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#### ABSTRACT

This lesson introduces students to the "blues," one of the most distinctive and influential elements of African-American musical tradition. With this lesson plan, students can take a virtual field trip to Memphis, Tennessee, one of the prominent centers of blues activities, and explore the history of the blues in the work of W. C. Handy and a variety of country blues singers whose music preserves the folk origins of this unique American art form. The lesson plan contains material on how to prepare to teach the lesson, including guiding questions. It is divided into four parts: (1) The Sound of the Blues; (2) Blues History; (3) Beale Street Blues; and (4) Blues Roots. The lesson plan provides detailed information and ideas for teaching each part; cites learning objectives; gives appropriate grade levels (Grades 6-12) and time required for completion; outlines national standards for social studies, music education, and English/language arts covered in the lesson plan; and offers an "Extending the Lesson" section. (NKA)



Learning the Blues. Lesson Plan.

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SUBJECT CATALOGUE WEBSITES LESSON PLANS REFERENCE SHELF: TEACHERS' LOUNGE ABOUT EDSITEMENT SEARCH



Learning the Blues

### Introduction

This lesson introduces students to the blues, one of the most distinctive and influential elements of African-American musical tradition. Students take a virtual field trip to Memphis, Tennessee, one of the prominent centers of blues activities, and explore the history of the blues in the work of W. C. Handy and a variety of country blues singers whose music preserves the folk origins of this unique American art form.

Home **Lesson Plans** 

## Learning Objectives

SEARCH

(1) To become familiar with the characteristic form and sound of the blues. (2) To learn about the history and evolution of the blues in relationship to the African-American experience. (3) To examine the structure and language of blues lyrics. (4) To compose blues lyrics that reflect present-day attitudes and concerns.



## Lesson Plan

Guiding Question: What are the blues and how does this form of musical expression reflect the African-American experience?

#### INTRODUCTION

To prepare for this lesson, review several short articles on the history of the blues that are available through EDSITEment at the River of Song website. You may wish to begin the lesson with a short background lecture based on these articles, or you may prefer to draw on this information for context as your students explore the blues on their own.

- At Play in the Delta, by Michael Luster (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e3-play.html) A history of the blues from 1900 to the 1990s, describing some of its many permutations and setting it in the context of other forms of recreation characteristic of life in the Delta region.
- Tennessee Blues and Gospel: From Jug Band to Jubilee, by David Evans and Richard M. Raichelson (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e3-tennessee.html) A review of African-American musical traditions in Tennessee that highlights the importance of Memphis as a center of the blues, with a

SUBJECT AREAS >

**Literature: American** 

**Literature: Poetry** 

**Art and Culture: Music** 

History: U.S.

History: U.S.: African-American

GRADE LEVELS >

6-12

TIME REQUIRED >

Three to four class periods

#### SKILLS Þ

listening skills musical analysis literary analysis and interpretation information gathering and research critical thinking creative writing collaboration Internet skills

#### STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▶

#### **National Council for** the Social Studies

- 1. Culture(more)
- Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
- 3. People, Places, and Environments (more)
- Individual Development and Identity (more)
- 5. Individuals, Groups,



history stretching from the hits of songwriter W. C. Handy to the innovations of electric guitarist B. B. King, and provides background on the parallel development of gospel music in the region.

<u>Southern Music</u>, by Bill C. Malone
 (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e3-southern\_music.html)
 A broad historical survey of the many types of music bred in the South - minstrelsy, gospel, ragtime, jazz, blues, country, Cajun, zydeco, and rock.

Some additional online resources for study of the blues include:

- The Blues Foundation
   (http://www.blues.org/index.cfm)
   An organization dedicated to preserving blues history, celebrating blues excellence, and supporting blues education, which offers lesson plans and other classroom resources at the <u>Blues in the Schools</u> section of its website.
- The Delta Blues Museum
   (http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org/)
   A growing center for the study and continuing development of blues
   traditions which features a <u>History of the Blues</u> exhibit at its website.
- The Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi
   (http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general\_library/files/music/bluesarc.html)
   A national resource for blues scholarship which houses many important
   collections of blues records, books, photographs, posters, clippings, and
   memorabilia.

Information on blues history and links to the contemporary world of blues performance are also available through leading blues publications such as <u>Living Blues</u>, <u>Blues Review</u>, and <u>Blues World</u>.

#### PART I: THE SOUND OF THE BLUES

Introduce students to the blues with a visit to the Delta region via the River of Song website. Summarize or have students read Southern Fusion, the website's introduction to the musical traditions of the Delta. Then listen to samples of the blues performed by three musicians mentioned in this article. (You must have the RealPlayer software installed on your computer to listen to these audio files. RealPlayer is available free of charge through a link on the River of Song website.)

 Robert Lockwood, Jr., "Sweet Home Chicago" (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/artists/media/e3-robert-a.ram) and Institutions (more)

#### National Standards for Music Education

- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music. (more)
- Evaluating music and music performances. (more)
- 8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts. (more)
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture. (more)

#### NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

- Students read a wide range of print and non print texts to build an understanding of texts of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world... (more)
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
- 6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.(more)
- Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer



- Jack Johnson, "Can't Live Happy"
  (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/artists/media/e3-jack-a.ram)
- Little Milton, "Grits Ain't Groceries" (http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/artists/media/e3-little-a.ram)

Help students recognize the basic 12-bar blues structure shared by these very different sounding performances. Explain that the blues is usually built on a unit of 12 measures which is divided into three sections of four measures each, with each measure having four beats. The first section has one chord associated with it, the second section has two chords, and the third section has three chords, with the chord changes arranged to make up this sound pattern:

This basic 12-bar unit is called a "blues chorus," and as they tap, clap, or hum along with the samples listed above, your students will discover that each is approximately one chorus long. To reinforce this understanding of blues structure, have students listen to Robert Lockwood, Jr.'s performance of a chorus from "Take a Little Walk with Me" as they follow along with the score. This classic example of the Delta blues can be found among the Extension Activities in the Teacher's Guide area of the River of Song website. (To play this sample you must have Quicktime software installed on your computer. Quicktime is available free of charge through a link on the River of Song website.)

Complete this introduction to the sound of the blues by having students listen to several full-length performances accessible through the <u>River of Song</u> website. Encourage students to tap, clap, or hum along as they listen to these blues tunes, in order to become familiar with the rhythms and harmonics of this remarkably versatile musical form. Afterwards, ask students where else they have heard this beat and three-step chord progression to help them recognize how the blues has influenced rock, country, hip-hop, and jazz.

- B. B. King, "Every Day I Have the Blues"
   (http://www.memphistravel.com/)
   On the River of Song homepage, click "Music Along the River," then click "Southern Fusion." Click "Related Links" on this page, then click "Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau." A full-length performance of B. B. King's classic plays as this website loads in your browser. (To hear this audio file you must have Quicktime software installed on your computer.)
- Mose Vinson, "My Mule" and "44 Blues" (incorrectly listed as "Gambler Blues")
   (http://www.pantheonarts.com/Folklore/MyMule.ram)
   (http://www.pantheonarts.com/Folklore/GamblerB.ram)
   Click "Memphis Music" on the homepage of the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau website, then scroll down to the "Memphis Music Links" pop-up menu and select "Center for Southern Folklore," which provides links to eleven selections by this longtime Memphis pianist. (To hear these audio files you must have the RealPlayer software installed on your computer.)

### **PART II: BLUES HISTORY**

Turn next to the history of the blues, beginning with a visit to Memphis, called the home of the blues because, as the urban center of the Delta region, it was the place where blues performers first brought their music to national attention in the early decades of the 20th century. Within Memphis,

- networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)
- Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)
- 12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion and the exchange of information). (more)

View your state's standards



Beale Street was the percolator of this creative activity, and your students can tour this neighborhood with blues legend B. B. King through the segments of an oral history video titled "All Day and All Night: Memories From Beale Street Musicians."

- Part I and Part II of this video are available at the <u>Center for Southern Folklore</u> website. These segments include a live performance by B. B. King, documentary photographs and footage of Beale Street in the days when it was a crowded, vibrant African-American community, and reminiscences of the district by blues musicians and other longtime residents of Memphis.
- Additional segments of the video can be accessed by clicking the
   <u>Pantheon Arts</u> logo on the Center for Southern Folklore homepage. Scroll
   down for links to <u>Part III</u>, <u>Part IV</u>, and <u>Part V</u>, which include a live
   performance by blues pianist Booker T. Laury and reminiscences about
   Beale Street night life and some of its greatest musicians.
- To play these videos you must have the RealPlayer software installed on your computer. Note also that the links provided here are for highspeed (200 Kbps) connections to the Internet. Lowspeed versions (34Kbps) are also available at the <u>Center for Southern Folklore</u> and <u>Pantheon Arts</u> websites.
- In addition to providing a portrait of the people behind the blues, the "All Day and All Night" video can help students appreciate two essential factors in the development of this music.
  - First, students should recognize that the blues is a highly sophisticated art form rooted in folk traditions. As B. B. King explains, Beale Street was the place where "country boys" like himself came to school themselves in the blues. There he met musicians playing the blues on instruments he had never seen, worked with musicians who could translate the blues into musical notation, and shared ideas with musicians who performed the blues in many different styles. He emerged from this school a virtuoso performer who eventually achieved international stardom. Yet his music remains rooted in the folk traditions of the blues and in the good-times, after-hours atmosphere of Beale Street itself.
  - Second, the video can help students understand that, in the broadest sense, the blues expresses a deeply philosophical attitude toward life. Rufus Thomas provides insight into this aspect of the blues when he explains the appeal of Beale Street: "When you went to Beale Street, if you had problems or troubles or something away from there, once you got to Beale Street -- no problems! no troubles!" Yet the music performed on Beale Street was mainly about problems and troubles, about sadness, discouragement, defeat, and disappointment -- all the emotions we mean when we say, "I've got the blues." Playing the blues, however, transforms these emotions into feelings of joy, excitement, and optimism. Scholars explain that the blues developed as a creative response to the hardships of African-American life, expressing a spirit of affirmation in the face of adversity through irony, rhythmic intensity, and melodic invention. But this affirmative spirit is not escapist. The blues is a music that confronts harsh realities, incorporates pain, and crafts this experience into an art that inspires a sense of hope and community.

#### PART III: BEALE STREET BLUES

To highlight the artistry of the blues, have students examine W. C. Handy's "Beale Street Blues" (1916), one of the songs that helped create a national audience for what was at that time primarily an African-American folk music tradition. Handy is often called "The Father of the Blues" for his string of



early blues hits, including "Memphis Blues" (1912) and "St. Louis Blues" (1914), and because he established a publishing house that made blues music widely available outside the African-American community. In "Beale Street Blues," Handy celebrated that community, creating a portrait of what he called "the best and worst of the Negro life."

- Handy's original score for "Beale Street Blues" is available through EDSITEment at the American Memory website in the collection "African-American Sheet Music, 1850-1920." (Use the <u>Title Index</u> on the collectionOs homepage to locate the sheet music.)
- Have students notice that in this composition Handy combines a blues tune (which begins at the bottom of page 4) with a fairly conventional popular song. Those who cannot read music may appreciate this distinction by comparing the lyrics for the two parts of the composition. Note, for example, that the non-blues lyrics are descriptive while the blues lyrics use metaphor to express a feeling or state of mind. Note also that the non-blues lyrics are set in a conventional two-couplet, four-line ballad stanza while the blues lyrics are set in the distinctive three-line blues chorus form which repeats the first line before closing with a rhyme. Like the chord progression that characterizes the blues, this verse form establishes a pattern of call and response that creates a very different effect than the squared-off pattern of the ballad stanza.
- Several historical performances of "Beale Street Blues" are available on the Internet at the Red Hot Jazz Archive, including a famous 1927 recording by the Memphis blues singer Alberta Hunter, who is accompanied on pipe organ by the jazz pianist Thomas "Fats" Waller. This performance opens with Waller playing and improvising through Handy's composition from beginning to end, after which Hunter enters to sing the two blues choruses. For a different treatment, listen to the 1943 radio performance by jazz trombonist and vocalist Jack Teagarden, accompanied by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Teagarden sings one stanza from the non-blues part of the song as a lead-in to the blues choruses. To play these recordings you must have the RealPlayer software installed on your computer.

After they have analyzed the song, have students compare Handy's musical portrait of Beale Street with the portrait provided by the musicians in "All Day and All Night." Remind students that Handy preceded those musicians by a generation or more. In what respects was his impression of Beale Street similar to theirs? In what respects does he seem to present a somewhat stereotyped view of this community, reflecting the racial prejudices of his times?

Explore this aspect of Handy's art further by having students comment on the cover of the "Beale Street Blues" sheet music, which shows Gilda Gray, a singer who popularized the song on Broadway in the Shubert Gaieties of 1919. Explain that it was typical at the time to feature star performers on sheet music as a way to promote sales, and typical also to feature white performers like Gray, due to prejudice against African Americans. In his autobiography, Father of the Blues (1941), Handy recalled encountering this prejudice when he tried to interest a music store owner in his first blues composition: "At the time I approached him, his windows were displaying 'At The Ball' by J. Lubrie Hill, a colored composer who had gone to New York from Memphis some time earlier. Around it were grouped copies of recent successes by such Negro composers as Cole and Johnson, Scott Joplin, and the Williams and Walker musical comedies. So when he suggested that his trade wouldn't stand for his selling my work, I pointed out as tactfully as I could that the majority of his musical hits of the moment had come from the Gotham-Attucks Co., a firm of Negro publishers in New York, I'll never forget his smile, 'Yes,' he said pleasantly. 'I know that -- but my customers don't."



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- Have students debate Handy's response to the prejudice he faced. Some
  may feel, for example, that he compromised his heritage by featuring a
  white singer on his sheet music, by echoing the stereotypes of his times,
  and by accommodating the blues to the conventions of popular song.
  Others may take the position that through such compromises he was able
  to make the blues an essential part of America's music, with a worldwide
  influence, and able to gain financial success and fame for himself as a
  music publisher and composer.
- In the context of this debate, have students try to imagine what it was like to see Gilda Gray perform Handy's song. What effect would the lyrics have when she sang them? To what extent might her performance have reinforced racial stereotypes, like the songs of the minstrel tradition? To what extent might she have helped weaken those stereotypes by giving white audiences access to the African American experience expressed through the blues?
- Similar questions arise in connection with the recordings of "Beale Street Blues" listed above. One is a performance by black artists, Fats Waller and Alberta Hunter, which was originally issued as a so-called "race record," produced exclusively for an African-American audience. The other is a performance by white artists, Jack Teagarden and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, which was originally part of a national radio broadcast. Ask students whether they were aware of this element of segregation as they listened to the two recordings. Does it have an effect on the quality of each performance? Does it have an influence on our response? From what point of view might one argue that these recordings simply document two ways of performing the blues? From what point of view might one argue instead that they document the blues and its pale imitation?
- As a coda to this discussion, inform students that Alberta Hunter and Jack Teagarden both played a role in eliminating segregation from American popular music. Hunter was the first African-American singer to record with a white band ("Tain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do" with The Original Memphis Five in 1923) and later went on to become a Broadway star, while Teagarden performed with African-American jazz musicians throughout his career, most notably as an original member of Louis Armstrong's All-Stars. In addition, students should note that both performers virtually eliminate those parts of Handy's song that echo the stereotypes of an earlier day, reducing his composition to its essence, the blues.

#### **PART IV: BLUES ROOTS**

Turn finally to the folk tradition that gave rise to the blues with a visit to the "Southern Mosaic" collection at the American Memory website, which preserves sound recordings, field notes, and photographs from a folk music collecting trip through the South undertaken by John and Ruby Lomax in 1939. John Lomax made similar trips throughout the 1930s in an effort to capture and preserve folk traditions then giving way to the influence of popular music due to the spread of radio and the phonograph. Stopping at prisons, farms, schools, and churches, he eventually collected more than ten thousand recordings, which remain the foundation of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress.

Introduce this aspect of blues history by having students explore the photographs included in the "Southern Mosaic" collection, which document African American life in the rural South during the 1930s. Students can browse this archive using the photo index, or, to speed this part of the lesson, you might have them examine two contact sheets that gather together a variety of photographs:

<u>Portraits</u> of African Americans, including Moses Platt, taken during

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- recording expeditions in Louisiana and Texas (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pnp/ppmsc/00600/00634r.jpg)
- <u>Portraits</u> of musician Bill Tatnall of Frederica, Ga.; Luneda Commeaux of New Iberia, La.; Prisoners at Darrington State Farm working in the woodyard; A mountain woman in the hills near Austin, Tx. (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pnp/ppmsc/00600/00670r.jpg)

Have students compare the culture and society portrayed in these images with the culture and society of Beale Street. Ask students to consider how the role of the musician and the social purpose of music might differ in these rural and urban settings. Remind them that the blues draws its strength from hardship and pain, expressing a spirit of affirmation in the face of adversity. What kinds of hardship are evident in these photographs? How could the blues help people cope with these conditions?

Next, have students listen to several examples of the rural blues collected on the Lomax field trip, focusing on the lyrics. The "Southern Mosaic" collection includes transcriptions of two of the songs listed here. Have students transcribe the third, "Lighthouse Blues," or provide them with copies of the transcription offered below. (To play these audio files, you must have RealPlayer software installed on your computer.)

"Worry Blues" performed by Jessie Lockett
 <u>Recording</u>
 (http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcss39/259/2596b3.ram)
 <u>Lyrics</u>

(http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcss39/st0010/0001.gif)

 "Grey Horse Blues" performed by Smith Casey Recording

(http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcss39/259/2597b2.ram)

(http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcss39/st0011/0001.gif)

 "Lighthouse Blues" performed by Roger "Burn Down" Garnett Recording

(http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcss39/267/2677a2.ram)
Lyrics

I 'member [?] I talked to my Sara the whole night long
I 'member [?] I talked to my Sara the whole night long
I tryin'to teach her and show her, now, which way right from wrong.

My Sara got teeth like the lighthouse on the sea My Sara got teeth like the lighthouse on the sea Every time she smiles, the light all over me.

I'm going to write me a letter and mail it in the air I'm going to write me a letter and mail it in the air I'm going to tell my Sara I'm on the road somewhere.

I stopped still and listened, I heard somebody calling me I stopped still and listened, I heard somebody calling me It wasn't my regular [?] but my old time used to be.

Discuss the call and response or question and answer structure of these blues choruses. Point out, for example, how the first line of "Worry Blues" implicitly raises the question answered by the last line of the chorus:

Some people say that the worry blues ain't bad (What do you say?)
But it's the worst old feelin' that I most ever had.



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This same technique is used in the second chorus of "Grey Horse Blues" to create suspense and add an element of plot:

Saddle up my old grey mare, hitch up my old grey mare (Why? Where are you going?)

I'm goin' find Corinna, she's in the world somewhere.

In "Lighthouse Blues," the call and response technique generates a sense of mystery around the song's central metaphor by causing a listener to wonder momentarily what it might mean:

My Sara got teeth like the lighthouse on the sea (This sounds grotesque or maybe crazy -- what's he talking about?) Every time she smiles, the light all over me. (Now I get it -- amazing!)

Point out also how this call and response structure carries over into the relationship between words and music within each song. In general, each four-bar line of the chorus is about half lyric and half instrumental response to the lyric. The performer seems to alternate between private dialogue with his instrument and public dialogue with his audience, conveying both a sense of isolation brought on by personal hardships and a sense of community achieved through mutual understanding.

Follow this formal analysis with discussion of the language used in these examples of the rural blues. Note, for example, how the metaphor of travel and the road is used to convey not a sense of direction and purpose, as we might expect, but a sense of dislocation and endless wandering.

I'm going to write me a letter and mail it in the air I'm going to tell my Sara I'm on the road somewhere.

Note also how the language of human relationships is used to create a complete world within each song. The singer of "Grey Horse Blues," for example, is a man surrounded by women (mother, sister, lover, even his trusty mare), while the singer of "Worry Blues" inhabits a world of public indifference to his private pain:

If any one asks you who composed this song, Tell him you don't know who wrote it, but he's done come and gone.

Finally, note how these songs create intensely dramatic moments with fragments of dialogue and colloquial detail:

Oh, mamma, tell me what in the world is on your mind. "Every time I think, I just can keep from crying."

With verbal devices like these, the blues singer succeeds in telling a story through his song, though it is a story told obliquely, conveyed more by the power of suggestion than in clear-cut narrative terms. As a complement to their close reading, have students fill out the story for each of these songs by describing the situation and what happens in a paragraph.

Conclude this lesson by having students compose their own blues choruses modeled on these examples. Encourage students to choose topics based on their own experience (for example, "Homework Blues" or "Busy Signal Blues"), and invite them to perform their songs in class.



## **Extending the Lesson**

Continue your study of African American musical traditions with the EDSITEment lesson plan on "Spirituals," which focuses on the role these songs have played in the struggle for freedom. Or explore the special exhibit, "The Development of an African-American Musical Theatre, 1865-1910" (part of the African-American Sheet Music, 1850-1920 collection at the American Memory website) to learn how African-American performers and composers overcame the stereotypes of minstrelsy to finally conquer the Broadway stage.



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