Finding the Blues

Overview
In this lesson students will learn about finding the blues in a variety of musical styles. They will investigate instances of the blues form heard in mainstream pop music, along with exploring the musical styles of two new artists who are helping to keep the blues alive today. In addition, students will look at the career of performer Eric Clapton, who as a rock ‘n’ roll icon has had a tremendous influence in bringing blues music to a wide mainstream audience.

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

- Identify instances of blues influence in examples of popular music.
- Recognize the efforts of young artists Shemekia Copeland and Chris Thomas King, who are working today to create a blues that reflects their own experiences.
- Become familiar with the career of Eric Clapton and his influence in bringing the blues to a wider audience.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
  Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

- Cream, “Crossroads”

Web Sites
- http://www.eric-clapton.co.uk/ecla/lyrics/im-so-glad.html
- http://lyrics.rockmagic.net/lyrics/clapton_eric/from_the_cradle_1994.html#blues_before_sunrise
- http://www.shemekiacopeland.com
- http://www.christhomasking.com/
**Introductory Exercise**

Eric Clapton is the only performer to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame three times: first as a member of the band The Yardbirds, second as a member of the band Cream, and finally as a solo artist. His fame, coupled with his blues background, has served to bring the blues to a wide audience. To make the connection between Clapton and the blues, start by having students listen to Cream’s “Crossroads” and, if possible, watch Cream play the song in the “Taking It Back to America” segment of the film *Red, White and Blues*. Discuss what identifies this as a blues song.

To further root “Crossroads” in blues music history, play the song upon which it is based, “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson. Students can identify the commonalities between Johnson’s song from the 1930s and Cream’s version from the 1960s. Another blues tune remade by Cream was Skip James’ “I’m So Glad.” A reenactment of James singing the song can be seen in the Skip James portion of the film *The Soul of a Man*. The end of the film mentions that the proceeds made by Cream’s cover of the song helped pay for James’ expensive hospital bills later in his life. While many groups have remade classic blues tunes, Cream’s combination of blues music and classic rock ‘n’ roll helped spread the blues to a new audience. Inform students that in the late 1960s, Cream was one of the most popular bands in the world.

Discuss why rock ‘n’ roll fans in the 1960s would have been interested in songs written 30 years prior in the rural Jim Crow South. It might be helpful to distribute the words to both the original songs and the Cream covers. What about these songs do students feel appealed to the later audience? The words? The music? Would these songs hold appeal today? What would have to change and what could stay the same in order for these songs from the 1930s to become hits in the 21st century? If time allows, ask students, in small groups, to rewrite the words to one of the two songs in order to make them more relevant to today’s listeners. [Lyrics to “Cross Road Blues” can be found at http://www.deltahaze.com/johnson/sounds.html and Cream’s “Crossroads” at http://www.lyricsfreak.com/c/cream/25184.htm. James’ “I’m So Glad” lyrics were replicated exactly by Cream and can be read at http://www.eric-clapton.co.uk/ecla/lyrics/im-so-glad.html.]

Next, inform students that Eric Clapton went on to bring the blues to later listeners, most notably with his 1994 album, *From the Cradle*, which includes cover versions of songs from such blues legends as Leroy Carr, Willie Dixon, Lowell Fulson, and Elmore James. Have students read the words to the songs on this album in order to consider why, like Cream in the 1960s, Clapton was able to touch a modern audience with blues classics. [Song lyrics can be found at http://lyrics.rockmagic.net/lyrics/clapton_eric/from_the_cradle_1994.html#blues_before_sunrise.]

Conclude by asking students to write a journal entry based on this prompt: The blues is a universal language and, as such, holds timeless appeal. Agree or disagree.

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**FILM TIE-INS**

**Cream and the Blues**
- *Red, White and Blues* (“Taking It Back to America” segment, with footage of Cream playing)
- *The Soul of a Man* (segment showing Skip James singing “I’m So Glad” and later discussion of Cream’s cover of the song)

**Blueswomen**
- *Warming by the Devil’s Fire* (segment about blueswomen, including Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Victoria Spivey)

**Koko Taylor and Shemekia Copeland**
- *Godfathers and Sons* (Koko Taylor performance at the beginning of the film)
- *The Soul of a Man* (Copeland’s cover of J.B. Lenoir’s “God’s Word”)

**Hip-Hop and the Blues**
- *Godfathers and Sons* (segment in which Chuck D talks about similarities between hip-hop and the blues)

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**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.
Focus Exercise
Shemekia Copeland represents a young artist who, like Eric Clapton, is keeping the blues alive for modern audiences. Start this exercise by playing Copeland’s “The Other Woman.” Ask students what elements in the song point to more traditional blues. If students are unfamiliar with the blues, allow them to listen to several blues songs in order to make the comparisons.

Ask students to learn about Shemekia’s background in order to determine the root of her blues sensibility. Her official Web site at http://www.shemekia copeland.com is a good place to start. Next, assign students to record facts from her life that explain her connection to the blues. Copeland’s appreciation of the blues was clearly influenced by growing up surrounded by the blues. Ask students if they believe such a background is necessary to embrace the blues. How can young people today become schooled in the blues? Does a person need to be mentored by a blues musician? Does listening alone work?

Point out that Copeland, in addition to keeping the blues alive for new audiences, also carries on the tradition of blueswomen. If students are unfamiliar with the contributions of females to the blues, point out that women such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and Victoria Spivey dominated blues recordings in the 1920s and early ’30s. These women, performing in what is now called “classic female blues,” set the precedent for blueswomen to follow. Illustrate the blueswomen tradition by playing the segment from the film Warming by the Devil’s Fire about such blueswomen as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Victoria Spivey. Subsequently, suggest that Copeland has frequently been compared to another blueswoman: Koko Taylor. To give students an understanding of this comparison, show them footage of Taylor singing at the beginning of Godfathers and Sons and Copeland’s cover of J.B. Lenoir’s “God’s Word” in The Soul of a Man. Discuss the similarities between Copeland and Taylor and, more broadly, the similarities between Copeland and earlier blueswomen. Given the history of women in the blues, do students think it’s important for female performers to be part of keeping the blues alive in modern times? Why or why not?

Conclude this exercise by asking students to consider why the Boston Globe said the following about Copeland (as quoted on her Web site): “She is as new as tomorrow’s paper and as ageless as the blues itself.” What about her life and music is both new and ageless? Student thoughts can be recorded in a journal entry prior to holding a class discussion.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS
While the blues was the voice of several generations of African Americans, hip-hop today largely plays this role. Introduce this idea by having students view the clip from the film Godfathers and Sons in which Chuck D discusses the similarities between hip-hop and the blues. Ask students, based on their understanding of the two music genres, what similarities exist between them.

As Clapton helped bridge rock ’n’ roll and the blues, some would suggest that the young performer Chris Thomas King has helped build a bridge between the blues and hip-hop. Assign students to research King’s life and music in order to answer the following questions:

- Why would Chris Thomas King use blues music as the basis of his music?
- How does King’s music borrow from and stray from the instrumentation of the blues?
- Would young listeners connect to the blues elements in his music? Why or why not?

Ultimately, students can share their findings by participating in a class discussion focused around the question: Does Chris Thomas King and his music help preserve blues for modern audiences? Why or why not?

Good starting points for research include:

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT
Ask students to write their own “blues rap,” in the style of Chris Thomas King’s “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here,” that reflects their experience as a teenager in high school today. Advanced music students can be assigned to perform their piece as well.
**Extensions**

**RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

1. Echoing the sentiments of earlier bluesmen, Eric Clapton has claimed, “The blues are what I’ve turned to, what has given me inspiration and relief in all of the trials of my life.” Have students research Clapton song lyrics in order to identify songs that specifically relate to life trials. Students should be prepared not only to name the songs but to connect the song lyrics with Clapton’s personal life experiences.

2. Clapton’s amazing guitar playing represents a major way in which he has kept the blues alive. Assign students to research his guitar techniques and to trace their origin. What blues performers did he learn from? How can the techniques of these bluesmen be seen in Clapton’s own playing? Student findings can be presented either visually or in performance, with guitar students demonstrating specific blues guitar techniques honed by Clapton.

[The Eric Clapton books and Web sites listed under Supplementary Resources will provide students with a variety of starting points for research.]

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**SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES**

**Readings**

**Web Sites**