Men, Women, and the Blues

Overview
This lesson shows how the blues can be used to enable students to explore gender divisions in the United States, both in the past and the present. Most blues songs are about the relationships between men and women, as are many songs in American popular music. But blues artists have always addressed love with a directness and realism absent in most mainstream popular songs. Between 1923 and 1945, women blues singers in particular offered a powerful alternative to the narrow mainstream image of women as domesticated wives and mothers, creating a new feminism that drew on the fight for women’s rights in the voting booth and the workplace that took place between 1913 and 1919, and prefiguring the later women’s movement of the 1960s and ’70s. By looking at both men’s and women’s performances of the blues, students can learn a great deal about sexual differences, identity, changing gender roles, and patriarchy throughout American history.

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

- Explore gender stereotypes and their influence on everyday behavior.
- Consider different sides in debates about the role of women in society.
- Understand how blues women were both limited by and defiant of the gender expectations under which they lived.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
  B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
  Shemekia Copeland, “The Other Woman”
Introductory Exercise

Blues songs provide an interesting lens through which to consider relationships between men and women as well as gender stereotypes. The following exercise asks students to consider this perspective while listening to three blues songs.

As students listen to the three songs named below, have them take notes on the following questions:

- **What are the circumstances in the song? Who is to blame for the problems between the couple?**
- **How are men and women portrayed in the song? Specifically, how are the actions of men and women portrayed?**
- **What gender stereotypes, if any, are evident in the song?**

First, play and discuss “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters, which depicts a ladies’ man who boasts of his sexual prowess. This is the typical “bluesman” stereotype, one that emphasizes men’s interest in sex and their desire not to stay in one place too long. Juxtapose this selection with “Three O’Clock Blues” by B.B. King, which depicts a man whose woman has left him because of a sin he’s committed. He is at times defiant (remarking that he should go down to where “the mens hang out”) and repentant, hinting that he’ll die without her (“I believe this is the end”). Finally, play Shemekia Copeland’s “The Other Woman.” This song depicts a woman who has been manipulated into a relationship by a married man. Note the twist on the typical situation in which a married woman finds out that her husband was cheating. Here, instead, a woman finds out that she’s participated unwittingly in a man’s cheating. After listening to all three selections, discuss students’ thoughts on the above questions, comparing the three songs to one another.

Broaden this discussion by considering gender roles and stereotypes in general. Ask students to cite examples of such stereotypes from print media, music, and television. Using student examples as a springboard, discuss: What kind of pressures do these stereotypes place on men and women? Are men and women always bound—by biology or nature—to fulfill these stereotypes? Or are there ways in which men and women can avoid the stereotypes and affect change?

Conclude by asking students to voice their opinions on whether or not the blues songs support or refute the gender stereotyping in contemporary mass media. How so? How not? Does Copeland’s song from 2000 more accurately capture today’s stereotypes, or do the messages of Waters’ and King’s songs still hold true today? What, if anything, would have to change in the lyrics of the earlier pieces in order to make them reflect 2003 thinking?
**Focus Exercise**

Musical instruments are often “gendered”: that is, they are considered appropriate for either men or women. To start a discussion about this phenomenon, ask the class to think about the instruments that men usually play and the instruments that women usually play. Answers usually link men with the guitar, trumpet, and drums, while women are linked with the flute, piano, or voice. List student answers on the board, then take each one, discussing: Why might this instrument be appropriate for a man or a woman? Does appropriateness have to do with the sound, shape, or weight of the instrument and/or how one must play it? Tie this discussion into the blues by noting that many early bluesmen were guitarists, harp players, or pianists, and most blueswomen were singers. Ask why that may have been.

Next, consider exceptions to the idea of gendered instruments. Ask students for examples, aiding the discussion if necessary, by asking: Are there men who excel at flute? Voice? Piano? Women who are guitarists? Trumpeters? Drummers? Another tool to help students think about such exceptions are the films *Warming by the Devil’s Fire*, which includes footage of Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing electric guitar, and *Red, White and Blues*, which discusses Tharpe and her guitar playing. To follow up on film viewing, point out to students that in the late 1940s the image of a female electric guitar player was completely incongruous with a woman’s role. Then ask whether women guitarists provide the same shock today. Ask students what they think about the exceptions discussed. Does going against the grain give performers a different image or edge? How so? [See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information.]

Conclude this exercise by tying the discussion of gender and instruments into a greater discussion of gender roles. Inform students that two stances exist in terms of men, women, and the roles they play. Stance one suggests that women have the physical and mental ability to do whatever a man can do but have been oppressed by gender stereotypes and sexist laws. They should promote their equality with men and push for equal treatment in employment, politics, sports, etc. The opposing stance argues that women are quite different from men, possessing unique and powerful emotional and intuitive qualities. They should enhance their power in society by focusing on caregiving, homemaking, and the arts, where emotion, nurturing, and intuition are valued and useful. Ask students which stance they believe women musicians most support. Then, broaden the discussion to allow students to express their own opinions on these two definitions of appropriate female roles in society.

**RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

Assign students to research the life of one of the following women blues singers. Specifically, their research should focus on how these women were constrained by the times in which they lived as well as the ways they challenged the status quo. Student research should consider biographical information as well as the music associated with their chosen singer.

| Ma Rainey | Billie Holiday |
| Mamie Smith | Sister Rosetta Tharpe |
| Bessie Smith | Memphis Minnie |
| Ida Cox | Ruth Brown |

**Good starting points for research include:**

- American Women’s History: A Research Guide at [http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddle/history/women/w-h.fam.html](http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddle/history/women/w-h.fam.html)

**SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT**

Have students, in pairs, make a collage of photographs of women musicians they feel are good role models for young women. They might find photos in magazines such as *Rolling Stone* or on the Internet. Collages should include at least one blueswoman. When collages are complete, students should present them to class, explaining the reasons behind their choices.
Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

In order to introduce the Women’s Movement in American history, talk about the different social roles available to women before the turn of the century. You might gather evidence for the discussion from a history textbook or from literature, with the goal, in the end, for students to understand traditional Victorian gender roles.

Then play “Lost Your Head Blues” by Bessie Smith. Ask students: How did Bessie Smith present an alternative to traditional Victorian gender roles in this song? Suggest that beyond this song, Bessie Smith represents a woman who defied gender roles. Introduce her as someone who worked in the public as an entertainer, recorded some of the first blues on record, became a national star, and made lots of money. She also embraced masculine traits typical of the time: She was “tough”—once scaring off a group of Klansmen who tried to disrupt her concert—sang openly about sexual desire, addressed issues like rape, and was known to be able to outdrink any challenger, man or woman. Ask students to account for Smith’s image and behavior. Why could Smith (and other blues singers) break free from the typical constraints on women in American society in the 1920s? Discussion should include:

- The 1920s were a time of shifting expectations for women. The suffrage movement and World War I challenged Victorian gender roles.

- Blueswomen were African Americans, which already separated them from middle class white America. Breaking gender roles was, in this way, somewhat easier.

- Urbanization and the African American Great Migration found many black women in the factory workforce. Here, in these urban settings, gender roles were challenged every day.

Finally, ask students to compare Smith’s sexuality and toughness to other attempts by women to gain equality. Start by handing out a timeline of women’s history. After students have read the timeline, ask them to compare Bessie Smith’s life and music to the events on the timeline. Specifically, discuss:

- Does Bessie reflect the times in which she lived? How so? How not?

- Did she prefigure some of the values of the Women’s Movement in the 1960s, as Angela Davis has argued in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism?

[A good timeline of women’s history can be found at http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-2842.html?for_printing=1.]

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. Ask students to locate images of Bessie Smith in the 1920s. Then ask them to locate other images of women during the 1920s. Ultimately, students should write a short report that describes the photographs, analyzing the meaning of Smith’s poses and image. Students should consider how the pictures fit with other images of women in the 1920s and 1930s. How do they compare to images of women now in magazines and on television?

    Good starting points for research include:

    - America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black and White Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935–1945


2. Bessie Smith and other blues singers were working-class women. But there were also middle-class and educated women, like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, in the early 20th century who tried to take a stand against both racism and women’s oppression. Using your school library or the Internet, ask students to investigate the contributions of these two women to American history, comparing their behavior and thinking to that of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.
SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Ask students, in an essay, to agree with the following prompt: Blueswomen have resisted the roles set out for them in society. Papers should use both biographical information and song lyrics as proof.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings


Video/DVD

- *Blues Masters*. Rhino R2 976075.

Web Sites

- *Primary Documents*. Pace University. [http://webpage.pace.edu/bofutt/his280sources.htm#Women%20of%20Color](http://webpage.pace.edu/bofutt/his280sources.htm#Women%20of%20Color).