



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:
 - J.B. Lenoir, "Shot on James Meredith"
 - "Trouble So Hard"
 - Skip James, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues"
 - Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy"
 - Chris Thomas King, "Da Thrill Is Gone From Here"

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://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 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. 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.

Ideas to include:

“Trouble So Hard”

With its unaccompanied singing and its call-and-response style (where a leader sings a line and others repeat it), the song mirrors earlier African American musical forms created by slaves. The song’s direct address to God and the weariness and endurance evident in the lyrics can be related to the brutal oppression of slavery, during which instruments were banned (hence the a cappella singing) and solace was found in the idea of the Christian hereafter. At the same time, the singing itself was a form of protest against conditions.

Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”

The sliding notes and slow pace is reminiscent of slave music, but the lyrics emphasize the movement of African Americans in search of a better life and an increasing anger about racism and poverty. The song represents the continuing oppression of African Americans during the Great Depression of the 1930s, a time when Jim Crow laws and lynchings were part of daily life in the segregated South.

Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”

The presence of electric guitar, the backing rhythm section of drums and harp, and the screaming audience reflect the bigger, louder life of excitement that blacks found after migrating to modern cities between the World Wars. The song is essentially a boast about sexual prowess, but also an indirect protest against racism, particularly whites’ practice of calling black men, of whatever age, “boy.” It can also be related to the growing Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s.

Chris Thomas King, “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here”

A modern cover of B.B. King’s 1971 hit “The Thrill Is Gone From Here.” The repeating refrain of “still got the blues,” the hip-hop slang, and the references to modern ghetto life outline the ways in which racism is still alive and well in America, despite emancipation, despite the Great Migration, and despite the Civil Rights Movement. The song lists cities across America where blacks live, and despairs about their plight, yet also espouses the power of “keeping a positive mind.”

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. 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/aaohhtml/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 from a 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.

Extensions

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. The blues developed in the latter decades of the 19th century, after emancipation and the failure of Reconstruction in the South. Rap music developed in the mid-1970s, after blacks found themselves increasingly segregated in Northern ghettos and plagued by gang violence. Assign students to research and compare the origins of each type of music. Why was each important in the black community? How was the music played and distributed? What did it do for people? Findings can be presented orally, visually, or in writing.

The following book should help students get started:

- Neal, Marc Anthony. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1998

2. Just as many blues songs mirrored the times in which they were written, songs today often reflect the times. Have students, either individually or in groups, come up with a list of songs that reflect different aspects of the time period in which they live, including romantic relationships, sources of inspiration, dress and fashion, and social problems. Ask that they present their lists in class (with audio examples, if appropriate). Make sure that the presenters indicate the reasons behind their choices. Discuss whether in 50 years historians might agree with the lists; how will they characterize our times?

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students to create a plan for a time capsule for the year or decade of one of the blues songs discussed in the **Focus Exercise**. Obviously, students will not have actual historical artifacts to include in the capsule, but they can either draw a diagram of the capsule or provide a written description for what it should contain. Items to consider might be literature, fashions, emblems, materials from everyday life, and symbols of particular events. Each plan should include a justification of what has been included and how the items fit (or do not fit) with the tenor and meaning of the blues song from the period.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

- Gussow, Adam. *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Van Rijn, Guido. *Roosevelt's Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Woods, Clyde. *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*. London: Verso, 1998.

Web Sites

- *The Civil Rights Documentation Project*. University of Southern Mississippi. <http://www.dept.usm.edu/~mcrohb/index.html>.
- *The Meredith Mississippi March-June 1966*. JoFreeman.com. <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/meredith.html>.