



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
 - Bessie Smith, "Lost Your Head Blues"
 - Mississippi John Hurt, "Stack O' Lee"
 - Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man"
 - Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy"

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 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/lohhtml/lohhome.html>
- The Blues film *Feel Like Going Home*
- “What Is the Blues?” essay in *The Blues Teacher’s Guide*

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.

Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

1. Blues lyrics, in addition to often following the AAB blues format, frequently tell a story. This exercise encourages students to consider the storytelling feature of the blues while allowing them to write their own blues song in AAB blues format. Start by playing B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues." Discuss the story in the song. Next, identify how the song conforms to the AAB blues format, with the first two lines in the verse being the same and the third, different; the A line presents an issue, while the B line presents the conclusion.

Give students a few minutes to brainstorm a short story about which to write their own blues song. Topics might include asking someone out on a date, completing a homework assignment, or performing in a school event—athletic or otherwise. Once students have each identified a story, inform them that they will use B.B. King's song as the base from which to write their own blues song.

Record the song's first verses on the board:

*"Well now, it's three o'clock in the morning
And I can't even close my eyes.
Three o'clock in the morning
And I can't even close my eyes.
Can't find my baby
And I can't be satisfied."*

Assign students to change the last line of the verse to a line corresponding with the story they want to tell. A student creation might read:

*"Well now, it's three o'clock in the morning
And I can't even close my eyes.
Three o'clock in the morning
And I can't even close my eyes.
My computer lost my report
And I'm just fit to be tied."*

Next, encourage them to move further away from the original in another rewriting of the verse. This time, the verse might read:

*"Well now, I woke up early this morning
And my eyes were burning with pain.
I woke up early this morning
And my eyes were burning with pain.
I stayed up all night writing
'Cause my computer lost my report again."*

Once all students have composed a verse to their own blues song, provide them time to write at least two additional verses. When class members all have their verses written, ask them to post their lyrics up in the classroom. Invite students to read the work of their classmates, borrowing lines that they particularly like from one another's work and incorporating these lines into their own songs. Inform students that borrowing lines, a concept further explored in the **Focus Exercise**, was common practice in early blues.

2. Much that became rock 'n' roll was borrowed from the blues, both in terms of the music and the lyrics. To have students consider the lyrical legacy of the blues on popular music, ask them to complete a side-by-side comparison of blues song lyrics and popular song lyrics from the same era, taking examples from the 1950s, 1970s, and today.

The following checklist of blues song elements can serve as a guide for assessing each song:

Repetition of lyrics

- often
- sometimes
- rarely
- never

Song topic

- social concern
- personal concern
- love/relationships
- politics

Grouping of stanzas

- often
- sometimes
- rarely
- never

Audience

- geared toward a specific demographic
- no specific audience intended

Lyrics tell a complete story

- yes no

Uses of slang and/or contractions

- often
- sometimes
- rarely
- never

Blues songs to consider can include:

1950s

- Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
- B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”

1970s

- Taj Mahal, “Fishin’ Blues”

Today

- Chris Thomas King, “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here”
- Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

Some options for popular music comparisons:

- 1955 #10 hit: Fats Domino, “Ain’t That a Shame”
- 1956 #5 hit: Chuck Berry, “Maybellene”
- 1957 #12 hit: Patsy Cline, “Walkin’ After Midnight”
- 1958 #6 hit: Frank Sinatra, “Witchcraft”
- 1959 #7 hit: Bobby Darin, “Mack the Knife”
- 1970 #1 hit: The Jackson 5, “ABC”
- 1971 #1 hit: Isaac Hayes, “Theme From Shaft”
- 1974 #6 hit: ABBA, “Waterloo”
- 1976 #1 hit: The Manhattans, “Kiss and Say Goodbye”
- 1979 #1 hit: Michael Jackson, “Don’t Stop ’Til You Get Enough”

Today’s hits can be located at <http://www.americanmusiconline.com/>.

As a class, analyze both the form and topical content of the lyrics, focusing on whether there is sufficient evidence to suggest that blues song elements crossed over into popular music of the same time period.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

- Burns, Loretta. *A Stylistic Analysis of Blues Lyrics*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1977.
- Kovacs, Edna. *Writing Across Cultures: A Handbook on Writing Poetry and Lyrical Prose*. Hillsboro, OR: Blue Heron Publishing, 1994.
- Tracy, Stephen C., ed. *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.

Web Sites

- *The Ancient Art of Sampling*. Varsity Online. http://www.varsity.cam.ac.uk/802567B80049EF7D/Pages/232000_TheAncientArt.html.
- McCready, Michael. *The Law Regarding Sampling*. Fast Forward Industry Newsletter.