A Snapshot of Delta Blues: Skip James and Robert Johnson

Overview

What ultimately influences a musician’s creations? Is it the time in which he/she lives, his/her personal experiences, the music of the time and previous times, or the image the artist hopes to convey? This lesson explores these questions by looking at the life and times of two early bluesmen: Skip James and Robert Johnson. Students consider what influenced both men, their unique musical contributions, their public personae, and their legacies.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Consider the various influences on musicians’ creations.
- Understand the musical contributions of Skip James and Robert Johnson.
- Explore the creation of personae by musicians past and present.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
  Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”

Web Sites

- http://www.eyeneer.com/America/Genre/Blues/Profiles/skip.james.html
- http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/D/devilgotmywoman.html
- http://www.coversproject.com
FILM TIE-INS
Skip James Guitar Techniques
The Soul of a Man (segments with James performing “Devil Got My Woman” and “I’m So Glad”)
Skip James Songs Covered by Other Artists
The Soul of a Man (segments in which Alvin Youngblood, Bonnie Raitt, Beck, and Lou Reed cover James’ songs)

Introductory Exercise
Blues musicians of the past, like today’s pop stars, were influenced by a wide variety of factors when it came to making music. Start by asking students to consider what influences a favorite musician to create the music he/she does. How do such factors as life experience, current times, musical trends, and persona all shape that individual’s music? Students can make a pie chart that depicts their opinion of the importance of each factor in that performer’s life. Once students have created their charts, discuss them as a class, focusing on how different musicians are influenced by different factors.

Introduce two blues performers who wrote and performed at roughly the same time—Skip James (1902–1969) and Robert Johnson (1911–1938)—then play a song by each: “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” by James and “Cross Road Blues” by Johnson. After students listen, ask them to create a Venn diagram in which they suggest the similarities and differences between the two songs.

Distribute biographies of each musician. Ideally, have students read a number of different sources about each man. If time is a concern, split the class in two, having each half focus on one individual and then asking the two halves to share what they uncovered. As students read, they should record information on important life circumstances, times in which the performer lived, musical influences, and public persona. [A James biography can be found at http://www.eyeneer.com/America/Genre/Blues/Profiles/skip.james.html and http://www.roadhouseblues.com/biopages/bioRJohnson.htm contains a good Johnson biography.]

Supplement this biographical information by informing students about life in the South for African Americans in the early part of the 20th century and about the Delta blues.

Jim Crow South
- Segregation laws pervaded all of Southern society.
- Southern “justice” meant unfair trials, prison terms, and at times lynchings.
- Many worked as sharecroppers or tenant farmers.
- African Americans who moved to the city often worked in poor factory conditions.
- The farming crisis of the late 1920s and the depression of the 1930s resulted in a hobo-type lifestyle for many Southern African American men.

The Delta blues
- Often also called “Mississippi blues.”
- Typically played acoustically with hollow-bodied guitars.
- Performers usually work solo.
- Features guitar playing with finger picking, slide work, and boogie rhythms.
- Very emotional sounding.

Conclude by playing “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and “Cross Road Blues” again. This time, ask students to consider if and how the lives, historic times, Delta blues, and the desire to create a persona can be seen in each piece.
Focus Exercise
The guitar-playing techniques of James and Johnson largely contributed to the sound of their music. Start by considering James and his unique guitar techniques. Instruct the class that James is known for:

- “Bentonia tuning,” which deviates from concert-pitch tuning. In concert-pitch tuning the strings are tuned in an E–A–D–G–B–E pattern. In Bentonia-style tuning the strings are tuned in an E–B–E–G–B–E pattern. If possible, demonstrate these different tunings on a guitar and show how the resulting sound differs. James employed this tuning technique in two of his better-known songs: “Devil Got My Woman” and “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues.” Listen for it in “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and in the performance of “Devil Got My Woman” in The Soul of a Man.

- A finger-picking guitar style, in which James, rather than strumming the guitar strings, plucked them using his fingernails. By doing so, he isolated individual notes rather than the blending of sounds often identified with the Delta blues. Again, demonstrate this style to students and ask them to listen for it in “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and “I’m So Glad,” performed by James in The Soul of a Man. Discuss how this style impacted the sound of the songs.

Conclude by mentioning that James’ life and music had a dark, troubled quality to them. These guitar techniques and their resulting sounds mirror these emotions. [See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information.]

Robert Johnson, considered by many to be one of the greatest blues guitarists ever, was particularly well known for these techniques:

- “Slide guitar,” in which the player depresses the strings of the guitar with a slide worn over a finger rather than using his/her fingertips. Because these slides were often made from the necks of glass bottles, this type of playing is often called “bottleneck guitar.” Demonstrate slide-guitar playing for the class and allow them to recognize it in “Cross Road Blues.”

- “Boogie-woogie guitar,” in which Johnson used the bottom strings of his guitar to create a boogie bass line while accompanying this rhythm on the other strings of the guitar. The resulting sound gave the effect of two guitars being played at once. In addition, this boogie-woogie bass line gave Johnson’s music an upbeat sound similar to that created on boogie-woogie piano, in which the bass line is played with the left hand. Demonstrate for students and see if they can recognize the method in Johnson’s music.

Conclude this exercise by allowing students to hear James and Johnson songs covered by other artists. The Soul of a Man shows artists such as Alvin Youngblood, Bonnie Raitt, Beck, and Lou Reed performing James’ tunes. Cream’s “Crossroads” is a nice example of a cover of Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” As students watch and listen, ask them to look for the guitar techniques discussed and demonstrated above. Conclude by discussing whether the cover versions convey the same feeling and emotion as the originals. [See Film Tie-Ins for details on James’ cover versions.]
Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

As discussed in the Introductory Exercise, a musician’s music is often influenced by the public persona he/she hopes to create. Start by discussing the notion of public personae. Ask students to first consider the personae they or classmates create while at school. Why do people create personae? What purpose do they serve? Next, discuss the public personae created by celebrities, musicians, or others. In the case of musicians, how do these personae affect a fan’s ability to make a clear connection between the artist’s life and his/her music?

Introduce Johnson as someone who had a strong persona attached to him, one that has lived on to this day. Start by distributing the lyrics to three Johnson songs: “Cross Road Blues,” “Hellhound on My Trail,” and “Me and the Devil Blues.” Ask students what these lyrics would suggest about Johnson. Inform students that the theme of bargaining with the devil in these lyrics was echoed by other circumstances in Johnson’s life. Namely:

- He possessed what some called an “evil eye” (likely the result of a cataract).
- Bluesman Son House once said about him, “He sold his soul to play like that.”
- He often ducked out of performances as soon as he was done playing (or sometimes during a break).
- He developed amazing guitar skills in a remarkably short period of time.
- His teacher, Ike Zimmerman, supposedly learned to play guitar in graveyards.

[Lyrics to Johnson’s songs can be found at http://www.deltahaze.com/johnson/sounds.]

After understanding Johnson the legend, consider Johnson the man, using the biographical sources from the Introductory Exercise and/or additional sources. Have students consider elements of Johnson’s life that support the legend and elements that either contradict or stray from it. Lyrics from his other songs can also be considered, as they deal much more with relationships and rambling than with the devil and evil.

Conclude this exercise by having students create visuals that depict Robert Johnson the man and Robert Johnson the legend. Song lyrics and biographical information should be included, and the visuals should ultimately reflect students’ hypotheses of where the line between persona and person should be drawn. Allow students to share their visuals and, if time allows, discuss why Johnson might have embraced the persona, given its sinister implications.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Using the Web site http://www.coversproject.com, have students measure the influence of Skip James and Robert Johnson by chronicling how many artists have covered their songs. Accessing audio examples from this same site, ask students to consider the following questions:

- How is the cover similar to and different from the original song?
- How is the song delivery similar and/or different?
- Does the singing of an old blues tune by a young artist who may be far removed from the original experience lessen the song’s value?
- How does a performer convey the emotion of an experience he/she has never had, or is the point that the messages of the blues are universal?
- What are some recurring themes in the blues songs students have studied that they feel anyone could relate to at any time?

Students can share their research in a class discussion or debate, or in a written paper.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Assign students to perform a song employing methods used by James, Johnson, or both. The song could be either one of these performers’ songs or another song adapted to their style.
SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

Web Sites