Blues Geography

Overview
This lesson enables teachers to use blues styles and performers to think about various geographical regions of the United States. By studying different blues styles from the Mississippi Delta, Texas, and the Piedmont region of the Southeastern Coast, or from cities like Memphis and Chicago, students can explore regional geography and culture while also learning about the effects of different environments on musical styles, the relationships between natural resources and social organization, and the cultural legacies of migrations of people from region to region in the United States.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:
- Explore the major blues styles associated with various regions of the United States.
- Understand the relationship between music and place.
- Learn about the cultural adaptations involved in migration.
- Explain how environments change over time.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music

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

Topographical Map of the US or US Atlas

Web Sites
- http://www.pbs.org/theblues

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Introductory Exercise

This exercise will introduce the idea of a region and its relationship to music and to the blues. Many musical styles have a strong relationship to place and often play a part in shaping these identities. For some musical styles, the place is a particular city or urban area (Detroit, Memphis, Seattle); for other styles, the place is larger (Texas, New England, the West Coast).

To help students comprehend the notion of regional music, you might talk about bluegrass and Appalachia, Tex-Mex and Texas, Motown and Detroit, or Dixieland jazz or Cajun music and Louisiana. If available, play examples of one or two of these musical styles for students to help them think about their meaning and geographic context. Next, discuss your region. Have students volunteer what might be a local or regional music; if possible, consult The Rough Guide to Music USA for guidance and ideas. After putting ideas on the blackboard, ask: Why is this music associated with your locality? Is there something in the sound of the music, its history, or the backgrounds of its players, that corresponds with the characteristics of your area?

Suggest that the blues is a music often associated with particular regions and cities. To illustrate, identify the following blues styles for the students with a short lecture:

- **Delta blues** unamplified guitar, rhythmic and spoken vocals, drones, moans, bottleneck slide techniques, and a generally “heavy” texture
- **Memphis blues** smooth and arranged, brass and/or saxophones prominent, soulful vocals, and a lighter feel
- **Chicago blues** simple structure, electricity, amplification, bass-drums-guitar-harmonica instrumentation, “raw” sounding

Following the lecture, divide the students into groups and have them listen to each of the following songs:

- **Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”** Delta
- **Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues** Delta
- **Bukka White, “The Panama Limited”** Delta
- **B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”** Memphis
- **Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”** Chicago

As they listen, they should record characteristics evident in each song. Then, using their notes and lecture information, the group should try to determine the region from which each song comes. As they share their guesses with the rest of the class, press them to identify specific regional characteristics that led them to their answers.

Conclude this exercise by discussing what forces such as globalization and the Internet have done to regional styles of music. Are such regional styles as common as they were in the early decades of the 20th century?
Focus Exercise

Knowing a bit about the regions associated with the blues deepens one’s understanding of the music. Introduce the notion of blues regions as places with distinct histories by showing clips from The Blues films, which discuss Memphis’ Beale Street and Chicago’s Maxwell Street. [See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information.]

Divide the students into seven groups, asking each group to research the histories of one of the following blues regions:

- New Orleans
- Mississippi Delta
- Texas
- Louisiana
- Memphis
- Chicago
- Los Angeles

Groups should consider the following questions: How has the region developed over time? What groups of people have lived there and how have they transformed the landscape? Why is this region considered a blues region? This exercise has the potential to expand infinitely, so give students specific time periods (1900 to the present, for instance) or limit the kinds of information you want to know (economic resources, urban development, racial and ethnic groups, etc.). Once groups have completed their research, assign them to teach the rest of the class about their respective regions. This instruction can take the form of a presentation, an illustration, or a Web site.

Good starting points for research include:

- Blues Road Trip at http://www.pbs.org/theblues
- The Blues Map at http://www.weightlessdog.com/bluesmap.nsf/map!OpenPage

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The sound of the blues was transformed in the early 20th century, between 1914 and 1945, when blacks from the rural South migrated to cities in the North and West. Assign students to research a particular migration pattern of African American musicians: the movement of people from Texas to Los Angeles; the Mississippi Delta to Chicago; or the Piedmont region (the Southeast) to New York City.

Using topographical and/or other maps from an atlas, ask them to discuss the following questions about their region: How might people have moved from place to place? Are there transportation links, like trains, highways, or rivers that might have aided movement? Why would people have gone from one place to another? Are there geographical relationships between the original places and ultimate destinations? What would have been the geographical reasons for going to particular cities and not others? What are the cultural, economic, and social environments of the original and ultimate destinations?

As a way to enable students to present their findings, ask them to create a poster advertisement for prospective migrants, enticing them from their original homes to a new destination. The posters should focus on a particular time period during the Great Migration. Students should research happenings during their selected time period in order to guarantee the authenticity of their posters. When complete, individuals should present their posters to the rest of the class, explaining how the content and design of the poster would appeal to migrants from their assigned region, during their selected time period.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

1. Ask students to write lyrics for a blues song that reflects their region. They might use another song like “Cross Road Blues” or “The Panama Limited” as a template and then fill in their own local references.

2. Alan Lomax worked, as had his father John Lomax before him, to record and collect blues songs for the Library of Congress. Lomax traveled throughout the South, as well as Europe in an effort to document folk music, including the blues. During his research, he observed and commented on the ways in which the mass media work to homogenize, and thereby erase, the distinctive, regional musical cultures of the United States, something he labeled as “gray-out.” Assign students to write an essay that addresses the following prompt: “Gray-out” is a problem in contemporary society. Agree or disagree using music as your evidence.
Extensions

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. Between 1914 and 1945, many blues performers participated in the Great Migration, moving from rural areas to cities in the South, West, and North. Assign students to individually research the life of one of the following performers and his or her participation in the Great Migration:

- Lonnie Johnson  New Orleans to Chicago
- T-Bone Walker  Texas to Los Angeles
- Muddy Waters  Mississippi to Chicago
- Leadbelly  Louisiana to New York City
- Sonny Terry  North Carolina to New York City

Questions to consider include: What motivated them to move? What did they think about city life? Did they adapt their music to their new environments? Why and how exactly?

Good starting points for research include:

- All Music Guide at http://www.allmusic.com

2. Ask students, in groups, to visit the Web sites for the following regional blues organizations and make a report to the class. What does each feature? How are the blues and its history described in each and what does that tell you about the region?

- Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, Mississippi at http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org
- Alabama Blues Society at http://www.alabamablues.org/
- Central Iowa Blues Society at http://www.cibs.org/
- Kansas City Blues Society at http://www.kcbluessociety.com/

Links to the Web sites of additional blues societies can be found on the Year of the Blues’ Web site at http://www.yearoftheblues.org/societyLinks.asp.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings


Web Sites