Folk Traditions in the Blues

Overview
This lesson will enable teachers to use the blues to explore selected topics in African American folklore. Students will learn about some of the African American cultural traditions that developed under slavery and the ways in which those traditions endured—and changed—as they found their way into the blues at the end of the 19th century. This lesson could be used in conjunction with other lessons on traditional cultures and folklore. Because much of it focuses on lyrical symbolism and the social function of language, it provides opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching, particularly when combined with the English Language Arts lesson “Oral Tradition and the Blues.”

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

- Explore the blues as a form of African American folklore, including its language, imagery, and function.
- Define and explain the nature of oral culture.
- Understand the ways in which cultural traditions develop over time.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  - “John Henry”
  - Mississippi John Hurt, “Stack O’ Lee”
  - Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”
  - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
  - B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
  - Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
  - Bessie Smith, “Lost Your Head Blues”
  - Big Bill Broonzy, “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man”
  - Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

STANDARDS
Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
Primary: I
Secondary: II, III, V
### Introductory Exercise

Examining heroic ballads is the simplest and most engaging way to begin thinking about African American blues as a form of folklore. First, ask the students to make a list of heroes in their community or in contemporary society. Once the list is compiled, discuss what sorts of specific qualities each hero has and whether these qualities add up to a general definition of “hero.” After establishing a general definition based on the examples, ask the students to think about how heroes function in society. Why do we need heroes? How and why do they even know about the heroes they listed in the first place?

Next, ask the students to use their knowledge of contemporary heroes to examine heroes in the black community in the early 20th century. Play the traditional song “John Henry” for students, asking them to pay close attention to the lyrics. Then do the same with Mississippi John Hurt’s “Stack O’ Lee.” Both ballads focus on heroes in the black community. Ask students to discuss how they would characterize the behavior of each hero. Do the hero’s actions and/or attitudes fit with the class’ initial definition of “hero”? Why or why not? Based on both these characters, ask the students to come up with a new definition of “hero.” What are the ways in which both heroes might have had meaning for poor blacks in the early 20th century, working on farms for little pay and enduring the harsh conditions of segregation?

To conclude this exercise, discuss how many early songs popular among African Americans were about folk heroes. Heroes were of two types: the exaggerated hero, the man who triumphs over whites by some sort of superhuman strength or wit, and the bad hero, the hard man who resists most of the conventional values of society, killing and stealing at will, with no remorse. Legends of those who thumbed their noses at whites and retained values outside of mainstream culture served to inspire hope for resistance and change among slaves and, later, poor black sharecroppers. Both types of hero are modern variants of the trickster, operating against the will of white society and meant to, in the words of William Barlow, “negate feelings of powerlessness and to avenge victimization by the dominant white social order” [Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture, p. 22].

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### FILM TIE-INS

**Themes and Images in Blues Music**

- *Warming by the Devil’s Fire* (segments on how the ocean equaled freedom, prison work gangs, and the Mississippi River flood of 1927; segment where the boy sits in a church and hears gospel music; segment re-creating Robert Johnson at the crossroads)

- *The Road to Memphis* (segment titled “Saturday Night Sunday Morning,” which explores the relationship between blues and the African American church)

**African Heritage of the Blues**

- *Feel Like Going Home* (segments discussing the origins of blues in Africa)
Focus Exercise
Blues culture is essentially an oral culture, in which learning takes place not from books but from the passing of stories, legends, and techniques from person to person over generations (represented by the ubiquitous “My mama told me...”). Consequently, blues artists work with a stock of shared metaphors, images, and phrases that resonate with listeners and that have been passed on through generations.

As a class, listen to the following songs:

- Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”
- Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
- B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
- Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
- Bessie Smith, “Lost Your Head Blues”
- Big Bill Broonzy, “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man”
- Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”

As students listen, ask them to record the images and themes that stand out in each song. After listening to all of the songs, make a list of prevailing images and themes. Discuss the symbolic meaning of these images and themes to the African American community and their connection to the African American oral tradition.

Some recurring motifs (and their symbolic meanings) include:

- Relationships between men and women metaphor for relationships between blacks and whites
- Travel, “leavin’,” trains travel as freedom and independence, or longing for escape from harsh conditions
- Graves, suicide, death harshness of conditions, loss of hope
- Manhood referring to both sexuality and social status in segregated society
- Crossroads meeting place, the devil, going in a new direction
- The devil, evil importance of the church in black life
- Water, rivers referring to the Mississippi Delta, as well as baptism and travel
- Floods and storms referring to helplessness in face of greater forces
- Waking up the morning many poor blacks lived day to day, unsure of when tragedy might befall them

[Many of these themes and images are highlighted in The Blues films. See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information and complementary sections.]

Conclude this exercise by assigning students to write a 1–2 page paper in which they discuss what the recurring themes and images in blues lyrics suggest about life for African Americans in the 20th century.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Paul Oliver has argued that the bluesman, as a lone, traveling minstrel singing songs that unite the black community and remind them of their hardships and hopes, is related to the West African griot, a musician and storyteller who wanders the countryside singing songs of praise or ridicule and who helps to advertise and manage community values. Labeling the bluesman as an American version of the griot further connects the blues to African American folklore. Is this label legitimate? Ask students to research these two figures and their roles in order to assess whether Oliver’s argument is correct. Once students have compiled evidence to support an opinion, the class could debate the merits and implications of Oliver’s assertion.

Good starting points for research include:

- The Blues film Feel Like Going Home
- Tracy, Steven C. Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999 (Oliver’s article and the response by musicologist David Evans)

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students to create resumés for John Henry and/or Stack O’ Lee, including information under the following categories: Objective, Education, Employment, Awards and Honors, Hobbies, References. Resumés should reflect student understanding of the role of the hero in the African American community as discussed in class.
Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Ask students about the slang they use. List these terms on the board. Talk about why they use such slang in their speech—why not speak in accepted English? Next, ask students to identify and define the slang in the following songs: Skip James’ “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy.” Start by asking students about what they don’t understand in the lyrics; list all the metaphors and terms. Then take them one by one and think about what they may have meant. Finally, check other people’s definitions of the terms in Clarence Major’s book *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* or at [http://blues.about.com/library/bigloss.htm](http://blues.about.com/library/bigloss.htm).

Terms to Focus On:

**Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”**
- *Killin’ floor* the place where cows are killed in Chicago slaughterhouses
- *Driftin’ door-to-door* homeless and jobless
- *Can’t find no heaven* can’t find any happiness or rest

**Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”**
- *Full-grown man* reference to male sexuality
- *Rollin’ stone* a ladies man, moving from one woman to the next
- *Hoochie-coochie man* a man obsessed with booze and women
- *The line I shoot will never miss* boasting of his sexual prowess

After identifying and discussing slang terms in each song, speculate why the musicians might have used such slang; why not just say things directly?

Conclude by explaining how African American slang functions similarly to students’ own slang as both a source of aesthetic pleasure and social power. African American slang has its roots in the *trickster* figure of many West African cultures; an animal that would escape tough situations through doubletalk and wit. The trickster came to be important in slave culture, because the Black Codes instituted in Southern states after 1640 increasingly limited slaves’ ability to communicate with each other and with whites. In order to express their pain and to resist without retribution from white masters, African Americans used inventive double-entendres as well as metaphors and similes—ways of “signifying”—in their conversations, stories, and songs. Language play soon became a highly valued component of African American culture. When oppressive conditions persisted in the 20th century and African Americans were expected to be deferential toward whites or risk punishment or even lynching, blacks continued the tradition of signifying. This was especially true of the blues.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Using library resources, have students investigate the history and function of the figure of the bandit or outlaw in other cultures, particularly in European and Asian folklore. Compare these figures to Stack O’ Lee (as heard in Mississippi John Hurt’s “Stack O’ Lee”).

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Dennis Jarrett has written: “Because of its basically autobiographical, first-person format, it is tempting to assume that a given lyric is the realistic account of one man’s experience. But...blues singers acknowledge that their productions are not strictly personal.” Using evidence from class discussions and research, write an essay that outlines the different ways in which the blues draws on shared traditions.
SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings


