

Lesson Plan
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The Most Southern Place on Earth

Blues, Blues Poetry, and Racial Identity

Objectives: To introduce students to blues music through listening, looking at lyrics, and recounting brief history.

To compare blues music to the poetry it has inspired through the years.

To examine what elements of traditional blues poets have maintained while exploring at the same time the elements they have adapted within their own art form.

To discuss the significance of the blues to African-American identity and consider whether it is a form openly available to those of other races and backgrounds.

I. What is the blues?

Definition: African-American roots music and the culture that produced it. Influences include spirituals, work songs, and field hollers. African influence can be seen by the use of call and response patterns. Blues later influenced jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop. (from *Live from the Birthplace of American Music*)

“They got the blues because of how they made the folks here plow and hoe and chop cotton at daylight in the morning. They would get out there and work so hard they would sing, “Hurry, hurry, sundown. Let tomorrow shine.” They wanted the sun to go down so they could stop work. They worked too hard, and they learned the blues from that.” (Shelby “Poppa Jazz” Brown)

“Listening to it, you sense the sticky mud and searing summer heat of the bottomland, the tenant shacks, and eerie specters at desolate crossroads. You feel the despair, joy, hate, fear, wanderlust, and heartbreak. To put it simply, the Delta blues is the truth.” (Robert Peterson)

II. Listen*

Charley Patton, “Pony Blues”
Robert Johnson, “Crossroad Blues”
Muddy Waters, TBA

Pass out lyrics and discuss what the students hear and what they notice in the words. *You may use whatever blues songs you feel best serve your purpose.

III. **Blues Poetry***

Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues" (You can listen to a recording of this, too.)

Gwendolyn Brooks, "sonnet-ballad"

Terrance Hayes, "The Blue Terrance" (Also available to listen to at www.poets.org)

Al Young, "The Blues Don't Change"

Compare and contrast between the poems, examining form, structure, literary and sound devices.

*These four poems are attached to the lesson plan, but again, substitute as you will. Then discuss the place of blues in these poems which span almost 60 years.

You can end the lesson here if you so choose, or you can go on.

IV. **The Blues and Racial Identity**

Listen to Janis Joplin's "Summertime." Identify key components of music and lyrics. Might also use a Butterfield Blues Song. ("Born Under a Bad Sign"?)

Watch clip from the documentary [The Road to Memphis](#) as Ike Turner discusses Sam Phillips.*

Consider what Turner says, and consider the original definition(s) of the blues. What role does race play in the blues? What does it symbolize to African-Americans, especially of the older generation? What does it mean for a white musician to play the blues?

V. **Native Guard**

The lesson culminates in our study of Natasha Trethewey's book of poetry in which she considers the legacy of the South to the nation's history and to her personal history, growing up biracial in Mississippi.

* About the film clip: It was recommended by one of our handouts; I haven't watched it yet myself as of the end of this workshop! Full disclosure. Just keep that in mind.

The Weary Blues

by Langston Hughes

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway . . .
He did a lazy sway . . .
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

(1926)

the sonnet-ballad

by Gwendolyn Brooks

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?
They took my lover's tallness off to war,
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.
He won't be coming back here any more.
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
When he went walking grandly out that door
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
Can make a hard man hesitate--and change.
And he will be the one to stammer, "Yes."
Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?

(1949)

The Blue Terrance

by Terrance Hayes

If you subtract the minor losses,
you can return to your childhood too:
the blackboard chalked with crosses,

the math teacher's toe ring. You
can be the black boy not even the buck-
toothed girls took a liking to:

the match box, these bones in their funk
machine, this thumb worn smooth
as the belly of a shovel. Thump. Thump.

Thump. Everything I hold takes root.
I remember what the world was like before
I heard the tide humping the shore smooth,

and the lyrics asking: *How long has your door
been closed?* I remember a garter belt wrung
like a snake around a thigh in the shadows

of a wedding gown before it was flung
out into the bluest part of the night.
Suppose you were nothing but a song

in a busted speaker? Suppose you had to wipe
sweat from the brow of a righteous woman,
but all you owned was a dirty rag? That's why

the blues will never go out of fashion:
their half rotten aroma, their bloodshot octaves of
consequence; that's why when they call, Boy, you're in

trouble. Especially if you love as I love
falling to the earth. Especially if you're a little bit
high strung and a little bit gutted balloon. I love

watching the sky regret nothing but its
self, though only my lover knows it to be so,
and only after watching me sit

and stare off past Heaven. I love the word *No*
for its prudence, but I love the romantic
who submits finally to sex in a burning row-

house more. That's why nothing's more romantic
than working your teeth through
the muscle. Nothing's more romantic

than the way good love can take leave of you.
That's why I'm so doggone lonesome, Baby,
yes, I'm lonesome and I'm blue.

(2006)

The Blues Don't Change

By Al Young

*"Now I'll tell you about the Blues.
All Negroes like Blues. Why?
Because they was born with the blues.
And now everybody have the blues.
Sometimes they don't know what it is."
Leadbelly*

And I was born with you, wasn't I, Blues?
Wombed with you, wounded, reared and forwarded
from address to address, stamped, stomped
and returned to sender by nobody else but you.
Blue Rider, writing me off every chance you
got, you mean old grudgeful-hearted, table-
turning demon, you, you sexy soul-sucking gem.

Blue diamond in the rough, you *are* forever.
You can't be outfoxed, don't care how they cut
and smuggle and shine you on, you're like a
shadow, too dumb and stubborn and necessary
to let them turn you into what you ain't
with color or theory or powder or paint.

That's how you can stay in style without sticking
and not getting stuck. You know how to sting
where I can't scratch, and you move from frying
pan to skillet the same way you move people
to go to wiggling their bodies, juggling their
limbs, loosening that goose, upping their voices,
opening their pores, rolling their hips and lips.

They can shake their bodies but they can't shake you.
(2008)