Blues, Urbanization, and Technology

Overview
This lesson will enable students to use the blues to explore urbanization and technology and their effects on everyday life in the 20th century. Musicians were among the large number of people who, between 1914 and 1945, participated in the Great Migration, in which rural African Americans left work on the farms for new opportunities in the cities of the North and the West. At the same time, these cities were in the process of being transformed by industry, invention, technology, and consumerism. Ultimately, this exercise should help students to appreciate African Americans’ experience of social and technological change in America during this time period.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:
- Gain an understanding of the experiences of African Americans who moved to the city during the Great Migration.
- Learn about the symbolic meanings of the city in the early to mid-20th century.
- Make connections between 20th-century urbanization and other forces of social change such as industrialization and mass communication.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
  - Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”
  - B.B. King, “Three O’Clock Blues”
  - Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”

Web Sites
- http://www.macalester.edu/geography/image/authentic/summer2002/lessons hedenstrom/7%20Letters%20from%20the%20Great%20Migration.htm
- http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/communities/

STANDARDS
Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
Primary: III, VIII
Secondary: II, V, VII

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Introductory Exercise

One of the major events of early 20th-century American history was the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans (including many blues performers) from poor and rural areas of the South to growing urban centers both in the South and North. African Americans’ encounters with modernity in America’s cities—places of tall buildings, machines, lights, noise, and masses of people never before seen—profoundly affected their behavior, attitudes, and goals for the future. Many of these migrants—some of whom had never had electricity, for instance, back home—were energized by the new environment, at least before they realized that the city contained new kinds of segregation and that their hopes were not to be fully realized due to institutionalized racism. That initial encounter with the city, however, embodied the promise of urbanization for all Americans between 1900 and 1940. Today, the city generally has a different set of associations, ones that have less to do with progress and light than with decay, crime, and poverty. This exercise will explore changing ideas of the city over time.

Start by asking students about their ideas of the city. What are some of its main features? How do cities’ tall buildings, commercial areas, and masses of people make you feel? Do they make you feel inspired, excited, depressed, frightened, weary, confused, etc.?

Next, as a way to place the discussion in a more concrete historical context, show excerpts from The Blues films that address the meaning of the city. The Road to Memphis opens with two segments titled “Coming Home” and “Heaven for a Black Man,” which focus on the changes that have occurred in Memphis over the years. B.B. King says that it “was like going to Paris” when he first arrived, and that Beale Street had a lively, exciting nightlife. However, Rosco Gordon reflects on things that have changed between then and today: Beale Street fell on hard times and has revitalized itself only as a tourist attraction. Godfathers and Sons includes a segment on Maxwell Street in Chicago, contrasting its prominence in 1945 as a lively market for black migrants and Jewish immigrants with its emptiness and decay today.

After watching the excerpts, ask students to characterize the changes experienced by both Memphis and Chicago. How did blues musicians perceive each city, and particularly the black neighborhoods in these cities, in the 1940s? How do they perceive the places now? Based on their own experiences and those of their parents and grandparents, do students feel that cities in the United States have changed for the worse, or at least have changed their appeal? Are cities today still associated with economic opportunity, progress, and invention? Does moving to the city today equate with improving one’s life? Why or why not?

Conclude this exercise by asking students to participate in a debate in which they voice their opinions on whether or not a Great Migration could happen in the near future and what the defining characteristics of such a migration would be.
Focus Exercise

This exercise compares the tone, content, and sound of country and urban blues in order to frame a discussion about the Great Migration. First, explain that the Great Migration, which largely occurred between World War I and World War II, was a mass movement of poor, rural, black Southerners to Southern and Northern cities. Blacks were seeking to better their lives, both economically and socially, leaving behind the Jim Crow South and tenant farming for what they saw as an opportunity to start again and gain a new independence in the burgeoning urban factory environment of the North. [Portions of The Blues films that discuss the Great Migration are noted in Film Tie-Ins.]

Suggest that the blues might be a good way to understand what moving to the city meant to migrants. First, play a country blues song or two (Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” and Skip James’ “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”). Then play an urban blues song or two for comparison (B.B. King’s “Three O’Clock Blues” and Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy”). Ask students to consider both how the music changes and how it remains the same. As you discuss the similarities and differences with the class, list them on the blackboard.

### Similarities
- Male singers
- Guitar emphasis
- Sliding notes
- Backbeat
- Emotional vocals

### Differences
- Country blues
  - Acoustic guitar
  - Indirect, mysterious
  - Quiet
  - Single singer
  - Informal, unfinished
  - Amateur

- Urban Blues
  - Electric guitar
  - Direct
  - Loud
  - Band
  - Formal, arranged
  - Professional

After focusing on the similarities and differences, take the discussion to another level by asking students how urban blues songs capture “the city” in sound.

Conclude this exercise by asking students to write a letter, in the voice of someone who migrated from the Delta region to Chicago in the 1940s, to a family member back home. The letter should enumerate how electric Chicago blues (as heard in “Mannish Boy”) differ from acoustic Delta blues (as heard in “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” and “Cross Road Blues”). For a model, students can be provided with actual letters written by migrants to Chicago. [Examples can be found at http://www.macalester.edu/geography/mage/authentic/summer2002/lessons/hedenstrom/7%20Letters%20from%20the%20Great%20Migration.htm.]

**RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

During the Great Migration, blues musicians traveled to cities like Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. Split the students into groups and assign each to choose one of these cities and imagine what it would be like for a blues musician arriving there in the 1940s. How would he/she get there? What would he/she have to do first upon arrival? In what part of the city did African Americans live and why? Where might a migrant find shelter, food, work, etc.? What might his/her experience of the city be in the first week? What kinds of new behaviors, attitudes, and values might he/she have to develop in order to survive? In the end, have students create a handbook for new arrivals to the city in the 1940s. Students can begin their research by consulting encyclopedia entries on the history of these cities and locating social histories on each. Web sources include http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/communities/.

**SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT**

Ask students to create an advertisement for Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy” (1955) or B.B. King’s “Three O’Clock Blues” (1951). The advertisement should address the qualities and values that would appeal to potential black urban buyers at the time these songs were released. Assign students a one-page explanation of their advertisement in which they justify their creations.
Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

1. A key component of the urban blues that developed in the 1940s was the electrification of instruments. Such electrification, particularly the guitar, bass, and harmonica, was one of the major sound manifestations of the African American experience of the city. Drawing on students own music listening, first discuss the meaning of electrification in music: How do acoustic instruments make you feel as opposed to electric instruments? Suggest that electrification and amplification were, for many black migrants, “modern” sounding, signifying the future. Discuss with students whether they agree with this idea that electrification and amplification create a modern sound. In particular, discuss which music they find “modern” or “old” and why. Conclude by discussing the relationship between technology and music. Does the sound of music suggest the time period in which it was produced? Do musicians ever work to make their music sound less modern? Why would they choose to do this?

2. Newly arrived migrants from the Delta were often frowned upon by middle-class black city dwellers as country bumpkins and “bad examples” of African Americans, while, in reality, many were striving to distance themselves from the past of cotton, slavery, and illiteracy. With that in mind, discuss how different blues songs might have been perceived by different groups of people, including the urban black middle class and black rural migrants. Suggestions include “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” by Skip James, “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters, and “Three O’Clock Blues” by B.B. King.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The technology of instrumentation, amplification, and recording are central to understanding the blues and its changing appeal as it moved to cities. In fact, blues musicians were very much like other city dwellers in their embrace of modern technologies and inventions. Ask students to research the history of one new invention or technology that had an impact on the blues, outlining its role in developing urban life. Suggestions include:

- Electricity
- Railroad
- Radio
- Microphone
- Automobile

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

Web Sites