ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the Great Migration spread Southern culture, helping to give the Blues a central place in American popular music?

OVERVIEW

In 1941, Alan Lomax and John Work, both musicologists, visited the Stovall Plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi. Working for Fisk University and the Library of Congress, the scholars were traveling throughout the Mississippi Delta to interview locals and survey musical cultures in rural communities. One of the musicians they recorded at the Stovall Plantation was McKinley Morganfield, an African-American sharecropper who also went by the name “Muddy Waters.” Though Muddy worked full-time on the plantation, he also sang and performed the Blues as a solo acoustic guitar player. The songs he recorded for Lomax, with titles such as “I Be’s Troubled” and “Burr Clover Farm Blues,” came out of a folk tradition through which songs were passed along orally and changed from generation-to-generation. Several of Muddy’s songs addressed the worries and struggles of black life and a determination to escape to someplace better. Two years after that first field recording, in 1943, Muddy left his home on the Stovall plantation to live in Chicago. Within a decade of his arrival, he had launched one of the most significant careers of any American Blues artist. Between 1950 and 1958, Muddy Waters had 14 top ten songs on the Billboard R&B chart and was packing nightclubs with what was by that time an electrified band. In 1963, pianist Otis Spann would introduce him onstage as “the man who brought the Blues from the country to the city,” pointing to Muddy’s substantial contributions to the evolution of the Blues tradition.

Muddy Waters and a multitude of African Americans in the twentieth century left their homes in the South for urban centers across the Northeast, Midwest, and West. This internal dispersion, known as the Great Migration, is the largest internal movement of a population in U.S. history. Between the 1910s and 1970, over six million African Americans from the South headed towards cities including New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Chicago, in search of a better life. There were plenty of reasons for leaving, one of which was the prevalence of the sharecropping economy in the rural South. Since Reconstruction, the sharecropping system of agriculture had saddled poor farmers with debt burdens from which they had little hope to recover, keeping
many African-American families entrenched in poverty. Meanwhile, as northern cities grew, a range of jobs emerged in factories, service industries, and domestic work. The work was usually hard and unglamorous, and old racial prejudices reappeared in different forms including de facto segregation, through which segregation occurred even without legal mandate. Still, these cities seemed far-removed from a region long-connected with generations of virulent racism.

Because of American slavery, African Americans had lived as a displaced people. In some ways, the experience of the Great Migration continued this displacement story. The Blues articulated the troubles people faced when uprooting their lives, and allowed migrants a means to connect as they struggled to survive in northern cities. When Muddy Waters sang “I Feel Like Going Home,” one of the first songs he recorded in Chicago, or when Howlin’ Wolf bellowed “Smokestack Lightnin,’” a song built around the image of a moving train, their audiences were familiar with the longing and imagery expressed in the songs. Oftentimes, listeners felt a shared sense of community when they heard the music; they had watched the same trains pass through the country towards new opportunities in the North. African Americans who migrated often reflected back on the places from which they had come, and the Blues served as a link between their old homes and their new urban lives.

When Phil and Leonard Chess, two Polish immigrants living in Chicago, began to search for artists to record on their Chess record label in the late 1940s, they decided to focus on Blues artists whose music appealed to the emerging urban African-American community. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Chess recorded artists including Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and Willie Dixon, in addition to Blues-influenced artists such as Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, who crossed over into Pop. Like Muddy Waters, most of these musicians had migrated from the South.

The repercussions of the Great Migration are far-reaching. Today, much of the restlessness and struggle that the Blues helped to articulate in the Migration era remains central in other forms of American music, including Hip Hop. In this lesson, students look to Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf as case studies that illustrate why African Americans left the South in record numbers and how communities came together in new urban environments, often around the sound of the Blues.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - Factors that prompted African Americans to migrate from the South to northern cities during the Great Migration, including the burdens of the sharecropping economy and racial discrimination
   - How the editors of the Chicago Defender newspaper encouraged African Americans in the South to seek relocation
   - Songs by Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf that reflected and symbolically managed an African-American experience of displacement
   - The role of Chicago’s Chess record label in popularizing instruments and ensemble playing

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Discuss figurative and connotative meanings of Blues lyrics portraying the imagery and emotions associated with the experience of the Great Migration
   - Analyze various accounts of the Great Migration era in different mediums, including photographs, paintings, letters, and census data, determining which details are emphasized in each account
   - Common Core: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. (CCCS Reading 7)

**ACTIVITIES**

**PRE-LESSON ACTIVITY:**

Assign students to read Handout 1: “Got a Right to Sing the Blues” by Muddy Waters. Each student will complete an entry ticket to bring to class on the day of the lesson.

Entry ticket questions:
- Where did Muddy Waters grow up? What was his name before he became known as Muddy Waters?
- Muddy Waters writes: “Somebody once asked me what my blues meant. I answered him in one word — ‘trouble.’” Describe what you think he means.
- If your family has ever moved, for what reasons did you move? If you have never moved, what are some reasons people move today? How does it feel to move?

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. At the start of class, select three or four student volunteers to share their entry ticket answers. Discuss how a person’s life might change when he or she moves several hundred miles from their original home.
2. Display two paintings created by the artist Jacob Lawrence.

Explain that these images are a part of Lawrence’s Great Migration Series, which he completed between 1940 and 1941, the same year Muddy Waters recorded his first songs in Mississippi. This series of sixty paintings is considered one of the most famous artistic expressions of the Great Migration, a period between the 1910s and 1970 when over 6 million African Americans left their homes in the South for new lives in the North, Midwest, and Western parts of the country.

Call on student volunteers to describe what they see in each painting. Guide the class through the specific details in each image.

Note to teacher: In the panel on the left, direct students toward the painting’s rural setting, earth tones, migrating birds, the forward motion of the people, and the sacks the people are carrying with them. In the panel on the right, direct students toward the painting’s urban setting, vibrant colors, people crowding into doorways labeled as different cities, and the eclectic styles of clothes people are wearing.

3. Ask students: If the painting on the left is a “departure” and the painting on the right is an “arrival,” what do you think the people are leaving behind? Where do you think they are going?

4. Jacob Lawrence set several scenes from his series in the heart of Mississippi. Ask students:

- What do you think were some of the reasons why so many African Americans from the South wanted to move during the Great Migration era?

- What do you think it means to be displaced? How does the Great Migration, as depicted in these paintings, continue the story of African-American displacement in the U.S. that began during the era of slavery?

- How might the reasons people moved during the Migration era compare to the reasons people move today?

This lesson follows Muddy Waters on his journey north from Mississippi to Chicago, examining how the Blues served as a way for African Americans not just to entertain themselves, but to process their experiences and connect during a period of mass displacement.
PROCEDURE:

1. In his 1955 article “I Got a Right to Sing the Blues,” Muddy Waters says that when he first started playing in Chicago, people called his songs “sharecropper music.” Begin the class with a brief review on sharecropping. Discuss as a class:

   - How did the sharecropping economy in the southern United States function, and how did the system keep sharecroppers stuck in a cycle of poverty?

   Note to teacher: After assessing what your students already know about sharecropping, you may refer them to the handout on sharecropping from the Blues: The Sound of Rural Poverty lesson.

2. Distribute Handout 2: Blues Lyrics and direct students to “Burr Clover Farm Blues” by Muddy Waters. Explain that Muddy Waters recorded this song in 1941, when he was living on a Mississippi farm and working as a sharecropper. Muddy was recorded by Alan Lomax and John Work, two musicologists working for Fisk University and the Library of Congress to study the folk traditions in rural communities. Muddy Waters left the farm and moved to Chicago in 1943, two years after recording this song.

   Play audio clip of “Burr Clover Farm Blues.” Ask students to follow along with the lyrics. Ask students:

   - According to the lyrics, what seem to be the singer’s feelings about the possibility of leaving the farm? How do the lyrics convey the singer’s sense of “displacement”?

   - Why might some audiences have identified this sound as “sharecropper music”? How do you visualize the setting for a song such as “Burr Clover Farm Blues”?

3. Display photos of plantation workers taken near Clarksdale, MS in 1936 and a sharecropper’s cabin on a Mississippi cotton plantation in 1939. Muddy Waters lived just outside Clarksdale.

   Ask students:

   - What are your first impressions of the photograph on the left? How many people do you see, and how would you describe the way they look in this photo? What relationship do you think these people might have to each other?

   - What are your first impressions of the photograph on the right? How would you describe the size of the house?

   - Notice the proximity between the house and the cotton pile. What might this proximity suggest about the relationship between work and home life for someone working as a sharecropper? How much leisure time do you think a sharecropper living in this cabin had?

4. Display photos of “juke joints.” Explain to the students that during much of the 20th century, juke joints were places where many southern African Americans came together during their limited off-hours from work to relax, gamble, dance, and hear music. Private living quarters often doubled as juke joints. Some historians argue that even Muddy Waters’s cabin on the Stovall Plantation, where he entertained guests by playing the Blues on his guitar, doubled as a juke joint.
Ask students:

- How would you describe the mood of the juke joint patrons in the photo on the left? How does the mood in this photo compare to the mood in the photo of the plantation workers?

- Why do you think so many African Americans living in rural communities found music to be a source of relief in their everyday lives?

- Where else do you think music provided relief for struggling populations of African Americans in the South? (In church, and even at work, in labor songs.)

5. Display a page from the 1940 U.S. Census. Explain that a census is a process of recording information about a population. This page is a record of the people who lived on a plantation outside Clarksdale, Mississippi, and was taken around the same time as the photographs we previously examined.

Help students navigate and interpret the data contained in the form. If the image is too small to read on the board, you can access a high-resolution scan of the full census page here.

Direct students to column 28, which lists “Occupation.” What is the reported occupation for most of the African Americans on this list? What is the reported occupation for one of the white people on the plantation? Answer: The African Americans are all reported as farmers, while the white occupant is reported as a manager.

Direct students to column 7, which lists the names of the plantation’s inhabitants. Locate the name “McKinley Morganfield.” Remind students that this was Muddy Waters’ birth name. What sort of information does the census tell us about Muddy Waters in 1940? Answer: Follow the information recorded in row 68 to learn that he was 27, born in Mississippi, and working full-time as a farmer.

Based on the materials discussed thus far, what are some general conclusions we can make about the lives of many African Americans living in Mississippi around 1940? Why do you think so many African Americans were determined to leave the South?

6. Distribute Handout 3: Letter to the Chicago Defender. Ask a volunteer to read the handout introduction to the class, then discuss as a group:

- How did the Defender reach African Americans who didn’t live in Chicago?

- What kind of content did the Defender publish to persuade African Americans to leave the South?

- How might northern business owners have benefited from having the Defender distributed throughout the South?

Display image of a newspaper clipping titled “The Defender’ Banned.” Ask a volunteer to read the article aloud to the class.
Ask students:
• What does this article suggest about the risks people encountered for distributing the Defender in the South?

7. Return to the handout and ask another volunteer to read the letter aloud to the class. Discuss as a group:
• How does the author of the letter describe his life in Lutcher, Louisiana in 1917? What is he trying to achieve by writing to the Defender?
• Why does the author ask for the newspaper not to publish his letter?
• The distance between Lutcher in southern Louisiana and Chicago is over 900 miles. What mode of transportation might have been ideal for such a long trip if you did not own a car?


Ask students:
• What cities does the Illinois Central Railroad connect? Have a volunteer locate Clarksdale, the town closest to Muddy Waters’s home, and Lutcher, Louisiana, the home of the author who wrote the letter to the Chicago Defender.

9. Play video clip of Howlin’ Wolf performing “Smokestack Lightnin’” in 1964. Ask students to follow along with the lyrics. (Note to teacher: mention that Howlin’ Wolf first recorded the song in 1956. The song reached No. 11 on the Billboard R&B chart, a chart geared towards African-American listeners.)

To help make sense of the lyrical imagery, read students the following quote attributed to Howlin’ Wolf: “We used to sit out in the country and see the trains go by, watch the sparks come out of the smokestack. That was smokestack lightning.”

Ask students:
• Why might someone living “out in the country” be captivated by the image of a train? Why do you think a train is such a potent symbol in Blues music?
• Why do you think “Smokestack Lightnin’” encapsulated feelings relating to the Great Migration so effectively? How does the song connect to the idea of “displacement”?
• How might you connect the lyrics of “Burr Clover Farm Blues” to “Smokestack Lightnin’”? What story might these two songs tell us when looked at together?

Tell students that like Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf was born in Mississippi. He later migrated to Chicago, where he recorded “Smokestack Lightnin’” for Chess Records, a company with a focus on recording Blues musicians including Muddy Waters and others.
**PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)**

10. Distribute Handout 4 – Chess Records. Read through as a class, then ask students:

- What did Phil and Leonard Chess observe about the changing demographics of Chicago? How did this influence the music they chose to record?

- How did the Blues music recorded at Chess sound different from earlier Country Blues recordings? Why did the Chess brothers want their recordings to be loud?

- How might the music recorded at Chess have fostered a sense of community for African Americans who had relocated from the South?

11. Play video clip of “Got My Mojo Working” performed by Muddy Waters in 1963 with other Chess recording artists. After the clip, show two side-by-side photos of Muddy Waters, the first on the plantation in 1941, and the second from after moving to Chicago.

Ask students:

- How has the sound of Muddy Waters’s music changed since his 1941 recording of “Burr Clover Farm Blues”? (Possible answers include: the inclusion of amplified electric instruments, a full band playing, and faster rhythms.)

- Help students identify the other musicians in the band, four of whom are mentioned on the Chess Records handout - Sonny Boy Williamson on harmonica, Willie Dixon on bass, Otis Spann on piano, and Matt Murphy on guitar. Based on information from the handout, what do all these musicians have in common?

- Display side-by-side photos of Muddy Waters: the first photo from when he lived on the Stovall Plantation and the second photo from after he had established his career in Chicago. How does Muddy's “look” reflect his transition from “country” to “city”?

In addition to the artists who came to Chess during the Great Migration, many Blues musicians settled in other cities. Los Angeles had T-Bone Walker and Johnny “Guitar” Watson; Big Joe Turner and Reverend Gary Davis lived in New York City; John Lee Hooker made his home in Detroit.

12. Think back to Muddy Waters’s statement from “Got a Right to Sing the Blues”: “Somebody once asked me what my blues meant. I answered him in one word -- ‘trouble’.” Discuss as a class: What kinds of “trouble” do you think African Americans might have encountered living and working in large urban centers like Chicago? Why do you think the Blues continued to resonate in African-American communities?
**SUMMARY ACTIVITY:**

Break students up into small groups. Distribute to each group Handout 5: African-American Life in the North. Instruct groups to analyze the materials in the handout to gain a sense of what living quarters, employment opportunities, and community activities were like for African Americans who had moved to the North during the Great Migration era.

Each group will jointly compose one letter in the imagined voice of an African American who has moved to the North and is writing to a relative back in the South. Students should reference details from their handout to illustrate what their life is like in a northern city. Students should be sure to answer the following questions:

- What state are you originally from? Where do you currently work, and how does it compare to the work you did before moving? How would you describe your living situation? How do you spend your time when you are not at work?

- How has your new life in the North met the expectations you had before moving? How has it not?

- What role has Blues music played in your life since moving from the South? Where, when, and how do you most often listen to Blues music?

At the close of class, have a student volunteer from each group stand and read their letter aloud. Each group must also explain what evidence from the handout they chose to highlight in their letter.

**EXTENSIONS:**

Assign students to read “...Howlin’ For The Wolf,” an article written by Cliff White in 1973, after Howlin’ Wolf’s death. After reading, refer back to Handout 1: “Got a Right to Sing the Blues” by Muddy Waters. In a written response supplemented by original research, have students address the similarities and differences between the experiences and careers of Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters. Think about their upbringings, their respective recording careers, their individual migrations northward, and how their music and performance styles compare. Students should cite relevant excerpts and quotes from these two texts and reference specific songs by each artist to support their argument.
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 6: Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

Reading 7: Students will analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g. personal accounts, print, multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’ and/or performers’ expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

**VIDEO RESOURCES**
- Muddy Waters – Got My Mojo Working (1963)
- Muddy Waters – Burr Clover Farm Blues (1941)
- Howlin’ Wolf – Smokestack Lightnin’ (1964)

**FEATURED PEOPLE**
- Leonard and Philip Chess
- Howlin’ Wolf
- Alan Lomax
- Muddy Waters

**HANDOUTS**
- Handout 1: Got a Right to Sing the Blues
- Handout 2: Blues Lyrics
- Handout 3: Letter to the Chicago Defender
- Handout 4: Chess Records
- Handout 5: African-American Life in the North