity of instruments, genres, vocal styles, and performance techniques.*
- *The Yoruba of Nigeria are known for their village drum ensembles that include a “dundun,” or “talking drum.” The dundun is known as a talking drum because patterns played on it can be controlled to match the tonality of the Yoruba language. Thus, the drum can be made to “speak.”*
- *The slave trade that began in the 1600s included many West Africans who brought their musical traditions with them. Because many slaves spoke different languages, they began to communicate through music.*
- *Slave owners throughout the Americas tried to ban drumming among their slaves, fearing that slaves were talking to each other, communicating with their spirits, and fomenting rebellion through the drums.*
- *Slaves did indeed use drums for communication. In planning the Stono River Rebellion of 1739, slaves used drums to signal to surrounding plantations when the revolt would begin. In the planning stages of the 1791 Haitian Revolution, enslaved Africans used drums to communicate with one another across many plantations.*
- *When drums were banned from plantations, slaves developed ways to imitate the polyrhythms of drumming, using European instruments, household items (spoons, jugs, washboards), and their own bodies—a style that became known as “slapping juba” or “patting juba.”*

Reinforce these ideas by showing drumming segments in the film *Feel Like Going Home*.

To reinforce the notion of percussion instruments being used for communication, conclude this exercise by asking students, in pairs, to create a conversation without using their voices. Simple percussion instruments, classroom items (even cafeteria spoons), or patting and slapping can be used. [An extended version of this exercise is provided under **Synthesis and Assessment**.]

## Focus Exercise

One of the identifying characteristics of the blues is the emphasis placed on the backbeat. Play a song from the accompanying CD and ask students to clap along to it. Ask them to describe their clapping. Did they tend to clap on certain beats of the song? Did they clap louder on certain beats of the song? How did they clap differently to this song than they would to, say, a classic rock song? Suggest that blues audiences typically find themselves clapping on the second and fourth beats of a song, the backbeats.

Introduce students to the backbeat by asking them to sing a familiar folk song, such as “Oh Susannah” or “Yankee Doodle” and having them clap evenly on all four beats of each 4/4 measure as they sing. This type of clapping exemplifies the “flat four pattern,” a pattern in which no one beat is emphasized more than another. Next, have students sing the song again, clapping only on the second and fourth beats (the backbeats) of each 4/4 measure. Finally, have students combine the two previous exercises by clapping on all four beats but giving emphasis to beats two and four. Ask students how the feel of the music changes when the backbeat is emphasized. Does the backbeat make them want to move their bodies more? Do they feel more of a “pulse” to the beat when the backbeat is emphasized?

Play “Lost Your Head Blues” by Bessie Smith and have students clap along with both a flat four pattern and then a backbeat feel. Subsequently, ask students which beat they feel better communicates the song’s meaning. Why?

Next, instruct students that blues musicians use the backbeat in a common blues rhythm known as a “shuffle beat.” Have them experience the sound of the shuffle beat by tapping out four even beats in 4/4 time with the right hand and add a “pre-beat” tap in the left hand just before each beat in the right. This pre-beat can be thought of as the “and” in “and one, and two, and three, and four.” After a steady rhythm has been established students should attempt to emphasize the backbeat by tapping louder with the right hand on beats two and four. This type of shuffle beat that emphasizes the backbeat is a *Chicago shuffle*. For students able to establish a steady pattern with both hands, they can try adding on a steady four taps of the right foot on the floor while everything else is still going on. Discuss with students why this rhythm is known as a shuffle beat.

Finally, play “The Other Woman” by Shemekia Copeland and tap along with a slow shuffle beat. Ask students if they can recognize this rhythmic combination as a pattern heard in popular music today. If time allows, play a popular song that uses blues rhythms and assign students to bring examples to class the following day.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to research two popular performing groups, Blue Man Group and STOMP. Student research should result in their ability to present an analysis of how these groups use drums and rhythm as tools of communication. More specifically, students should be prepared to discuss uses of the backbeat style within these groups’ performances.

### Good starting points for research include:

- Blue Man Group at <http://www.blue-man.com>
- *The Complex* (audio CD)
- *Pulse—A STOMP Odyssey: Soundtrack from the IMAX Film* (audio CD)
- STOMP at <http://www.stomponline.com>

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

To reinforce the notion of the communicative power of rhythm instruments, particularly the “talking drum” used in Africa, students can work in pairs using homemade percussion instruments, available drums, or even the technique of “slapping juba” or “patting juba,” described in the **Introductory Exercise**, to create a short conversation. Each duo should present a key containing basic written rhythmic notations that represent different words or language phrases, and should perform their short “conversation” in front of the class.



# Blues, Urbanization, and Technology

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for

### Social Studies

Primary: III, VIII

Secondary: II, V, VII

## Overview

This lesson will enable students to use the blues to explore urbanization and technology and their effects on everyday life in the 20th century. Musicians were among the large number of people who, between 1914 and 1945, participated in the Great Migration, in which rural African Americans left work on the farms for new opportunities in the cities of the North and the West. At the same time, these cities were in the process of being transformed by industry, invention, technology, and consumerism. Ultimately, this exercise should help students to appreciate African Americans' experience of social and technological change in America during this time period.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Gain an understanding of the experiences of African Americans who moved to the city during the Great Migration.
- Learn about the symbolic meanings of the city in the early to mid-20th century.
- Make connections between 20th-century urbanization and other forces of social change such as industrialization and mass communication.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

### Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

### Web Sites

- [http://www.macalester.edu/geography/mage/authentic/summer2002/lessons\\_hedenstrom/7%20Letters%20from%20the%20Great%20Migration.htm](http://www.macalester.edu/geography/mage/authentic/summer2002/lessons_hedenstrom/7%20Letters%20from%20the%20Great%20Migration.htm)
- <http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/communities/>

**FILM TIE-INS****The Meaning of the City**

*Godfathers and Sons* (segment on Maxwell Street)

*The Road to Memphis* (“Coming Home” and “Heaven for a Black Man” segments, in which B.B. King and Rosco Gordon discuss black migration to the city of Memphis and the changing face of Beale Street)

**The Great Migration**

*Godfathers and Sons* (discussion between Marshall Chess and Chuck D, backed by historic footage, of migration to Chicago; segment in which the Great Migration is described as a way to escape the Jim Crow South)

*The Soul of a Man* (segment in the first Skip James portion of the film in which the farming crisis of the 1920s, sharecropping, and tenant farming are depicted; segment in the first J.B. Lenoir section where Lenoir discusses his desire to leave the farming life)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

One of the major events of early 20th-century American history was the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans (including many blues performers) from poor and rural areas of the South to growing urban centers both in the South and North. African Americans’ encounters with modernity in America’s cities—places of tall buildings, machines, lights, noise, and masses of people never before seen—profoundly affected their behavior, attitudes, and goals for the future. Many of these migrants—some of whom had never had electricity, for instance, back home—were energized by the new environment, at least before they realized that the city contained new kinds of segregation and that their hopes were not to be fully realized due to institutionalized racism. That initial encounter with the city, however, embodied the promise of urbanization for all Americans between 1900 and 1940. Today, the city generally has a different set of associations, ones that have less to do with progress and light than with decay, crime, and poverty. This exercise will explore changing ideas of the city over time.

Start by asking students about their ideas of the city. What are some of its main features? How do cities’ tall buildings, commercial areas, and masses of people make you feel? Do they make you feel inspired, excited, depressed, frightened, weary, confused, etc.?

Next, as a way to place the discussion in a more concrete historical context, show excerpts from *The Blues* films that address the meaning of the city. *The Road to Memphis* opens with two segments titled “Coming Home” and “Heaven for a Black Man,” which focus on the changes that have occurred in Memphis over the years. B.B. King says that it “was like going to Paris” when he first arrived, and that Beale Street had a lively, exciting nightlife. However, Rosco Gordon reflects on things that have changed between then and today: Beale Street fell on hard times and has revitalized itself only as a tourist attraction. *Godfathers and Sons* includes a segment on Maxwell Street in Chicago, contrasting its prominence in 1945 as a lively market for black migrants and Jewish immigrants with its emptiness and decay today.

After watching the excerpts, ask students to characterize the changes experienced by both Memphis and Chicago. How did blues musicians perceive each city, and particularly the black neighborhoods in these cities, in the 1940s? How do they perceive the places now? Based on their own experiences and those of their parents and grandparents, do students feel that cities in the United States have changed for the worse, or at least have changed their appeal? Are cities today still associated with economic opportunity, progress, and invention? Does moving to the city today equate with improving one’s life? Why or why not?

Conclude this exercise by asking students to participate in a debate in which they voice their opinions on whether or not a Great Migration could happen in the near future and what the defining characteristics of such a migration would be.

## Focus Exercise

This exercise compares the tone, content, and sound of country and urban blues in order to frame a discussion about the Great Migration. First, explain that the Great Migration, which largely occurred between World War I and World War II, was a mass movement of poor, rural, black Southerners to Southern and Northern cities. Blacks were seeking to better their lives, both economically and socially, leaving behind the Jim Crow South and tenant farming for what they saw as an opportunity to start again and gain a new independence in the burgeoning urban factory environment of the North. [*Portions of **The Blues** films that discuss the Great Migration are noted in **Film Tie-Ins**.*]

Suggest that the blues might be a good way to understand what moving to the city meant to migrants. First, play a country blues song or two (Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" and Skip James' "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues"). Then play an urban blues song or two for comparison (B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues" and Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy"). Ask students to consider both how the music changes and how it remains the same. As you discuss the similarities and differences with the class, list them on the blackboard.

Similarities	Differences	Urban Blues
Male singers	Country blues	Electric guitar
Guitar emphasis	Acoustic guitar	Direct
Sliding notes	Indirect, mysterious	Loud
Backbeat	Quiet	Band
Emotional vocals	Single singer	Formal, arranged
	Informal, unfinished	Professional
	Amateur	

After focusing on the similarities and differences, take the discussion to another level by asking students how urban blues songs capture "the city" in sound.

Conclude this exercise by asking students to write a letter, in the voice of someone who migrated from the Delta region to Chicago in the 1940s, to a family member back home. The letter should enumerate how electric Chicago blues (as heard in "Mannish Boy") differ from acoustic Delta blues (as heard in "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues" and "Cross Road Blues"). For a model, students can be provided with actual letters written by migrants to Chicago. [*Examples can be found at <http://www.maclester.edu/geography/mage/authentic/summer2002/lessons/hedenstrom/7%20Letters%20from%20the%20Great%20Migration.htm>.*]

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

During the Great Migration, blues musicians traveled to cities like Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. Split the students into groups and assign each to choose one of these cities and imagine what it would be like for a blues musician arriving there in the 1940s. How would he/she get there? What would he/she have to do first upon arrival? In what part of the city did African Americans live and why? Where might a migrant find shelter, food, work, etc.? What might his/her experience of the city be in the first week? What kinds of new behaviors, attitudes, and values might he/she have to develop in order to survive? In the end, have students create a handbook for new arrivals to the city in the 1940s. Students can begin their research by consulting encyclopedia entries on the history of these cities and locating social histories on each. Web sources include <http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/communities/>.

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students to create an advertisement for Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy" (1955) or B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues" (1951). The advertisement should address the qualities and values that would appeal to potential black urban buyers at the time these songs were released. Assign students a one-page explanation of their advertisement in which they justify their creations.



# Oral Tradition and the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2

Secondary: 9

## Overview

When slavery took Africans from their land, they were separated from the rich musical and oral traditions native to each country and region. While working as slaves, Africans found they had two places they could use these musical traditions freely: the fields where they labored and the churches where they prayed. The field hollers, spirituals, and work songs they invented were designed to lighten the load of the task. They were also a means of telling stories, passing along news, plotting escapes, and releasing frustrations. The early blues carried on the tradition of voicing black aspirations and experiences. This lesson explores both the African American oral tradition and the relationship of this tradition to the blues.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore the African American oral tradition, including its roots, its importance, and its legacy.
- Consider the oral traditions that exist within his/her own family.
- Explain how spirituals, work songs, hollers, and ballads functioned in the everyday lives of slaves and sharecroppers.
- Connect African American oral tradition to both Africa and the blues.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD

Readings

- W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Web Sites

- <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubSoul.html>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>
- <http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/S/stagolee.html>
- [http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press\\_article](http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press_article)

**FILM TIE-INS**

## African American Folk Music

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segment on W.C. Handy discovering the blues; discussion of Joe Turner and black prison work gangs; Mississippi John Hurt's performance of "John Henry")

## Oral Tradition in Africa

*Feel Like Going Home* (segments emphasizing the oral tradition in Africa and its export to the Americas)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

This exercise introduces the idea of oral tradition and examines the importance of that tradition in African American culture. Start by asking students to think about a family story that has been told and retold over the years. Once students have had the opportunity to identify a tale, ask them to answer a few questions about it:

- *What are the roots of this story?*
- *Has the story changed over time as it has been retold? If so, what changes can you note?*
- *Consider the occasions in which the story is told. What purpose does it seem to serve in your family? Why does it continue to be told and retold?*
- *Has the story ever been written down? Why or why not? How do you think the story and its function in your family might change if it were to be recorded?*

When students have finished, discuss the purpose of family stories as a whole class. Explain to the class that such stories are often referred to as **oral-tradition narratives**, passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and song.

Inform the class that oral tradition is extremely important in African American culture. To highlight the importance of songs in African American oral tradition, assign students to read **Chapter 14**, "Of the Sorrow Songs," from W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. As students read, ask them to answer the following questions:

- *What, according to DuBois, is the history of these songs?*
- *What purpose did these songs serve?*
- *Why are many of these songs religious in nature?*
- *What themes do these songs cover and what themes do they omit?*
- *Why are these songs important to America?*

[An online version of the text can be found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubSoul.html>.]

Once students have read and discussed the reading, inform them that while DuBois focuses largely on spirituals, three types of songs characterize African American folk music: spirituals, ballads, and work songs. Play a sample of each for the class and discuss the purposes each type of song might have played in African American communities. [A wealth of songs can be found in the Library of Congress collection, *The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip* (found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohhome.html>). The accompanying CD has two appropriate selections, "Trouble So Hard" and "John Henry," and the film **Warming by the Devil's Fire** contains good references to African American oral tradition. See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed information.]

## Focus Exercise

The African American oral tradition has roots in Africa and a legacy in the blues. This exercise explores the continuum of the oral tradition, asking students ultimately to consider how blues music is a legacy of African tradition. Start the exercise by introducing students to the concept of the *griot*. Associated primarily with West Africa’s Mali Empire, which lasted from 1245 to 1468, and the legend of Sundiata, which arose from this empire, griots were essentially professional historians, praise singers, and musical entertainers. They were educated and used their knowledge of history, which was passed down from griot to griot, to bring wisdom to present situations. Because of their wisdom, they had extremely high standing in society, advising kings and educating princes. Griots also became the official musicians of Malian society. After providing this background, ask students how the griot tradition may have impacted the African American oral tradition.

Suggest that slave songs (spirituals, ballads, and work songs) have not only a rich history but also a rich legacy. The blues is a big part of that legacy. Assign students to read the essay in this guide “*What Is the Blues?*” and discuss how the essay makes the connection between the blues and African American slave songs and oral tradition. Demonstrate this connection by introducing the legend of Stack O’ Lee. Play the Mississippi John Hurt version of “Stack O’ Lee” to the class and after students have listened, ask them what story or incident this song relates. Pass out the lyrics and ask students, in pairs, to write a news story that narrates the incident in the song. Once student stories are written and shared, distribute the actual news story from the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* of December 27, 1895, which many believe was the basis for the song. Discuss, as a class, the following:

- How did your news stories compare to the actual story on which the song (and the legend of Stack O’ Lee) is likely based?
- How might the story of Stack O’ Lee and Mississippi John Hurt’s sung version of it suggest a connection between African American oral tradition and the blues?
- Why would the legend of Stack O’ Lee have such lasting power in African American culture and, ultimately, American culture?
- Dozens of performers, including Pat Boone, Big Bill Broonzy, Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead, and Beck, have done versions of a Stack O’ Lee song. What does this suggest about oral tradition and legends?

[The words to “Stack O’ Lee” can be found at <http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/S/stagolee.html> while the news story is replicated at [http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press\\_article](http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press_article).]

Conclude this exercise by connecting blues musicians to the griot tradition. Ask students whether they think musicians such as Mississippi John Hurt, who retold a famous story in song, represent an American version of the African griot. How are blues musicians similar to griots? How do they differ?

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The Library of Congress collection *The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip* (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>) contains a wealth of primary sources—songs, in particular—related to the African American oral tradition. Assign them to explore this Web site, specifically asking them to listen to enough songs on the site to choose four or five selections that have the same theme. These selections can come from one type of music (for example, spirituals or work songs), or they can represent several different types. Once students select their songs, they should find the same number of photographs from the collection that illustrate their chosen theme. Student research should ideally be presented in oral presentations in which students play their songs and show their photographs, pointing out the common theme in all the works. If time does not allow for oral presentations, have students present their assertions in a paper.

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

If legendary bluesmen were, in many respects, the griots of their time, it could be argued that rap artists are modern-day griots. Ask students to either agree or disagree with this idea in a written essay. The essay should include references to the griot tradition as well as evidence from rap lyrics and biographical information about rap artists.



# Playing the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following  
National Curriculum Standards  
for **Music Education**

Primary: 2, 3, 6

Secondary: 4, 5

## Overview

This lesson enables students to gain a broader awareness of the basic blues scale and the harmonic structure of the standard blues progression. Students will be given introductory exercises on blues improvisation and will also investigate the use of bending and sliding pitches and their importance in both the understanding and performance of blues music.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Understand how to correlate Roman numerals with the note names of a scale in a given key.
- Identify the musical intervals of the blues scale as well as dominant, subdominant, and root chords of the blues.
- Transpose the blues progression and blues scale into various keys.
- Identify half-tones not found in a chromatic scale.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

### Music

- ***The Blues Teacher's Guide*** CD

### Instruments

- A piano or alternative instrument (*guitar/accordion*) that can play whole steps, half steps, and chords
- Band instruments, xylophones/tone bells, any melodic source for students to use individually (*optional*)

### Web Site

- <http://www.emplive.com>

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**FILM TIE-INS****Defining the Blues**

*Red, White and Blues* (end of the “Was the UK Blues Scene Significant?” segment, in which a variety of people define the blues)

**Introductory Exercise**

The blues has often been portrayed as slow, mournful music full of bleak images of personal pain and despair. This exercise asks students to expand their understanding of the genre. Start by asking students what feelings they associate with the word “blue.” After discussing, ask what they imagine blues music might be about. Why do they have these notions? How much of their description has to do with the way the music sounds? With the music’s lyrics? With their understanding of the word “blue” in the context of feelings?

Play Bessie Smith’s “Lost Your Head Blues.” Ask students if this song reinforces or challenges their notions of blues music. Point out that while the song might sound mournful, it actually depicts a bold woman willing to stand up to her husband. Next, play Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy.” What does this song do to students’ preconceptions of blues music? Finally, play an example of “jump blues.” (See the glossary, p.44, for a definition.) By this point, student definitions of blues music should be more nuanced than they were originally. Point out that the blues is a means of self-expression; as such, it naturally includes a wide variety of emotional moods, including sadness, desperation, humor, flirtation, and, very often, happiness. Conclude this discussion by playing the end of the “Was the UK Blues Scene Significant?” segment from *Red, White and Blues*, in which a variety of people talk about what defines the blues. [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information. Short song clips by jump blues performers such as Louis Jordan and Wynonie Harris can be found in Experience Music Project’s Digital Collection at <http://www.emplive.com>.]

After students have explored the music that exists under the umbrella of the blues, inform them that certain musical elements are present in much blues music. To allow them to hear the commonalities in blues songs, play a variety of tracks and ask students to identify these shared characteristics. To reinforce student understanding of essential blues elements, assign them to read the essay in this guide, “*Understanding the 12-Bar Blues.*”

This entire exercise can be wrapped up by having students complete a one-page written response to the question “What are the blues?” Student writings should capture the ideas presented in the lesson.

**Focus Exercise**

This exercise introduces the blues scale and blues improvisation. The theory of using numbers that correlate to the seven letters identifying note names in music should be introduced if students are not familiar with the construction of an **eight-tone diatonic scale** (i.e., begin with  $C=1$ ,  $D=2$ ,  $E=3$ , and continue up to the octave  $C=8$ ). Play the scale a number of times to allow students to hear the pattern. Next, introduce the notes of the **chromatic scale** by inserting them between the eight-tone scale. Again, the teacher should demonstrate by playing a chromatic scale. If students have their own instruments, they should be encouraged to play both scales as well. To further reinforce student understanding, ask them to sing the scales and at the same time mirror the intervals with hand movements.

Inform students that the blues scale uses some of the same pitches as the eight-tone major scale while adding some others. The blues scale is built around a **pentatonic scale**, which is common in many African music cultures. Begin to introduce this blues scale by demonstrating the notion of bending pitches. Do so by playing the flat 3rd, flat 5th, and flat 7th steps in any given key. Now, incorporate all the pitches that construct a **blues scale** in any given key.

Show, via overhead projector or handout, the notes in a blues scale: the root (1), the flat 3rd (b3), the 4th (4), the flat 5th (b5), the 5th (5), the flat 7th (b7), and the octave (8). Choosing a specific key, have students repeat this scale pattern up and down on whatever chromatic instruments are available. Periodically, students should revert to playing the original eight-tone major scale to train their ear to hear the difference between the two types of scales.

Another characteristic of the blues is improvisation. Inform students that the blues scale is used to construct melody, which is created through variations on the order in which the blues scale pitches are played. The flexible order and duration of the chosen pitches is called **musical improvisation**. Improvisation allows performers to create a different mood or convey a different meaning through their personal choices of notes, tempos, and rhythms.

Walk students through the following exercise, with the goal of using the notes from the blues scale to make up their own phrases (of 12 measures in 4/4 time) on any melodic instrument. Start by having students echo short phrases you play on non-pitched instruments. Once students have mastered the echo, keep playing the same rhythmic phrase while one or two individual students improvise their own rhythm. Continue this call-and-response exercise until all class members have had a chance to improvise. Maintain this call-and-response format, using longer and longer phrases and eventually transitioning into pitched instruments and two-three notes. Once students have mastered diatonic improvisation, move into blues improvisation, using the blues scale and the same technique of echo and call and response.

To help build student competence in blues improvisation and to reinforce the conversational tone of improvising, wrap up by allowing students to try “trading fours” with a partner. Trading fours refers to each player in the duo taking turns improvising on four-bar measures.

In addition to the blues scale and the melodies related to it, the use of a particular harmonic or chord pattern identifies the blues. This exercise introduces students to the three basic chords of the blues. These chords create the vertical harmony that supports the horizontal melodies. Start by presenting a visual example of the music staff, with a root chord (I), subdominant chord (IV), and the dominant chord (V)—the most common chords used in a blues progression. Demonstrate playing these chords in the key of C and have students echo. Then, have students construct these chords in one or two easier keys by changing the identity of the root chord. Inform students that one of the more popular formulas for a blues progression is played using the chords mentioned above in the following pattern: I-IV-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-IV-I-V. Students should be encouraged to play the progression above on chorded instruments, or at least the root note of each chord in the progression if they do not have a chorded instrument. Conclude by introducing the notion of a 7th chord. Show what such a chord looks like on a music staff, using a V7—common to the blues—for your example. Play the V7 and give students a chance to do the same. Finally, have students play the pattern above, substituting the V7 for the V. Discuss how adding the 7th chord changes the sound and how this sound can be heard in the blues.

### RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to prepare a compare/contrast presentation by listening to a Delta blues recording that uses bended pitches and then performing a stripped-down version of the same song without using the bended-pitch technique. In conjunction with their performances, students should compose a short writing in which they describe how the song’s mood or feeling changes when the bended pitches are eliminated. Possible options for songs can be found on the accompanying CD, including “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson, “Stack O’ Lee” by Mississippi John Hurt, and “Trouble So Hard.”

### SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Choose a blues song from the accompanying CD that was not used in the lesson. Assign students to analyze the song, presenting their analysis either orally or in writing. Student analysis should include the following: identification of the root of each chord used in the harmonic progression and any melodic pitches used that are not in the standard blues scale; instances of the use of bended pitch and of trading fours (four measures vocal/four measures instrument); the use of call and response between the singer and his/her own instrument; and a critique of how well the sound of the music matches the content of the lyrics.



# Men, Women, and the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for

### Social Studies

Primary: IV, V

Secondary: II, X

## Overview

This lesson shows how the blues can be used to enable students to explore gender divisions in the United States, both in the past and the present. Most blues songs are about the relationships between men and women, as are many songs in American popular music. But blues artists have always addressed love with a directness and realism absent in most mainstream popular songs. Between 1923 and 1945, women blues singers in particular offered a powerful alternative to the narrow mainstream image of women as domesticated wives and mothers, creating a new feminism that drew on the fight for women's rights in the voting booth and the workplace that took place between 1913 and 1919, and prefiguring the later women's movement of the 1960s and '70s. By looking at both men's and women's performances of the blues, students can learn a great deal about sexual differences, identity, changing gender roles, and patriarchy throughout American history.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore gender stereotypes and their influence on everyday behavior.
- Consider different sides in debates about the role of women in society.
- Understand how blues women were both limited by and defiant of the gender expectations under which they lived.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

**FILM TIE-INS****Instruments and Gender**

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segment in which Buddy talks to the boy about female blues performers, including performance footage of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Victoria Spivey)

*Red, White and Blues* ("The Post-War Years" segment, which includes a discussion among British musicians about Sister Rosetta Tharpe's tour in England in the 1950s)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

Blues songs provide an interesting lens through which to consider relationships between men and women as well as gender stereotypes. The following exercise asks students to consider this perspective while listening to three blues songs.

As students listen to the three songs named below, have them take notes on the following questions:

- *What are the circumstances in the song? Who is to blame for the problems between the couple?*
- *How are men and women portrayed in the song? Specifically, how are the actions of men and women portrayed?*
- *What gender stereotypes, if any, are evident in the song?*

First, play and discuss "Mannish Boy" by Muddy Waters, which depicts a ladies' man who boasts of his sexual prowess. This is the typical "bluesman" stereotype, one that emphasizes men's interest in sex and their desire not to stay in one place too long. Juxtapose this selection with "Three O'Clock Blues" by B.B. King, which depicts a man whose woman has left him because of a sin he's committed. He is at times defiant (remarking that he should go down to where "the mens hang out") and repentant, hinting that he'll die without her ("I believe this is the end"). Finally, play Shemekia Copeland's "The Other Woman." This song depicts a woman who has been manipulated into a relationship by a married man. Note the twist on the typical situation in which a married woman finds out that her husband was cheating. Here, instead, a woman finds out that she's participated unwittingly in a man's cheating. After listening to all three selections, discuss students' thoughts on the above questions, comparing the three songs to one another.

Broaden this discussion by considering gender roles and stereotypes in general. Ask students to cite examples of such stereotypes from print media, music, and television. Using student examples as a springboard, discuss: What kind of pressures do these stereotypes place on men and women? Are men and women always bound—by biology or nature—to fulfill these stereotypes? Or are there ways in which men and women can avoid the stereotypes and affect change?

Conclude by asking students to voice their opinions on whether or not the blues songs support or refute the gender stereotyping in contemporary mass media. How so? How not? Does Copeland's song from 2000 more accurately capture today's stereotypes, or do the messages of Waters' and King's songs still hold true today? What, if anything, would have to change in the lyrics of the earlier pieces in order to make them reflect 2003 thinking?

## Focus Exercise

Musical instruments are often “gendered”; that is, they are considered appropriate for either men or women. To start a discussion about this phenomenon, ask the class to think about the instruments that men usually play and the instruments that women usually play. Answers usually link men with the guitar, trumpet, and drums, while women are linked with the flute, piano, or voice. List student answers on the board, then take each one, discussing: Why might this instrument be appropriate for a man or a woman? Does appropriateness have to do with the sound, shape, or weight of the instrument and/or how one must play it? Tie this discussion into the blues by noting that many early bluesmen were guitarists, harp players, or pianists, and most blueswomen were singers. Ask why that may have been.

Next, consider exceptions to the idea of gendered instruments. Ask students for examples, aiding the discussion if necessary, by asking: Are there men who excel at flute? Voice? Piano? Women who are guitarists? Trumpeters? Drummers? Another tool to help students think about such exceptions are the films *Warming by the Devil’s Fire*, which includes footage of Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing electric guitar, and *Red, White and Blues*, which discusses Tharpe and her guitar playing. To follow up on film viewing, point out to students that in the late 1940s the image of a female electric guitar player was completely incongruous with a woman’s role. Then ask whether women guitarists provide the same shock today. Ask students what they think about the exceptions discussed. Does going against the grain give performers a different image or edge? How so? [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information.]

Conclude this exercise by tying the discussion of gender and instruments into a greater discussion of gender roles. Inform students that two stances exist in terms of men, women, and the roles they play. Stance one suggests that women have the physical and mental ability to do whatever a man can do but have been oppressed by gender stereotypes and sexist laws. They should promote their equality with men and push for equal treatment in employment, politics, sports, etc. The opposing stance argues that women are quite different from men, possessing unique and powerful emotional and intuitive qualities. They should enhance their power in society by focusing on caregiving, homemaking, and the arts, where emotion, nurturing, and intuition are valued and useful. Ask students which stance they believe women musicians most support. Then, broaden the discussion to allow students to express their own opinions on these two definitions of appropriate female roles in society.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to research the life of one of the following women blues singers. Specifically, their research should focus on how these women were constrained by the times in which they lived as well as the ways they challenged the status quo. Student research should consider biographical information as well as the music associated with their chosen singer.

<i>Ma Rainey</i>	<i>Billie Holiday</i>
<i>Mamie Smith</i>	<i>Sister Rosetta Tharpe</i>
<i>Bessie Smith</i>	<i>Memphis Minnie</i>
<i>Ida Cox</i>	<i>Ruth Brown</i>

### Good starting points for research include:

- *American Women’s History: A Research Guide* at <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women/wh-afam.html>
- Harrison, Daphne Duval. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Have students, in pairs, make a collage of photographs of women musicians they feel are good role models for young women. They might find photos in magazines such as *Rolling Stone* or on the Internet. Collages should include at least one blueswoman. When collages are complete, students should present them to class, explaining the reasons behind their choices.



# Identity, Oppression, and Protest:

## *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Blues

### STANDARDS

Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2

Secondary: 6, 9

### Overview

African American history during the Jim Crow era includes encounters with poverty, racism, disrespect, and protest. Harper Lee develops all four of these themes in her famous 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To help students understand these ideas, this lesson incorporates the blues and other literature of the time. Ultimately, students will be asked to consider both African American oppression and activism through a variety of lenses.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore life for African Americans during the Jim Crow era.
- Consider terms of respect and disrespect.
- Analyze the effectiveness of different forms of cultural protest.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD

Readings

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"

Web Sites

- [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l\\_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html)
- [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l\\_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html)
- <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/bljlenoi.htm>
- <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**FILM TIE-INS**

Blues Music as Protest

*The Soul of a Man* (second segment on J.B. Lenoir)

**Introductory Exercise**

Considering the notion of manhood provides one way to compare the blues to literature about the African American experience. This exercise explores the notion of manhood and what it takes to become a man, using Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Richard Wright's story "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," and two blues songs—Big Bill Broonzy's "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man" and Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy"—as examples.

Divide the class into six groups, with each group being responsible for one person's definition of manhood. The six people to consider are:

- Atticus Finch *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Jem Finch *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Tom Robinson *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Dave "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"
- Big Bill Broonzy "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man"
- Muddy Waters "Mannish Boy"

*[For detailed talking points related to each individual, read the online version of this lesson at <http://www.pbs.org/theblues>.]*

Once student groups have identified their character's or individual's definition of man and found quotations to support their assertions, the class should have a discussion of manhood. Students speak in the voices of the characters they have studied. Ask the following questions and remind students to remain in character as they answer:

- *How do you define manhood?*
- *What does it take to become a man?*
- *How does your society define manhood? Does the definition vary by the color of a man's skin? Explain.*
- *Does society have its definitions right? Why or why not?*
- *What would you like to see changed in the way society regards manhood?*
- *How are women involved in or impacted by your definition of what it takes to be a real man?*

This exercise can be concluded by asking students to speak to these questions as themselves, broadening the term "manhood" to "adulthood." As part of this discussion, consider how society's definitions may have changed and whether or not race still plays a factor.

*[Prior to starting this exercise, make sure students are familiar with all materials to be studied. Wright's story is in the Norton Anthology of American Literature. The two blues songs are on the accompanying CD. Lyrics to Waters' song can be found at [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/\\_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html), while Broonzy's are available at [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/\\_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html).]*

## Focus Exercise

Despite the racist society in which they lived, many African Americans in the first half of the 20th century fought against the established norms, asserting themselves even as white society failed to give them respect. This exercise explores examples of such self-assertion. Start by reading the quotation from Chapter 24 of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Atticus states, “I guess Tom was tired of white men’s chances and preferred to take his own.” Discuss the meaning of this quotation with students. What does “white men’s chances” refer to? Why might Tom have given up on such chances? What do you think about Tom trying to escape? When a society is unjust, is it okay for a person to break the law and take justice into his or her own hands? *[If students have not previously studied African American history, it would be worth reviewing what life was like for many blacks during the Jim Crow era (late 1800s–mid-1900s) at this point in the lesson.]*

Suggest that many blacks, like Tom, chose to assert themselves rather than to endure racism, oppression, and poverty quietly. Start by asking students to identify other examples of such assertion in the novel. Then, suggest that the blues provided a way for African American musicians to speak out against the conditions in which they lived. To introduce this idea, show the second J.B. Lenoir segment from the film *The Soul of a Man*. Subsequently, ask students to consider why music provided a good outlet for African Americans to express their frustrations. As a class, listen to three blues songs from different time periods to illustrate this point: “John Henry” (early 1900s), “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” (1930), and “Shot on James Meredith” (1966). Ask students how each song illustrates African American unwillingness to accept the conditions in which they found themselves.

Finally, consider African American activists who took a stand against oppression. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “[Letter From Birmingham Jail](http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html)” would be a good document to consider. Compare the letter, blues songs, and fictional literature as means of protest. Which form do students think would have most inspired African Americans? Which would have had the biggest impact on whites and on the country’s leaders in particular? Which appeals to them most today as a forum for expressing discontent? *[King’s letter can be found online at <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>.]*

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The **Focus Exercise** considers the use of writing and song to address societal inequities. The music of J.B. Lenoir provides a wonderful example of how musicians protested through music. Introduce this idea by watching the second segment on Lenoir in *The Soul of a Man*. After viewing, ask students to research Lenoir’s songs. Specifically have them consider “Alabama Blues,” “Born Dead,” “Eisenhower Blues,” and “Vietnam” (1966 version). Once students read the song lyrics, they should research the references to social injustice in each song. Student research can be presented in a paper or in a visual. Either way, student projects should clearly demonstrate student understanding of how Lenoir’s lyrics openly criticize the racial realities of the country in the 1950s and ’60s.

### Good starting points for research include:

- Blues Lyrics: J.B. Lenoir at <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/bjljenoi.htm>
- Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin USA, 1988

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

1. To assess student understanding of life for African Americans in the Jim Crow era, have them write a newspaper editorial about the unjust treatment and lack of respect given to Tom Robinson in the courtroom. Divide the class so that students write for different audiences or perspectives, like a black paper or a white paper, or a Northern or Southern paper.
2. Assign students an essay in which they support the following assertion: Black culture in music and literature reflects the time in which it is written. Proof should include quotations from Lee’s novel and Wright’s short story, blues song lyrics, and historic references.



# A Snapshot of Delta Blues:

## Skip James and Robert Johnson

### STANDARDS

Addresses the following  
National Curriculum Standards  
for **Music Education**

Primary: 6, 7

Secondary: 9

### Overview

What ultimately influences a musician's creations? Is it the time in which he/she lives, his/her personal experiences, the music of the time and previous times, or the image the artist hopes to convey? This lesson explores these questions by looking at the life and times of two early bluesmen: Skip James and Robert Johnson. Students consider what influenced both men, their unique musical contributions, their public personae, and their legacies.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Consider the various influences on musicians' creations.
- Understand the musical contributions of Skip James and Robert Johnson.
- Explore the creation of personae by musicians past and present.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

Web Sites

- <http://www.eyeneer.com/America/Genre/Blues/Profiles/skip.james.html>
- <http://www.roadhouseblues.com/biopages/bioRJohnson.htm>
- <http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/D/devilgotmywoman.html>
- <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/blrjohns.htm>
- <http://www.coversproject.com>

**FILM TIE-INS**

[Skip James Guitar Techniques](#)

*The Soul of a Man* (segments with James performing “Devil Got My Woman” and “I’m So Glad”)

[Skip James Songs Covered by Other Artists](#)

*The Soul of a Man* (segments in which Alvin Youngblood, Bonnie Raitt, Beck, and Lou Reed cover James’ songs)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues)

for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

Blues musicians of the past, like today’s pop stars, were influenced by a wide variety of factors when it came to making music. Start by asking students to consider what influences a favorite musician to create the music he/she does. How do such factors as life experience, current times, musical trends, and persona all shape that individual’s music? Students can make a pie chart that depicts their opinion of the importance of each factor in that performer’s life. Once students have created their charts, discuss them as a class, focusing on how different musicians are influenced by different factors.

Introduce two blues performers who wrote and performed at roughly the same time—**Skip James** (1902–1969) and **Robert Johnson** (1911–1938)—then play a song by each: “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” by James and “Cross Road Blues” by Johnson. After students listen, ask them to create a Venn diagram in which they suggest the similarities and differences between the two songs.

Distribute biographies of each musician. Ideally, have students read a number of different sources about each man. If time is a concern, split the class in two, having each half focus on one individual and then asking the two halves to share what they uncovered. As students read, they should record information on important life circumstances, times in which the performer lived, musical influences, and public persona. [A James biography can be found at <http://www.eyeneer.com/America/Genre/Blues/Profiles/skip.james.html> and <http://www.roadhouseblues.com/biopages/bioRJohnson.htm> contains a good Johnson biography.]

Supplement this biographical information by informing students about life in the South for African Americans in the early part of the 20th century and about the Delta blues.

**Jim Crow South**

- Segregation laws pervaded all of Southern society.
- Southern “justice” meant unfair trials, prison terms, and at times lynchings.
- Many worked as sharecroppers or tenant farmers.
- African Americans who moved to the city often worked in poor factory conditions.
- The farming crisis of the late 1920s and the depression of the 1930s resulted in a hobo-type lifestyle for many Southern African American men.

**The Delta blues**

- Often also called “Mississippi blues.”
- Typically played acoustically with hollow-bodied guitars.
- Performers usually work solo.
- Features guitar playing with finger picking, slide work, and boogie rhythms.
- Very emotional sounding.

Conclude by playing “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and “Cross Road Blues” again. This time, ask students to consider if and how the lives, historic times, Delta blues, and the desire to create a persona can be seen in each piece.

## Focus Exercise

The guitar-playing techniques of James and Johnson largely contributed to the sound of their music. Start by considering James and his unique guitar techniques. Instruct the class that James is known for:

- *“Bentonia tuning,” which deviates from concert-pitch tuning. In concert-pitch tuning the strings are tuned in an E–A–D–G–B–E pattern. In Bentonia-style tuning the strings are tuned in an E–B–E–G–B–E pattern. If possible, demonstrate these different tunings on a guitar and show how the resulting sound differs. James employed this tuning technique in two of his better-known songs: “Devil Got My Woman” and “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues.” Listen for it in “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and in the performance of “Devil Got My Woman” in **The Soul of a Man**.*
- *A finger-picking guitar style, in which James, rather than strumming the guitar strings, plucked them using his fingernails. By doing so, he isolated individual notes rather than the blending of sounds often identified with the Delta blues. Again, demonstrate this style to students and ask them to listen for it in “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and “I’m So Glad,” performed by James in **The Soul of a Man**. Discuss how this style impacted the sound of the songs.*

Conclude by mentioning that James’ life and music had a dark, troubled quality to them. These guitar techniques and their resulting sounds mirror these emotions. [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information.]

Robert Johnson, considered by many to be one of the greatest blues guitarists ever, was particularly well known for these techniques:

- *“Slide guitar,” in which the player depresses the strings of the guitar with a slide worn over a finger rather than using his/her fingertips. Because these slides were often made from the necks of glass bottles, this type of playing is often called “bottleneck guitar.” Demonstrate slide-guitar playing for the class and allow them to recognize it in “Cross Road Blues.”*
- *“Boogie-woogie guitar,” in which Johnson used the bottom strings of his guitar to create a boogie bass line while accompanying this rhythm on the other strings of the guitar. The resulting sound gave the effect of two guitars being played at once. In addition, this boogie-woogie bass line gave Johnson’s music an upbeat sound similar to that created on boogie-woogie piano, in which the bass line is played with the left hand. Demonstrate for students and see if they can recognize the method in Johnson’s music.*

Conclude this exercise by allowing students to hear James and Johnson songs covered by other artists. *The Soul of a Man* shows artists such as Alvin Youngblood, Bonnie Raitt, Beck, and Lou Reed performing James’ tunes. Cream’s “Crossroads” is a nice example of a cover of Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” As students watch and listen, ask them to look for the guitar techniques discussed and demonstrated above. Conclude by discussing whether the cover versions convey the same feeling and emotion as the originals. [See **Film Tie-Ins** for details on James’ cover versions.]

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to further research the life of either Skip James or Robert Johnson. In addition to researching the musician’s life, they should investigate the time in which he lived, his songs, and the Delta blues. After researching, students should create a pie chart, similar to that created in the **Introductory Exercise**, in which they assert their opinions on what influenced James’/Johnson’s music. The pie chart should be accompanied by a short paper (1–2 pages) in which students justify their choices.

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

In his book *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas*, Julio Finn asserts, “The bluesman is the undeciphered enigma on the American landscape.” Ask students to write an essay in which they apply this quotation to Skip James, Robert Johnson, or both.



# Folk Traditions in the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for

### Social Studies

Primary: I

Secondary: II, III, V

## Overview

This lesson will enable teachers to use the blues to explore selected topics in African American folklore. Students will learn about some of the African American cultural traditions that developed under slavery and the ways in which those traditions endured—and changed—as they found their way into the blues at the end of the 19th century. This lesson could be used in conjunction with other lessons on traditional cultures and folklore. Because much of it focuses on lyrical symbolism and the social function of language, it provides opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching, particularly when combined with the English Language Arts lesson “Oral Tradition and the Blues.”

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore the blues as a form of African American folklore, including its language, imagery, and function.
- Define and explain the nature of oral culture.
- Understand the ways in which cultural traditions develop over time.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- ***The Blues Teacher's Guide*** CD

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**FILM TIE-INS****Themes and Images in Blues Music**

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segments on how the ocean equaled freedom, prison work gangs, and the Mississippi River flood of 1927; segment where the boy sits in a church and hears gospel music; segment re-creating Robert Johnson at the crossroads)

*The Road to Memphis* (segment titled "Saturday Night Sunday Morning," which explores the relationship between blues and the African American church)

**African Heritage of the Blues**

*Feel Like Going Home* (segments discussing the origins of blues in Africa)

**Introductory Exercise**

Examining heroic ballads is the simplest and most engaging way to begin thinking about African American blues as a form of folklore. First, ask the students to make a list of heroes in their community or in contemporary society. Once the list is compiled, discuss what sorts of specific qualities each hero has and whether these qualities add up to a general definition of "hero." After establishing a general definition based on the examples, ask the students to think about how heroes function in society. Why do we need heroes? How and why do they even know about the heroes they listed in the first place?

Next, ask the students to use their knowledge of contemporary heroes to examine heroes in the black community in the early 20th century. Play the traditional song "John Henry" for students, asking them to pay close attention to the lyrics. Then do the same with Mississippi John Hurt's "Stack O' Lee." Both ballads focus on heroes in the black community. Ask students to discuss how they would characterize the behavior of each hero. Do the hero's actions and/or attitudes fit with the class' initial definition of hero? Why or why not? Based on both these characters, ask the students to come up with a new definition of "hero." What are the ways in which both heroes might have had meaning for poor blacks in the early 20th century, working on farms for little pay and enduring the harsh conditions of segregation?

To conclude this exercise, discuss how many early songs popular among African Americans were about folk heroes. Heroes were of two types: the exaggerated hero, the man who triumphs over whites by some sort of superhuman strength or wit, and the bad hero, the hard man who resists most of the conventional values of society, killing and stealing at will, with no remorse. Legends of those who thumbed their noses at whites and retained values outside of mainstream culture served to inspire hope for resistance and change among slaves and, later, poor black sharecroppers. Both types of hero are modern variants of the trickster, operating against the will of white society and meant to, in the words of William Barlow, "negate feelings of powerlessness and to avenge victimization by the dominant white social order" [*Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture*, p. 22].

## Focus Exercise

Blues culture is essentially an oral culture, in which learning takes place not from books but from the passing of stories, legends, and techniques from person to person over generations (represented by the ubiquitous “My mama told me...”). Consequently, blues artists work with a stock of shared metaphors, images, and phrases that resonate with listeners and that have been passed on through generations.

As a class, listen to the following songs on the accompanying CD:

- Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”
- Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
- B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
- Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
- Bessie Smith, “Lost Your Head Blues”
- Big Bill Broonzy, “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man”
- Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

As students listen, ask them to record the images and themes that stand out in each song. After listening to all of the songs, make a list of prevailing images and themes. Discuss the symbolic meaning of these images and themes to the African American community and their connection to the African American oral tradition.

Some recurring motifs (and their symbolic meanings) include:

- Relationships between men and women *metaphor for relationships between blacks and whites*
- Travel, “leavin’,” trains *travel as freedom and independence, or longing for escape from harsh conditions*
- Graves, suicide, death *harshness of conditions, loss of hope*
- Manhood *referring to both sexuality and social status in segregated society*
- Crossroads *meeting place, the devil, going in a new direction*
- The devil, evil *importance of the church in black life*
- Water, rivers *referring to the Mississippi Delta, as well as baptism and travel*
- Floods and storms *referring to helplessness in face of greater forces*
- Waking up the morning *many poor blacks lived day to day, unsure of when tragedy might befall them*

[Many of these themes and images are highlighted in **The Blues** films. See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information and complementary sections.]

Conclude this exercise by assigning students to write a 1–2 page paper in which they discuss what the recurring themes and images in blues lyrics suggest about life for African Americans in the 20th century.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Paul Oliver has argued that the bluesman, as a lone, traveling minstrel singing songs that unite the black community and remind them of their hardships and hopes, is related to the West African *griot*, a musician and storyteller who wanders the countryside singing songs of praise or ridicule and who helps to advertise and manage community values. Labeling the bluesman as an American version of the griot further connects the blues to African American folklore. Is this label legitimate? Ask students to research these two figures and their roles in order to assess whether Oliver’s argument is correct. Once students have compiled evidence to support an opinion, the class could debate the merits and implications of Oliver’s assertion.

### Good starting points for research include:

- *The Blues* film *Feel Like Going Home*
- Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999
- Jones, Leroi. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow, 1963
- Keil, Charles. *Urban Blues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966
- Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. New York: Penguin, 1981
- Tracy, Steven C. *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999 (Oliver’s article and the response by musicologist David Evans)

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students to create resumés for John Henry and/or Stack O’ Lee, including information under the following categories: *Objective, Education, Employment, Awards and Honors, Hobbies, References*. Resumés should reflect student understanding of the role of the hero in the African American community as discussed in class.



# Crossroads Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following  
National Curriculum  
Standards for the  
**English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2

Secondary: 9

## Overview

The crossroads—and the decisions made and entities met there—are a common theme in literature, pushing readers to examine the choices and encounters that shape life experience. The theme has also been explored in blues music, most famously by Robert Johnson, who, according to bluesman Son House, must have “sold his soul to play like that.” This lesson uses Johnson and his music as an entry point into the study of crossroads literature.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Recognize the crossroads as a prevalent theme in literature, blues music, and world mythology.
- Analyze the decisions made by people, fictional and real, when at the crossroads.
- Explore the depiction of the devil and the bargains made with him in music and in literature.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- ***The Blues Teacher's Guide*** CD

Readings

- Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “We Real Cool”

Web Sites

- <http://www.deltahaze.com/johnson/lyrics.html>
- <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmlD=1233>

**FILM TIE-INS**

Robert Johnson and the Crossroads

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segment reenacting Robert Johnson at the crossroads)

The Blues and the African American Church

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (opening scenes where the blues is connected to sin)

*The Road to Memphis* (segment titled "Saturday Night Sunday Morning," which compares and contrasts the blues and gospel)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

Start by asking students what they think of when they envision a crossroads. Encourage them to consider a crossroads in literal terms—a place where two roads intersect—and figurative terms—a place where two options stand before a person. Suggest to students that in figurative terms, a crossroads implies significant or weighty decisions (life-altering/determining) that must be made; in other words, the term probably wouldn't be used to describe a student's decision about what to have for lunch.

Ask students to complete a journal entry in which they describe a time that they stood at the crossroads. The writing should include what options existed, what went through their minds in weighing the options, what choice they made, and what the consequences of the choice were.

The notion of life's intersections is common to music, as well as literature. Introduce this point by playing the segment in *Warming by the Devil's Fire* that reenacts Robert Johnson at the crossroads. Inform students that this segment refers to perhaps the most famous song dealing with the crossroads, Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues." Distribute the words to this song and play it for students. After listening, discuss the song's literal and figurative meanings. To encourage students to think figuratively, have them consider the lines:

- "Asked the Lord above, 'Have mercy now; save poor Bob, if you please.'"
- "I'm standing at the crossroad, babe. I believe I'm sinkin' down."

By focusing on these lines, students should pick up on the idea that the speaker is worried about his soul because of a willingness to deal with the devil; the crossroads thus represents the choice either to deal with the devil or to turn away. Once the figurative meaning has been discussed, ask students what decision they think the character in the song makes. Does he go down the path with the devil or stay on the "righteous" road? What evidence supports either interpretation? To help students answer this question, distribute the lyrics to another Johnson song, "Me and the Devil Blues." Ask students whether these lyrics help finish out the story begun in "Cross Road Blues." [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information. Lyrics to both Johnson songs can be found at <http://www.deltahaze.com/johnson/lyrics.html>.]

Instruct the class about the legend surrounding Johnson as someone who did indeed sell his soul to the devil in order to become an amazing musician. This legend was fueled by the fact that he possessed amazing musical talent and skill, he had the "evil eye" (most likely a cataract), and his guitar teacher, Ike Zimmerman, supposedly learned to play guitar at night sitting atop tombstones in old country churchyards. The legend was also supported by a statement made by bluesman Son House, who once said about Johnson, "He sold his soul to play like that."

After providing this background, assign students to complete the story begun in "Cross Road Blues." Students can either write additional verses to the song or compose a narrative conclusion.

## Focus Exercise

The concept of the crossroads as a place where one makes important decisions is not foreign to American poetry. This exercise explores the idea by asking students to consider two poems with a crossroads theme. First, ask students to read Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." As a class, analyze the poem, considering tone and prominent poetic devices. Then, consider the theme of the poem—both literal and figurative. Questions to consider when thinking about the poem's figurative meaning:

- *Does the speaker think that he/she will ever be able travel the other path? Why not?*
- *Why do you think he/she might be telling the story with a "sigh" in the future?*
- *What does the speaker mean by "that has made all the difference"?*
- *What less-traveled paths can you (students) choose to take when at life's crossroads?*

Contrast this with Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool." This poem provides a nice contrast to Frost's in how it discusses what happens after the crossroads. Discussion questions can include:

- *What might the crossroads in this poem have looked like? What paths do the characters face? What factors might determine their options and motivate their decisions?*
- *What point does Brooks make about the choices of the characters in the poem?*
- *Do the characters in this poem take the path less traveled? Why or why not?*
- *Have you faced decisions similar to the characters in this poem?*

[The poem can be found online at <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1233>.]

Conclude by asking students to critically examine what societal, economic, and cultural factors might inhibit the characters in "We Real Cool" from taking the more promising road less traveled.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Legends like that of Robert Johnson and others such as Tommy Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw have resulted in the blues being labeled "the devil's music," contrasted frequently with gospel, or "God's music." Introduce this idea by showing the beginning of *Warming by the Devil's Fire*, which suggests that the blues is what the young boy in the film needs to be "saved from," and/or the segment "Saturday Night Sunday Morning" from the film *The Road to Memphis*, in which Bobby Rush discusses the relationship between church music and the blues. After this introduction, assign students to research:

- *The history of the blues' association with "the devil's music."*
- *Those responsible for making the connection between the blues and "the devil's music."*
- *The feeling in the blues community about the blues being "the devil's music."*
- *Blues lyrics that connect blues with sin, evil, and the devil.*
- *Blues lyrics that contradict the term "the devil's music" in their thematic elements.*
- *The relationship between blues and gospel.*

Ultimately, most bluesmen reject the connection between the blues and the devil. Ask students to be prepared, with evidence, to support and to refute this association in a paper or in a class debate.

### Good starting points for research include:

- Oakley, Giles. *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues*. New York: Taplinger, 1977
- Spencer, Jon Michael. *Blues and Evil*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

The phrase "standing at the crossroads," present in Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues," is used today in a variety of contexts. Ask students to research a variety of ways the term has been used, starting by searching for the phrase online. Once students have uncovered a variety of meanings, assign them to create posters that explore the term. The posters should include visuals, as well as text. Older students could also write an accompanying paper in which they describe how the term "standing at the crossroads" has become widespread and multilayered.



# Blues Lyrics

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following  
National Curriculum Standards  
for **Music Education**

Primary: 4, 6

Secondary: 7, 8, 9

## Overview

This lesson examines both the content and form of lyrics in blues songs. In addition to highlighting the basic musical form of a blues song, it also addresses the use of floating verses in blues music, both within the context of the original era in which the songs were sung and also in relation to how this practice is perceived today.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Understand and practice mapping out a blues song.
- Comprehend the difference between the use of floating verse and the violation of copyright law.
- Investigate the origins of the blues.

### RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- *The Blues Teacher's Guide* CD

Web Sites

- <http://www.bluesroots.de/songbook1/10.htm>
- <http://www.fleetwoodmac.net/penguin/lyrics/d/dustmybroom.htm>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>
- <http://www.copyright.gov/title17>

**FILM TIE-INS**

## AAB Blues Format

*The Road to Memphis* (segment “Black Spot on the Dial,” in which B.B. King’s performance shows the AAB blues format)

## “Borrowing” from the Blues

*The Road to Memphis* (“Sam Phillips” segment)

## Origins of the Blues

*Feel Like Going Home*

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

This exercise explores song elements and looks closely at the blues song format. Ask students to bring the lyrics of a favorite song to class (reminding them beforehand what appropriate and inappropriate choices would be). Start by discussing the lyrical parts of a song:

- Verses *In a song, a verse is a group of lines that constitutes a unit (similar to verses in poetry). Typically, a song consists of several verses, and the rhyme scheme and rhythm are usually the same from verse to verse.*
- Chorus *A song’s refrain (verse that repeats itself at given intervals throughout the song).*
- Bridge *Transitional passage connecting two sections of the song.*

As you discuss, demonstrate the parts on an overhead projector using a song with which students are familiar. Once students comprehend the parts, ask them to identify the parts of the song lyrics they brought to class, pointing out that not all songs contain all parts.

Mention that blues songs, like many other songs, conform to standard song structure in some ways while varying in others. Have students listen to “Lost Your Head Blues” by Bessie Smith, recording the words as they listen. Once the class has heard the entire song, transcribe the lyrics on the board in prose rather than verse form, filling in where student gaps exist. Ask students to label each sentence with a letter, starting with A. Sentences that are the same should have the same letter. This should look like:

I was with you baby when you didn’t have a dime. I was with you baby when you didn’t have a dime.  
 Now since you’ve got plenty of money, you have throwed your good gal down. Once ain’t for always, two ain’t  
 but twice. Once ain’t for always, two ain’t but twice. When you get a good gal, you better treat her nice.

Now, ask students to write the lyrics out in song form. Where would the line breaks be? Where would the verse breaks be? The first verse of the final product should look like:

- (A) I was with you baby when you didn’t have a dime.  
 (A) I was with you baby when you didn’t have a dime.  
 (B) Now since you’ve got plenty of money, you have throwed your good gal down.

Inform students that this format, known as the **AAB blues format**, is typical of many blues songs. The first line often presents an idea or issue, the second line repeats it (perhaps with a slight variation), and the third line develops or resolves the idea presented in the first and second lines. To further illustrate this blues form, play “Crossroads” by Cream and show the segment “Black Spot on the Dial” from *The Road to Memphis*, in which B.B. King performs a song in the AAB blues format. [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information.]

Finally, demonstrate how blues music frequently veers away from the AAB blues format. Playing a variety of songs, including “Stack O’ Lee” by Mississippi John Hurt, “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man” by Big Bill Broonzy, and “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters, can illustrate how the AAB blues format is by no means the exclusive song format of the blues.

## Focus Exercise

Floating verses—the same lyrics or phrases used in more than one blues song—are very common in blues music. To illustrate the notion of floating verses, ask students to read the lyrics of two blues songs: “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” (1936) by Robert Johnson and “Dust My Broom” (1951) by Elmore James. Students should identify phrases and lines borrowed from Johnson by James. Inform them that Johnson borrowed lyrically from others as well. Specifically, phrases from three early blues songs—Kokomo Arnold’s “Sagefield Woman Blues” and “Sissy Man Blues” and Carl Rafferty’s “Mr. Carl Blues”—appear in “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom.” Ask students what they think about this kind of borrowing. Why would blues singers borrow from one another in this fashion? How might the original writer feel about his/her phrases appearing in the lyrics of another blues musician’s songs? How might the fact that the blues is based largely on African American oral tradition, in which stories were passed down from generation to generation, have shaped the phrase-borrowing that is so common to the blues? [Robert Johnson’s song lyrics are at <http://www.bluesroots.de/songbook1/10.htm> and Elmore James’ can be found at <http://www.fleetwoodmac.net/penguin/lyrics/d/dustmybroom.htm>.]

While borrowing lines or phrases from other blues songs was an accepted practice, especially in early blues (up to the 1950s), blues musicians weren’t necessarily happy when white artists “borrowed” their music, remaking it for white audiences. Illustrate this idea by watching the segment “Sam Phillips” in the film *The Road to Memphis*. After viewing, discuss:

- How do Sam Phillips and Ike Turner view the borrowing of blues music by white artists differently? Why might Turner have been less approving of such borrowing than Phillips?
- How is this borrowing different from floating verses as discussed above?
- Why might black blues artists in the 1950s not have seen white artists’ borrowing as a compliment?
- Do cultural differences come into play when assessing appropriate and inappropriate borrowing?

Conclude this exercise by assigning students to compose an article in the voice of Robert Johnson in which he describes the difference between the practice of floating verse and plagiarism.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to research the history of the blues, focusing on both the music from which the blues emerged (field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and country string ballads) as well as early blues performers. Research should consider the following:

- How the blues represents an extension of the African American oral tradition.
- How the AAB blues format connects to African music and early African American music.
- The connection between slave music lyrics and blues lyrics.
- The history of the floating verse.

Because these topics are very large (and the focus of many academic studies of the blues), students should be encouraged to view their findings as ideas rather than as definitive answers. When students have been given adequate research time, the class can hold a forum in which these issues are discussed.

### Good starting points for research include:

- *The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip* at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohhome.html>
- The Blues film *Feel Like Going Home*
- “What Is the Blues?” essay in this guide, p.42

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Assign students an essay where they either agree or disagree with the following assertion: Musicians who incorporate samples from other songs into their music today are no different from blues musicians who used floating verse. Therefore, copyright law should not apply.

The US Copyright office at <http://www.copyright.gov/title17> will provide some background.

## What Is the Blues?

On a lonely night in 1903, W.C. Handy, the African American leader of a dance orchestra, got stuck waiting for a train in the hamlet of Tutwiler, Mississippi. With hours to kill and nowhere else to go, Handy fell asleep on a hard wooden bench at the empty depot. When he awoke, a ragged black man was sitting next to him, singing about “goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog” and sliding a knife against the strings of a guitar. The musician repeated the line three times and answered with his instrument.

Intrigued, Handy asked what the line meant. It turned out that the tracks of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, which locals called the Yellow Dog, crossed the tracks of the Southern Railroad in the town of Moorehead, where the musician was headed, and he’d put it into a song.

It was, Handy later said, “the weirdest music I had ever heard.”

That strange music was the blues, although few people knew it by that name. At the turn of the century, the blues was still slowly emerging from Texas, Louisiana, the Piedmont region, and the Mississippi Delta; its roots were in various forms of African American slave songs such as field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and country string ballads. Rural music that captured the suffering, anguish—and hopes—of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming, the blues was typically played by roaming solo musicians on acoustic guitar, piano, or harmonica at weekend parties, picnics, and juke joints. Their audience was primarily made up of agricultural laborers, who danced to the propulsive rhythms, moans, and slide guitar.

In 1912, Handy helped raise the public profile of the blues when he became one of the first people to transcribe and publish sheet music for a blues song—“Memphis Blues.” Eight years later, listeners snapped up more than a million copies of “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith, the first black female to record a blues vocal. This unexpected success alerted record labels to the potential profit of “race records,” and singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith began to introduce the blues to an even wider audience through their recordings.

As the African American community that created the blues began moving away from the South to escape its hardscrabble existence and Jim Crow laws, blues music evolved to reflect new circumstances. After thousands of African American farm workers migrated north to cities like Chicago and Detroit during both World Wars, many began to view traditional blues as an unwanted reminder of their humble days toiling in the fields; they wanted to hear music that reflected their new urban surroundings. In response, transplanted blues artists such as Muddy Waters, who had lived and worked on a Mississippi plantation before riding the rails to Chicago in 1943, swapped acoustic guitars for electric ones and filled out their sound with drums, harmonica, and standup bass. This gave rise to an electrified blues sound with a stirring beat that drove people onto the dance floor and pointed the way to rhythm & blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the electrified blues reached its zenith on the radio, but began to falter as listeners turned to the fresh sounds of rock ‘n’ roll and soul. In the early 1960s, however, as bands such as The Rolling Stones began to perform covers of Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf songs, aspiring white blues musicians in the United Kingdom helped resuscitate the genre. In the process, they created gritty rock ‘n’ roll that openly displayed its blues influences and promoted the work of their idols, who soon toured England to wide acclaim. Although happy to be in demand as performers again, many veteran blues musicians were bitterly disappointed to see musicians such as Led Zeppelin get rich by copping the sound of African American blues artists, many of whom were struggling to survive.

Today, 100 years after W.C. Handy first heard it, the blues no longer commands the attention it once did; to many young listeners, traditional blues—if not contemporary blues—may sound as strange as it did to Handy. But if they listen closely, they’ll discover a rich, powerful history of people who helped build America and created one of the most influential genres of popular music.

## Understanding the 12-Bar Blues

The most common musical form of blues is the *12-bar blues*. The term 12-bar refers to the number of measures, or musical bars, used to express the theme of a typical blues song. Nearly all blues music is played to a *4/4 time signature*, which means that there are four beats in every measure or bar and each quarter note is equal to one beat.

A 12-bar blues song is divided into three four-bar segments. A standard blues progression, or sequence of notes, typically features three chords based on the first (*written as I*), fourth (*IV*), and fifth (*V*) notes of an eight-note scale. The I chord dominates the first four bars; the IV chord typically appears in the second four bars (although in the example below, Elmore James introduces it in the first four bars); and the V chord is played in the third four bars.

The lyrics of a 12-bar blues song often follow what's known as an AAB pattern. "A" refers to the first and second four-bar verse, and "B" is the third four-bar verse. In a 12-bar blues, the first and second lines are repeated, and the third line is a response to them—often with a twist.

Below is an example of a 12-bar blues stanza from "Dust My Broom" as performed by Elmore James, broken down by bars (or measures), beats, chords, and lyrics:

First bar/measure	Second bar	Third bar	Fourth bar
1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
<b>I</b> chord	<b>IV</b> chord	<b>I</b> chord	<b>I</b> chord
<i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	<i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>		
Fifth bar	Sixth bar	Seventh bar	Eighth bar
1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
<b>I</b> chord	<b>IV</b> chord	<b>I</b> chord	<b>I</b> chord
<i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	<i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>		
Ninth bar	Tenth bar	Eleventh bar	Twelfth bar
1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
<b>V</b> chord	<b>IV</b> chord	<b>I</b> chord	<b>V</b> chord
<i>I quit the best girl in lovin'</i>	<i>Now my friends can get my room</i>		

In each 12-bar stanza, the third four-bar segment (in the example above, the ninth–twelfth bars), serves to resolve the previous four-bar segments. The resolution may signal the end of the song or set up another stanza. If the song continues, the transition to the next stanza is known as the *turnaround*. "Dust My Broom," for example, contains seven 12-bar stanzas, with a turnaround between each.

Not all blues songs follow the 12-bar format, but by understanding this basic musical framework, the listener will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for all blues music.

## Blues Glossary

**AMPLIFICATION** The act of increasing the magnitude of a signal without altering any of its other qualities, or the use of a device (amplifier) that does this. Important in the transition from acoustic blues, where amplification was rarely used in live performance, to electric blues, where performers began using amplifiers.

**BEALE STREET** Located in Memphis, Tennessee, Beale Street was the central street in what was considered by many to be the capital of black America in the early 20th century.

**BOOGIE-WOOGIE** A particular style of jazz/blues piano, typically played at a rapid tempo, in which the left hand maintains a repeated rhythmic and melodic pattern in the bass and the right hand handles improvised variations in the treble.

**CALL AND RESPONSE** A musical term referring to the alternation between two musical voices in a song, particularly that between a solo singer (the “*call*”) and a group chorus (the “*response*”).

**CHICAGO BLUES** What is now referred to as the classic “Chicago blues” style was developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s by artists who fully amplified the Delta blues and put it into a small-band context. Adding drums, bass, and piano (and sometimes saxophones) to the basic string band and harmonica aggregation, the style created the now standard blues-band lineup. The form was (and is) flexible to accommodate singers, guitarists, pianists, and harmonica players as featured performers in front of the standard instrumentation. \*

**COUNTRY BLUES** A catch-all term that delineates the depth and breadth of the first flowering of guitar-driven blues, embracing solo, duo, and string-band performers. The term also provides a convenient general heading for all the multiple regional styles and variations (Piedmont, Atlanta, Memphis, Texas, acoustic Chicago, Delta, ragtime, folk, songster, etc.) of the form. \*

**DELTA BLUES** The Delta blues style comes from a region in the southern part of Mississippi, a place romantically referred to as “the land where the blues was born.” In its earliest form, the style became the first black guitar-dominated music to make it onto phonograph records back in the late 1920s. \*

**ELECTRIC BLUES** An eclectic genre that embraces just about every kind of blues that can be played on an amplified instrument. It is typically played on the electric guitar, but can also be performed on the bass (usually a solid body Fender-type model, but sometimes merely an old “slappin’” acoustic with a pickup attached), harmonica, and keyboard instruments. \*

**FIELD HOLLERS** A class of rural African American vocal performance enacted by an individual (as opposed to a group) while engaged in manual labor, unaccompanied by any instrument. Field hollers are generally slower and much less rigid in musical form than group work songs, combine lyrical phrases common to the community with individual interpretations and improvisations, and are most often lamenting or sorrowful in subject matter.

**GREAT MIGRATION, THE** A mass movement during the first half of the 20th century, during which millions of African Americans from primarily rural locations in the Southern United States moved to urban locations, particularly in the North. The migration occurred in two major waves, each centered around the World Wars, during which a great need for industrial workers arose in Northern (and later, Western) cities.

**GRIOT** A West African performer who perpetuates the oral traditions of a family, village, or leader by singing histories and tales. Griots typically perform alone, accompanying themselves on a stringed instrument, and are considered by many musicologists to be a critical African root of the solo acoustic blues that developed among African American communities during the early 20th century.

**JIM CROW** A term arguably arising from a minstrel performer of the early 19th century, “Jim Crow” more generally refers to the laws and regulations that arose in the South following post-Civil War Reconstruction. Through the mandated segregation established by these laws, African Americans were systematically prevented from achieving economic, political, and cultural power and equality.

**JUMP BLUES** An up-tempo, jazz-tinged style of blues that first came to prominence in the mid-to late 1940s. Usually featuring a vocalist in front of a large, horn-driven orchestra or medium-sized combo with multiple horns, the style is earmarked by a driving rhythm, intensely shouted vocals, and honking tenor saxophone solos—a combination of elements that prefigures rock ‘n’ roll. \*

**MAXWELL STREET** From the early 1900s until its relocation in the mid-1990s, the weekend open-air market along Chicago’s Maxwell Street was a frequently changing urban milieu where one could find everything from used and new merchandise to food, religion, and live music. It was a particularly important location for new immigrants to the city seeking employment, entertainment, and the familiarity of customs and people from “back home.”

**MEMPHIS BLUES** A strain of country blues all its own, Memphis Blues gives the rise of two distinct forms: the jug band (playing and singing a humorous, jazz style of blues using homemade instruments) and the beginnings of assigning guitarists solo (lead) and rhythm parts, a tradition that is now part and parcel of all modern-day blues and rock ‘n’ roll bands. \*

**ORAL CULTURE** Conventionally, “oral culture” is understood to mean any and all traditions that are sustained within and between generations strictly through the spoken (as opposed to written) word, such as stories, tales, and songs.

**RACE RECORDS** A term used by major and independent record labels from the early 1920s until the early 1950s to designate albums recorded by African American artists. The term itself was not used pejoratively, but rather to distinguish records that could be more readily marketed to an African American audience.

**SHARECROPPING** An agricultural system common in the post-Civil War South, in which tenants worked pieces of land in exchange for a portion of the year’s crop or revenue. For their work on the land, the tenants were supplied living accommodations, seeds, tools, and other necessities by the landowner, who was invariably the bookkeeper and proprietor of the local commissary as well.

**SIGNIFYING** The act of using secret or double meanings of words to either communicate multiple meanings to different audiences, or to trick them. To the leader and chorus of a work song, for example, the term “captain” may be used to indicate discontent, while the overseer of the work simultaneously thinks it’s being used as a matter of respect.

**SLIDE** A method of playing guitar whereby the player uses either a tube placed over the finger (such as a bottleneck), or a flat-edged object (such as a knife blade) to press down the strings of the guitar. The resulting sound wavers and fluctuates, and can include tones that cannot be produced in the conventional manner, where fingers are used to depress the strings.

**URBAN BLUES** This term has two pervasive definitions. Originally it was used to describe the more sophisticated sentiments of the blues style in contrast to the more rural style of country blues. As time went on, it also came to describe blues music with lyrics that captured city life—its opportunities as well as its grim realities.

**WORK SONGS** A probable root of the blues, work songs were extensively documented by folklorists during the early portions of the 20th century, although their roots arguably go as far back as West Africa. Work songs help synchronize the rhythm of group tasks, with a single leader calling out a line that is then copied or responded to by the group (see “call and response”), typically in time with their work motion (e.g., chopping with an axe or digging with a shovel).

*[Want to know more? Visit <http://www.pbs.org/theblues> for an expanded glossary.]*

\* Erlewine, et al., eds. *All Music Guide to the Blues*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1999.

## Blues Resources

Listed below are general blues resources for teachers and students who wish to do additional study. Resources by lesson and listening suggestions for each film are available online at <http://www.pbs.org/theblues>.

### Print

- Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow, 1963.
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The Year of the Blues Web site contains an extensive list of national and international blues societies.

Visit <http://www.yearoftheblues.org/societyLinks.asp>.



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