Blues Masters: Muddy Waters and B.B. King

Overview

B.B. King and Muddy Waters are without question two of the most famous blues performers of all time. In this lesson students will study the early careers and lasting musical contributions of both artists, each of whom carried the blues on to new generations. Of particular note will be their introduction to and use of the more modern-sounding electric guitar while still preserving the integrity of the Delta blues form.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Become familiar with the historical arc of Muddy Waters and B.B. King’s musical careers.
- Recognize contributions made by both Muddy Waters and B.B. King to the role of electric guitar in blues music.
- Understand the important role each has played in bringing the blues to a wider audience.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  - Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
  - B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
  - Bukka White, “The Panama Limited”
  - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
  - Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”

Web Sites

- http://www.bbking.com/
- http://www.muddywaters.com
**Introductory Exercise**

Muddy Waters and B.B. King are considered by many to be the “deans” of the blues. Muddy Waters is hailed as the Chicago bluesman who built a bridge between the acoustic Delta blues and the electric Chicago blues. B.B. King has entered his sixth decade as a blues performer, earning countless honors, including 18 GRAMMY Awards. Both men have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, suggesting their impact upon not just the blues, but on rock 'n' roll as well. This exercise introduces students to the lives of these two great bluesmen. Start the lesson by playing “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters and “Three O’Clock Blues” by B.B. King. After listening, ask students if they recognize either the singer or the song. Inform them that the songs are associated with two blues greats: Waters and King. Discuss how and why these songs suggest reasons for the performer’s fame.

Divide the class into four groups, two that will focus on Waters and the other two, King. Using the Web sites noted under Resources Needed, assign students the task of researching the life of their assigned bluesman. While reading, students should look for answers to the questions posed below:

**GROUP 1  B.B. King**
1. What was B.B. King’s given name?
2. Why did B.B. leave home for Memphis?
3. What was B.B.’s big break in 1948?
4. Why does King name his guitars “Lucille”? 
5. Find one distinction of B.B.’s guitar playing.
6. What festival did B.B. play in 1968?
7. In what year did B.B. win his first GRAMMY?
8. When was his most recent GRAMMY awarded?

**GROUP 2  B.B. King**
1. Where was B.B. King born?
2. What was an early musical experience?
3. How did B.B. initially get the name “B.B.”?
4. What was B.B.’s first No. 1 hit?
5. List styles of music fused in B.B.’s playing.
6. Who did B.B. tour with in 1969?
7. What is the title of King’s autobiography?
8. How many concerts does King average a year?

**GROUP 3  Muddy Waters**
1. What instrument did Muddy first learn to play?
2. Which “bottleneck” players did he listen to?
3. In what year did Waters first get recorded?
4. When did Waters move to Chicago?
5. What single was Waters’ first hit record?
6. What instruments did Waters use in his band?
7. What group got its name from a Muddy tune?
8. What was the focus of the Fathers and Sons album?

**GROUP 4  Muddy Waters**
1. At what age did Muddy start to play the guitar?
2. What characterized the best Delta singers?
3. Who was Alan Lomax?
4. What did Waters do for work in Chicago?
5. What performer is at the root of Waters’ style?
6. Who was Willie Dixon?
7. What did amplification do for Waters’ guitar?
8. Who was Waters’ audience in the 1960s?

When groups have answered their questions, give them some time with the other group that researched the same artist. Once these new, larger groups feel confident in their understanding of the answers to the questions above, have them present their findings to the other half of the class.

In order to have students consider the unique contributions of Waters and King, as well as the commonalities between their lives and careers, ask them (either individually or in pairs) to construct a compare/contrast chart on the lives of the two men. Allow students to organize this chart in whatever form they wish, provided that the end product highlights both similarities and differences. When charts are finished, ask students to discuss their findings.

Conclude this exercise by having students write a short, one-page paper in which they assert why these two men are considered “blues masters” by many. Following the writing exercise, discuss how students defined “master.” How did influence on other musicians, number of performances and recordings, awards, and biographies factor into student definitions?
Focus Exercise
Muddy Waters is considered one of the key people who built a bridge between the acoustic blues, largely associated with the Delta region, and the electric blues, largely associated with big cities such as Chicago. This exercise allows students to identify elements of both types of blues in Waters’ music. Start by introducing students to the characteristics of acoustic Delta blues. Include the following characteristics:

- Dominated from the early 1900s–1930s
- Acoustic
- Slide guitar
- Very emotional vocals
- Lyrics reflect hard times in the South
- Solo performances
- Guitar-dominated (often with harmonica)

Have students listen to some examples of the Delta blues. “The Panama Limited” by Bukka White, “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson, and “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” by Skip James are all good examples. As students listen, have them identify examples of the characteristics detailed above.

Suggest that Muddy Waters incorporated many elements of the Delta blues in his music while also breaking from the genre. Have students listen to “Mannish Boy” in order to identify how the song conformed to and veered from the Delta blues. Instruct students that Waters is associated with another genre of blues music called Chicago blues (and specifically electric Chicago blues). Students should understand the following about electric Chicago blues:

- Dominated from the 1940s–1960s
- Incorporated many elements of the Delta blues, including passionate vocals, storytelling quality of lyrics, guitar-playing techniques
- Amplification used
- Small bands predominant
- Drums, bass, and piano added to the guitar-and-harmonica-based Delta blues

To allow students to identify elements of both the Delta blues and Chicago blues in Waters’ music, show the clip of him singing “Hoochie Coochie Man” in Godfathers and Sons. After viewing, discuss evidence of both blues styles.

Finally, help students to connect elements of Waters’ life to his ability to build a bridge between the acoustic Delta blues and the electric blues of Chicago. Provide students with the following facts about Waters’ life:

- Grew up in the Delta region of Mississippi, where he was surrounded by the music of such famous Delta blues musicians as Son House and Robert Johnson.
- Learned to play guitar—specifically the bottleneck, or slide style—in the Delta region.
- Performed acoustically at dances, house parties, and picnics, as well as in juke joints throughout the Delta region.
- Left Mississippi for St. Louis and continued on to Chicago in 1943.
- Was one of thousands of African Americans who were escaping from the back—and spirit—breaking economy of the rural South for better opportunities in the North (known as the Great Migration).
- Initially played acoustically in Chicago, at many of the same types of gatherings he had played in the Delta.
DEFINITIONAL LESSONS: What Are the Blues?

As people came to know his talents, he was asked to play with numerous small bands.

His shows became more and more crowded, and his music was being drowned out by the listeners.

To allow his music to be heard, Muddy added an amplifier.

Armed with this biographical information, students should produce either a paper or an oral presentation focused on how Waters helped bridge Delta and Chicago blues. The paper or presentation should explain how Waters’ music and life illustrate such bridge building.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Over the years, B.B. King has developed one of the world’s most identifiable guitar styles. He borrowed from T-Bone Walker, Django Reinhardt, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and others, combining the precise, vocal-like string bends and left-hand vibrato (the trembling of pitch that most imitates the singing human voice) that has now become the model for thousands of players. Assign students to research King’s guitar techniques, their roots, and their legacy. Students should present their findings in an oral or written report that includes examples of King-like guitar sounds found on recordings by performers such as Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Bonnie Raitt. Guitar students could also be asked to demonstrate King’s guitar techniques in order to highlight their importance.

Good starting points for research include:
- B.B. King at http://www.torvund.net/guitar/BookLists/BB_King.asp

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

The components involved in creating a “master” of any trade, music, or otherwise, include mentors, as well as mentees. Assign students to create “family trees” that illustrate the people who were important in developing Waters’ and King’s musical styles and those who were impacted by them. These family trees should be specific about what Waters and King borrowed from and passed on to others. In addition, they should demonstrate the overlapping roots and influences of these two great blues masters.
The similarities between King and Waters, as explored in the Introductory Exercise, are many. King, like Waters, left the rural South for the more urban Memphis; his music displays many features of the Delta blues (largely due to his mentor and cousin, Bukka White); and many blues and rock musicians cite him as a major influence on their playing. However, King, even more than Waters, illustrates the shift of blues music from a predominantly African American music to a music embraced by white America. This lesson explores this shift, using clips from the film The Road to Memphis.

Start by showing the segment “Black Spot on the Dial.” Ask students what this segment suggests about the blues audience in the 1940s. Discuss why the blues in the first half of the 20th century was predominantly an African American music.

Next, show the segment “Like Being Black Twice.” Discuss what this segment illustrates about the shifting musical tastes of young black America in the 1960s. Ask students what King means when he suggests that this snubbing was like “being black twice.” To illustrate who came to embrace the blues, show the final film clip, “The White Embrace 1968.” Make sure that students understand how the blues audience became increasingly white in the 1960s.

Discuss with students why, in the 1960s, young blacks may have abandoned the blues while young whites embraced it. Ask students whether or not it seems odd that a music so associated with the black experience became popular with a white audience. Is this similar to rap music’s popularity with all races today?

Conclude this exercise by discussing how B.B. King continues to appeal to a wide audience. Since King’s early performing days he has always maintained an ambitious number of touring dates per year, usually more than 300. To demonstrate both King’s acclaim and pervasiveness, have students note his awards and appearances as documented on his official Web site at http://www.bbking.com/. The tour dates on his Web site serve to illustrate the amount of time he has spent on the road spreading “the word of the blues” to audiences. Discuss what impact students believe B.B.’s touring schedule has had on him becoming the ranking blues performer and blues spokesperson today.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. This interdisciplinary activity asks students to consider how Muddy Waters’ musical career was influenced by the times and country in which he lived. In 1987, five years after he died of a heart attack, Muddy Waters was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. While it may have taken the United States a long time to recognize Waters’ importance to the development of rock ‘n’ roll, England acknowledged his legacy earlier. Have students identify reasons why Muddy may have had more musical influence and gained more personal respect overseas than in his own country during the 1950s. Focus on the social climate in America versus England and consider some of the following specific issues, which might help highlight those differences:

- Segregation
- Racism
- Jim Crow laws
- Southern justice
- Supreme Court rulings
- The Civil Rights Movement
- Ku Klux Klan
- The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

To present their findings, students can use the above topics present in America during the 1950s and make side-by-side comparisons as to whether or not similar social institutions existed (and to what degree) in Britain during the same time period.

[Information on the above can be found in many places, including Encyclopedia Britannica’s page on black history at http://search.eb.com/blackhistory/]
2. B.B. King was 10 years younger than Muddy Waters but had success at a much earlier age, which enabled the careers of the two men to overlap. While Muddy had gradually worked into the Chicago scene over the years and, by 1952, was recording and doing well with his band, B.B. had his first solo hit out of Memphis in 1951 with “Three O’Clock Blues.” This song was so successful that promoters took the “Beale Street Blues Boy” right out of Memphis, brought him to New York City, and shortened his name to “B.B.” Assign students to research how this boy, born to a poor family of sharecroppers living on the Mississippi Delta in 1925, grew up to became a worldwide ambassador of blues music.

Specifically, students can research the following sites and construct a time line of events in King’s life to gain a better picture of his beginnings:

- B.B. King at http://www.island.net/~blues/bb.html

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES
Readings