

Lesson Topic: Blues Music and Langston Hughes' Use of the Blues Form in His Poetry

Grade Levels: 5 – 7

Number of periods: 8 - 45 minute lessons

Submitted by: Gini Peterson, June 2010, NEH Workshop -- Most Southern Place on Earth: Music, Culture, and History of the Mississippi Delta

Overview

The English teacher will introduce this 9-day lesson after students have studied in social studies class the post Civil War African American experience through the time of the Great Migration. Students will grow to understand the power of word and song through listening to African American work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and blues, and learn how music was used to ease their hearts. Students will learn about the growth and development of the blues and about its elements, and they will write lyrics for a five-stanza blues song/poem. Finally, they will learn about the life of the poet Langston Hughes, and they will learn how he used the blues music form in some of his poetry by listening to some of his works. The lesson culminates with students reading Langston Hughes' poems as well as their own songs/poems aloud to one another.

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will:

- Understand that music and poetry are powerful forms of human expression.
- Explain the origin and development of blues music.
- Explain the content and lyric forms of the blues.
- Be able to determine which is the classical 7-scale musical European form and which is the 5-note blues form, if the music teacher feels most of the students will be able to grasp this concept without too much difficulty.
- Summarize Langston Hughes' life by introducing "him" to other members of the class.
- Analyze how Langston Hughes used the blues form in some of his poems.
- Write a blues style poem.

Materials

- Recordings from internet sources Blues Highway
 - Field hollers and other work songs sung by African American sharecroppers
 - Spiritual music sung by African Americans
 - Early string band music
- Blues Songs
 - Robert Johnson's "Crossroads Blues"

- Charley Patton's "Pea Vine Blues"
- Robert Petway's "Catfish Blues"
- Langston Hughes blues form poems
 - "Bound No'th Blues"
 - "The Weary Blues"—recording of Hughes reading this
 - "Homesick Blues"
 - "Hey!"
 - "Hey! Hey!"
 - "Po' Boy Blues"
 - "Wide River"
 - "Night and Morn"
 - "Blues Fantasy"

Lesson Progression

FIRST MODULE

Day 1

- Conduct a discussion about the post Civil War African American experience to learn what the students have gleaned from their social studies lessons.
- Teach a lesson on the Mississippi Delta and its uniqueness.
 - Map of Mississippi with the Delta outlined in green
 - Delta has some of the most fertile land in the nation because of the floods that create a rich alluvial plain
 - Although there were some white planters and slaves working farms prior to the Civil War, the Delta was largely unsettled and was mostly dense jungle until after the Civil War.
 - After the Civil War many African Americans went to the Delta to find wage work in logging camps, on the railroads, on the levees, or in cotton fields as sharecroppers. They hoped they might be able to use the money they earned to buy their own land. Many saw the Delta as a "Land of Opportunity."
 - When things did not work out for some, they left. The problems that dashed their hopes included the following: some couldn't get work or make enough money to support themselves, the boll weevil ruined crops some years, the price of cotton fluctuated, they could not get out of sharecropper debt, the work and the Jim Crow existence was brutal, the flood of 1927 devastated the existence of many.
 - Life was very unsettled because the people were living day to day. The social environment was less stable than where they had come from because people often moved from one plantation to another. Change made for a weaker social base and a transient feeling, and many left and

went North to work in factory jobs creating an even weaker social base. WWI sent many young men off to war and there were many available jobs because of soldiers leaving their homes to serve in the war.

Conditions in the South continued to be brutal, and there was lots of talk about life being better in the North. Cities advertised wage earning jobs and relatives who had moved North earlier offered places to stay.

- Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Gary, Chicago, and other cities were common destinations.
- Life in the North offered a dream, but often the dream was not realized because of harsh circumstances in the North. Low wages working in harsh conditions, big families in crowded tenements, loneliness, prejudice and injustices.
- How do you think the Southern and Northern existences for African Americans that I have described made African Americans feel?

Day 2

- Discussion: Why do most of you like and listen to music? What are some of your favorite songs to sing or listen to? Why?
- We are going to listen to some recordings of African American music: work songs, field hollers, spirituals, early string band music. Show photos of African Americans in the fields, in church, at home with instruments before the Great Migration.
- Discuss the lyrics, sound, and feeling of each recording. Why do you think African Americans sang these songs or created music on instruments?
- Listen to the lyrics again and give some background information about each.
 - Be sure students understand that slaves were forced to convert to Christianity when they came to North America. Discuss connection between Moses leading his enslaved people out of Egypt to freedom and the belief that this, too, would happen for African Americans one day also.
 - What do you think singing was so important to African Americans?
 - Spirituals gave them hope of being free one day – either finding a better life on earth or at least a better life in the hereafter.
 - Field hollers and work songs made the time go faster and helped, for intermittent moments, to draw their minds away from the hours of exhausting and backbreaking labor on the railroads and levees, in the woods, or in the fields. Songs made the day go faster as well as synchronized the workers' movements, which helped them work faster and better and in some cases, earn more money.

Days 3

- At the turn of the century a new form of music developed in the Mississippi Delta that became known as the blues. This music grew out of the secular and sacred traditions that were heard and discussed yesterday.
- Students listen to a recording of “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson (released in 1937). Consider also playing Eric Clapton’s arrangement of Johnson’s song titled “Crossroads”, that was played by Cream. After listening to this song, ask the students what they heard, thought, felt as they listened to the piece. Draw out reactions and responses to both lyrical themes and musical elements.
 - How would you describe the music? (The music has a feeling and power that makes you care about the person in the song, usually the singer-- intensity.)
 - Singing—highly emotional with a voice deep down in the throat and chest, the song is physically a part of the singer
 - Vocal tools—falsetto, growling tones, great sense of involvement on the part of the singer
 - Instruments—highly rhythmic, percussive effects such as snapping strings or using a sliding device like a bottleneck, knife, heavy metal tube, small glass bottle to create a new sound (flexibility of notes)
 - Why do you think this music is called the Blues? What feelings are expressed in the words (lyrics) of the blues? (To many people, the blues means a certain kind of sad and melancholy feeling. Although the range of blues music is much greater than this, many blues songs often have a melancholy feeling created by themes of being down on one’s luck, missing someone or of being rejected by someone you love or of feeling downtrodden by work or lack of work or by society. It is about hard times—love, travel, dissatisfaction, change, possibility, uncertainty, living from day to day, but they “keep on keepin’ on.)
 - Explain that certain strategies that are used to create blues lyrics. Expressions like “low-down,” and metaphors and similes like “She’s got ways like an angel, an’ she’s sweet like heaven above,” and describing a bad situation and making it worse before posing a solution are frequently used techniques.

Play a recording of Charley Patton’s “Pea Vine Blues.” Consider also playing John Lee Hooker’s version of this song. Charley Patton is known as the Father of the Delta Blues. Discuss the Blues elements in this piece. Discuss concepts brought out from previous conversation.

Day 4

Invite the music teacher to lead this class. Ask her to play a recording of Robert Petway's "Catfish Blues." Discuss the blues elements in this piece AND include the following concepts if the music teacher thinks the group can process this.

- The minimalism in Blues music
 - Blues is pentatonic—5-note scale instead of classical European 7-note scale
 - Neutral pitches
 - Wavering pitches
 - Sliding pitches
 - Riff—short repeated musical phrase with a rhythmic quality—no real chord changes, a lot of stringbending

The Blues spread to other places way beyond the Delta because of the Great Migration North. Show the geographic growth and development of Blues Music.

- Using a map of the USA that focuses on the Mississippi River, discuss the growth and development of blues music relating it to the Great Migration. The Blues did not stay in the Delta. The music traveled to Memphis and up the Mississippi River and became very popular in the North and Midwest as well as in the South. Memphis, Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis are some of the places where it quickly gained popularity.
- In 1900 a songwriter named W. C. Handy first heard the blues in the Delta. He heard the lyrics, "When the Southern meets Dog" and thought the music was the strangest thing he'd ever heard. (Explain that these were two railroads that met in the Delta). He soon realized, however, that people really liked the music and started composing blues songs himself. His first song was "St. Louis Blues" and was recorded in 1903. His compositions were popular and led to the blues influence spreading even farther and faster. The blues musical form became known worldwide, and it has led to other music forms including jazz, rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and hip hop.
- Ask the music teacher to make a CD of examples of these forms and play one recording of each form.

Day 5

The English teacher will teach the five-stanza AAB lyrics form used in many blues songs.

Distribute the lyrics of "Cross Road Blues" by Robert Johnson to the students, and discuss the five-stanza AAB form after asking what they notice and think about and feel in terms of meaning and form.

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please."

Yeoo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
Ooo eeee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by.

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down
I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down.

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroads blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down.

And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
Lord I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well babe, in my distress.

- What do you notice about the format of this song? Elicit the students' ideas before showing that the classic blues stanza (lyrics) is three lines of verse in AAB form
AAB form
 - First line presents a statement
 - Second line repeats the statement
 - Third line offers a rhymed response, often resolving the issue raised in the first two lines
- Five-stanza form
 - A first stanza following the three-line format explained above that describes a bad or sad situation.
 - Three more stanzas making the situation increasingly worse.
 - A last stanza that could possibly change the condition described in the poem.

Homework Assignment:

Students write their own classic blues song/lyrics using the form outlined above and about a situation angers, frustrates or saddens them. Students might choose personal topics such as sibling or parent or friend or homework blues or a current event topic such as the BP oil spill blues.

SECOND MODULE

Day 6

- The blues impacted the writing of several poets. We are going to study one poet who was especially moved by the blues and used the form in many of his poems. His name was Langston Hughes.
- Give background information about Hughes' life including his journey to Harlem and relate this journey to the Great Migration. Also explain that Hughes loved blues music and wanted to connect his poetry to the blues. In 1927 he traveled through the South with a friend named Zora Neale Hurston who was recording African American folk art. Langston listened to rural folk musicians. This trip helped Langston unite the oral music tradition with his written work.
- Show some photos of Langston Hughes.
- Divide students into three groups and then into pairs and ask each student to introduce Hughes to her/his group.

Day 7

- Read "Bound No'th Blues" by Langston Hughes.
- Distribute a copy of the poem and read it again while the students read along.
 - Discuss the form—AAB but only 4 stanzas
 - Discuss the lyrics—shows the suffering of African Americans – hard times, love, oppression, alienation, searching for identity and place
 - Discuss the use of vernacular speech (ordinary spoken language)
- Play the recording of Langston Hughes reading his poem, "The Weary Blues," and afterward ask students to describe their thoughts and feelings as they listened to him read his poem. Distribute a copy of this poem and discuss this poem so that students see that the style of blues lyrics and poems does not always have the five-stanza AAB form.
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Day 8

- Divide the class into 6 groups and have each group analyze and discuss the meaning and form of one of the six of the blues poems listed above in the "Materials" section of the lesson. Ask the students to discuss the poem's relationship to the blues in terms of form and content as well as other thoughts and feelings people had about the poem.
- Assign a reader and a reporter in each group to read the poem to the class and report the group's observations, thoughts, and feelings about the poem. The teacher adds input to enrich the students' observations.

Day 9 Culminating Activity

- Stage a Harlem party given by A'leilia Walker to which she has invited poets to read their poems. Explain who A'leilia Walker was.
- Have each student read a poem by Langston Hughes aloud to the group and then have each student read her/his own blues lyrics to the group.