The Beat of the Blues

Overview
This lesson focuses on how students can learn basic blues percussion patterns by considering the polyrhythms of African drumming and investigating how and why such drums were banned during slavery. Students will listen to several blues and non-blues recordings to practice recognizing the “backbeat” in each song. Hands-on exercises will show students how to identify and create a backbeat rhythm.

STANDARDS
Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for Music Education
Primary: 2, 6
Secondary: 9

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:
- Understand the musical and cultural importance of African drumming.
- Demonstrate steady rhythms in a variety of blues styles.
- Recognize the role of the backbeat in blues music.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  Bukka White, “The Panama Limited”
  Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
  Chris Thomas King, “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here”
  Bessie Smith, “Lost Your Head Blues”
  Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

Instruments
- African drums (conga, bongo, timbale are all acceptable)
- Standard five-piece drum kit (if available)

Web Sites
- http://www.blueman.com
- http://www.stomponline.com

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Introductory Exercise

The rhythm of the blues has its roots in African drumming. This lesson explores the connection. Start by playing the following recordings: “The Panama Limited” by Bukka White, “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters, and “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here” by Chris Thomas King. While listening, have students write descriptions of the rhythmic variations they hear from song to song, both in execution and in musical “feel.” Questions for students to consider: Do they hear a steady, “flat” beat or erratic “explosions”? Do the drums seem just to keep time or do they interact with what else is happening in the song? Does the pattern and intensity of the drumming communicate any type of emotion (anger, happiness, fear, etc.) in each song?

Suggest that the rhythmic elements they just recognized in the songs above have their roots in Africa. Provide students with a brief history of the African drum and how it was perceived in slave states. Key points to include in this overview:

- The sheer size of Africa has contributed to the diversity of its music.
- Specific characteristics of different regions of Africa reveal a diversity of instruments, genres, vocal styles, and performance techniques.
- The Yoruba of Nigeria are known for their village drum ensembles that include a “dundun,” or “talking drum.” The dundun is known as a talking drum because patterns played on it can be controlled to match the tonality of the Yoruba language. Thus, the drum can be made to “speak.”
- The slave trade that began in the 1600s included many West Africans who brought their musical traditions with them. Because many slaves spoke different languages, they began to communicate through music.
- Slave owners throughout the Americas tried to ban drumming among their slaves, fearing that slaves were talking to each other, communicating with their spirits, and fomenting rebellion through the drums.
- Slaves did indeed use drums for communication. In planning the Stono River Rebellion of 1739, slaves used drums to signal to surrounding plantations when the revolt would begin. In the planning stages of the 1791 Haitian Revolution, enslaved Africans used drums to communicate with one another across many plantations.
- When drums were banned from plantations, slaves developed ways to imitate the polyrhythms of drumming, using European instruments, household items (spoons, jugs, washboards), and their own bodies—a style that became known as “slapping juba” or “patting juba.”

Reinforce these ideas by showing drumming segments in the film Feel Like Going Home.

To reinforce the notion of percussion instruments being used for communication, conclude this exercise by asking students, in pairs, to create a conversation without using their voices. Simple percussion instruments, classroom items (even cafeteria spoons), or patting and slapping can be used. [An extended version of this exercise is provided under Synthesis and Assessment.]
**Focus Exercise**

One of the identifying characteristics of the blues is the emphasis placed on the backbeat. Play a song from the accompanying CD and ask students to clap along to it. Ask them to describe their clapping. Did they tend to clap on certain beats of the song? Did they clap louder on certain beats of the song? How did they clap differently to this song then they would to, say, a classic rock song? Suggest that blues audiences typically find themselves clapping on the second and fourth beats of a song, the backbeats.

Introduce students to the backbeat by asking them to sing a familiar folk song, such as “Oh Susannah” or “Yankee Doodle” and having them clap evenly on all four beats of each 4/4 measure as they sing. This type of clapping exemplifies the “flat four pattern,” a pattern in which no one beat is emphasized more than another. Next, have students sing the song again, clapping only on the second and fourth beats (the backbeats) of each 4/4 measure. Finally, have students combine the two previous exercises by clapping on all four beats but giving emphasis to beats two and four. Ask students how the feel of the music changes when the backbeat is emphasized. Does the backbeat make them want to move their bodies more? Do they feel more of a “pulse” to the beat when the backbeat is emphasized?

Play “Lost Your Head Blues” by Bessie Smith and have students clap along with both a flat four pattern and then a backbeat feel. Subsequently, ask students which beat they feel better communicates the song’s meaning. Why?

Next, instruct students that blues musicians use the backbeat in a common blues rhythm known as a “shuffle beat.” Have them experience the sound of the shuffle beat by tapping out four even beats in 4/4 time with the right hand and add a “pre-beat” tap in the left hand just before each beat in the right. This pre-beat can be thought of as the “and” in “and one, and two, and three, and four.” After a steady rhythm has been established students should attempt to emphasize the backbeat by tapping louder with the right hand on beats two and four. This type of shuffle beat that emphasizes the backbeat is a Chicago shuffle. For students able to establish a steady pattern with both hands, they can try adding on a steady four taps of the right foot on the floor while everything else is still going on. Discuss with students why this rhythm is known as a shuffle beat.

Finally, play “The Other Woman” by Shemekia Copeland and tap along with a slow shuffle beat. Ask students if they can recognize this rhythmic combination as a pattern heard in popular music today. If time allows, play a popular song that uses blues rhythms and assign students to bring examples to class the following day.

**RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

Assign students to research two popular performing groups, Blue Man Group and STOMP. Student research should result in their ability to present an analysis of how these groups use drums and rhythm as tools of communication. More specifically, students should be prepared to discuss uses of the backbeat style within these groups’ performances.

**Good starting points for research include:**
- Blue Man Group at [http://www.blueman.com](http://www.blueman.com)
- *The Complex* (audio CD)
- *Pulse—A STOMP Odyssey: Soundtrack from the IMAX Film* (audio CD)
- STOMP at [http://www.stomponline.com](http://www.stomponline.com)

**SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT**

To reinforce the notion of the communicative power of rhythm instruments, particularly the “talking drum” used in Africa, students can work in pairs using homemade percussion instruments, available drums, or even the technique of “slapping juba” or “patting juba,” described in the Introductory Exercise, to create a short conversation. Each duo should present a key containing basic written rhythmic notations that represent different words or language phrases, and should perform their short “conversation” in front of the class.
Introduce the genre of blues music known as jump blues as another illustration of the blues beat. Provide students with some background of jump blues:

- A cross between big-band-era jazz and up-tempo blues
- Grew out of the boogie-woogie piano craze of the 1940s
- Includes a quick beat, a strong lead vocalist, a strong horn section
- An early form of party music—thus the term “jump”
- Famous jump blues singers include Wynonie Harris, Louis Jordan, Big Jay McNeely, Louis Prima, and Big Joe Turner

Allow students to create a jump blues sound by having them tap the right hand in a light and bouncy way as they speak each syllable “and a one, and a two, and a three, and a four.” By doing this, they should experience the constant motion of the “jump.” By adding the left-hand tapping on the first syllable (i.e., “and a one, and a two, and a three, and a four”) a little harder than the right-hand tapping, they can establish the driving feel of the jump blues. [Musical notation is two swing eighth-note pickups into a measure of quarter notes, two eighths, quarter note, two eighths continuing the swing style.]

Give students the opportunity to listen to examples of jump blues. Students should be able to note the use of the shuffle beat, as discussed above, in many jump blues songs. [Several audio samples can be found in Experience Music Project’s Digital Collection at http://www.emplive.com/]

Conclude by asking students to identify other styles of music that are labeled/identified by their beat, such as reggae, disco, or even rap. Discuss how these types of music group and emphasize beats in order to create a unique musical style.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. The drum setup used by blues drummers helps contribute to creating the blues sound. While pop- and rock-music groups today often feature massive drum setups, the blues drummer still uses a basic drum kit. Ask students to research the role of the drummer in a blues ensemble and the history of drums in blues music. Student research can be presented orally or in a written report.

2. In addition to changing the sound of the beat through different kit setups and the use of different sticks (even wire brushes), drummers each have a different way of playing the blues. You can go to different parts of the United States and drummers will be playing different beats to similar blues. Have students research three regional blues styles and compare the drumming of each. Some possibilities are Chicago blues (rock beat), Texas (swing beat), and Louisiana (slow-tempo “lazy” beat). Students can share their findings by presenting a small anthology of song examples. The examples could come in the form of recordings, but a written summary of the differences should be included. Basic descriptions such as “drums are prominent throughout song,” “drums play a background role,” “drums are used to change tempo,” or “drums keep steady tempo throughout,” in addition to labeling backbeat and shuffle when present, are appropriate inclusions.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Assign a written report about the history of the drum, including a timeline of its development as a communication tool in Africa through its introduction into the blues band in the late 1950s.
DEFINITIONAL LESSONS: What are the Blues?

Approaching the Blues

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

Web Sites