Whites, Blacks, and the Blues

Overview
This lesson enables students to explore and measure the distance between blacks and whites in the past and present United States. By thinking about the intersections of whites, blacks, and others around the blues, students will deepen their understanding of discrimination and prejudice. They will also come to understand the ways in which music can, or cannot, create opportunities for people of different cultures, and with varying degrees of power, to relate to one another and find common ground.

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

- Explain debates about black or white ownership of music in the United States.
- Understand the relationship between the marketing of blues music and its target audience.
- Think about the ways in which Southern, working-class, African American culture has had meaning for white audiences in the United States and in England.

RESOURCES NEEDED
Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
- Cream, “Crossroads”

Web Sites

STANDARDS
Addresses the following themes in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
Primary: I, V
Secondary: II, III, IX
**Introduction to Exercise**

Show the “Sam Phillips” segment of *The Road to Memphis*, in which Phillips and Ike Turner talk about blues music. In the segment, they argue about whites “borrowing” music from blacks. When Phillips suggests that whites didn’t copy black music, Ike Turner argues that the songs whites were singing were black and therefore, “They sure did.” Phillips then clarifies what he meant by saying that whites didn’t “imitate” black singers, but made the music their own. Turner then counters that blacks couldn’t get their records on white radio stations, but Phillips did. After viewing, make sure students understand the position of each man.

To build on the ideas presented in *The Road to Memphis*, show the excerpt from *Godfathers and Sons* that depicts Marshall Chess walking around with Chuck D, visiting blues clubs, and talking about his father’s promotion of blues artists. For some people, despite Chess’ enthusiasm for the music, his control of its production and distribution, even today, is part of the continuing problem of white exploitation of black talent.

After watching both film clips, discuss whether these scenes are about the integration of races and generations through music or about white control of black musical practices and the legacy of that control. For some people white ownership is anathema, a remnant of racist practices in which blacks are the slaves of white masters who profit from their labor. While Ike Turner clearly has affection for Phillips and his legacy in rock ‘n’ roll, he suggests that white singers of the blues were somehow taking something from its black creators. The counterargument, presented by Phillips, is that enlightened white record-company owners were the only ones who could ever expose blues artists to wider markets and actually helped black artists to gain exposure and success, thereby establishing new relationships between previously divided races.

Take the issue raised in the films—black music being co-opted by white artists and producers—a step further by assigning students to read an essay on the topic. Divide the class in two, giving each half one of the following online essays:


As students read, ask them to note the examples and reasoning provided by the author to support his/her opinion. Following the reading, have students debate the issue of whites playing the blues, with the two groups using examples from the films and their readings for support.
Focus Exercise
The co-optation of black music by white America has both historic and current applications. This lesson considers both. First, ask students about contemporary examples of white middle-class audiences listening to working-class black music. Hip-hop is an obvious example. Specifically, ask:

- Why do white kids in the suburbs listen to rap?
- Does it mean the same thing to them as it means to African Americans in urban ghettos?
- Does the distance of most whites from the black urban culture that spawned rap mean that whites cannot truly appreciate rap music and its content?
- Does the same difference exist in the opposite direction between the music of white kids and black kids? Why or why not?

The blues provide a rich opportunity to examine the question of white America co-opting black music. To illustrate this, play “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson and ask the class to brainstorm what the song might have meant to Johnson and his listeners in the Jim Crow South of the 1930s. Start by looking at the song’s instrumentation, tone, and lyrics, and then connecting those qualities to African American culture in the South at the time. Some questions to consider:

- Why would Johnson’s solo guitar have appealed to people?
- What would listeners have made of his references to selling his soul to the devil?
- What would a “crossroads” have signified to sharecroppers and plantation workers?

Then play a cover of Johnson’s song, “Crossroads” by the British rock group Cream. Explain that the song was covered in the 1960s and was a popular rock hit in both America and Great Britain. Again, ask the class to brainstorm what the song might have meant to the players in Cream and to their listeners in the 1960s. Look at the song’s instrumentation, tone, and lyrics, and then connect those qualities to the counterculture of the 1960s. Consider:

- How was Robert Johnson’s song changed by Cream? Why?
- Many listeners of Cream’s version of the song had never heard Johnson’s version, were white and middle class, and were not from the American South. What would such an audience in the 1960s have made of the song’s references to the devil and to crossroads?

Segments from the films The Road to Memphis and Red, White and Blues can be shown to help students think about the white embrace of the blues. [See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information.]

Conclude by asking students to write a dialogue between a fan of Robert Johnson’s song in the 1930s and Cream’s cover in the 1960s. The dialogue should consider differences of opinion, as well as common ground. To enrich the dialogues, students can incorporate points raised in the essays noted in the Introductory Exercise [White Blues at http://www.bluesworld.com/whiteblues.html and How the Blues Affected Race Relations in the United States at http://www.angelfire.com/sc/bluesthesis/rock.html].
Extensions

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. Debates about whites playing the blues often include accusations that whites are “stealing” black music, as if whites and blacks exist in their own worlds, each with their own untouched and pure musical styles. However, American-music history contains numerous instances of musical acculturation, or the adoption of the musical traits of one culture by another. In order to help students understand the wider context and complexity of debates about white blues, ask them to think about instances where black and white musical styles merged. In particular, have students research the origins of one of the following examples of black/white acculturation and write an essay on how acculturation changes or confirms their understanding of the debates raised in the initial exercises for this lesson:

- The merging of European band and show music and African American rhythm and style in early jazz
- The borrowing of the African American banjo, vocal style, and soloing in country music
- The merging of white country music, big-band jazz, black gospel, and urban blues in rock ‘n’ roll

The general histories of each musical genre found in encyclopedias and other books will provide the information students need to complete this assignment.

Good starting points for research include:

2. While the blues started as an African American music, it is now a music that has been embraced by people in different cultures, black and white, around the world. Ask students to use the Internet to survey blues Web sites from different countries. How are the blues described or discussed from country to country? In the end, ask students to assess the success of the blues across racial, ethnic, and cultural divisions. Are people in different countries reproducing older versions of American blues or are they shaping blues to their own cultural traditions? If the latter, how exactly? How does the presentation of the blues worldwide influence student thinking about the “universality” of blues music?

Good starting points for research include:
- Blues Foundation Newsletters at http://www.blues.org/newsletters/
- Blues & Stuff Directories and Links at http://www.bluesandstuff.com/directory/genblues/dirlinks.htm
- Year of the Blues at http://www.yearoftheblues.org

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings