



THE BIRTH OF THE ELECTRIC GUITAR

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

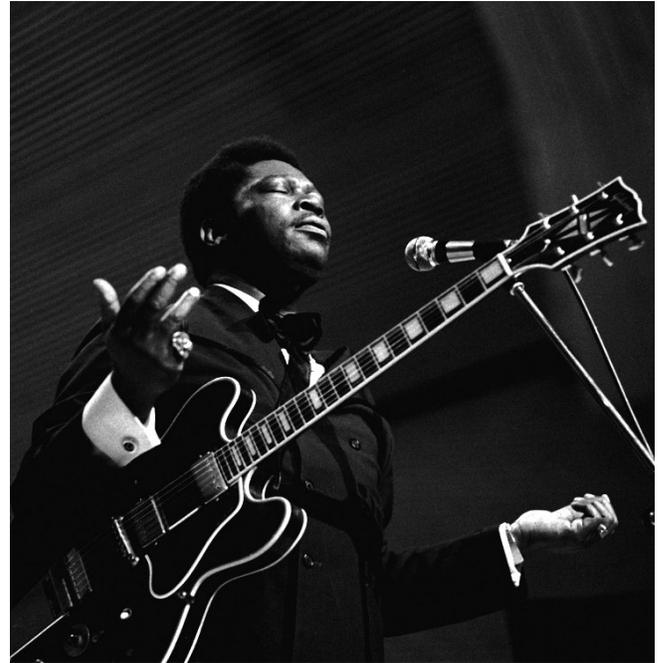
How did the electric guitar transform Blues music from the 1940s forward?

OVERVIEW

The electrification of the guitar had an enormous impact on American popular music. As the Country Blues traveled to the industrial North in the 1930s and 40s, pioneers such as T-Bone Walker and Muddy Waters began plugging in their instruments. In the process, they redefined the sound of the Blues. The electric or “urban” Blues in turn helped popular music inch ever closer to the Rock and Roll revolution.

In this lesson, students will trace some of the technological developments that made the electric guitar possible. Using a variety of Internet sources, students will conduct research into some of the early models, including the hollow-bodied Gibson ES-150, introduced in 1936, and the Fender Telecaster, the first mass-marketed solid-body electric guitar, introduced in 1952, at the dawn of the Rock and Roll era. They will explore not only how these instruments transformed the Blues sound, but how they laid the groundwork for the development of the electric guitar as an essential Rock and Roll instrument.

In addition, this lesson will also help students identify and evaluate the reliability of Internet resources, which they will use to conduct original research about early electric guitar models.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Key developments in the invention and development of the electric guitar in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s
- The impact of the electric guitar on the Blues in the 1940s and after

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Evaluate the effects of technology on history and culture
- Common Core: Students will conduct research and gather evidence to create a timeline on the invention and innovations of the electric guitar (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Writing 7; CCSS Speaking and Listening 5)
- Common Core: Students will identify research sources on the Internet and evaluate their credibility and relevance for their research task (CCSS Writing 8; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Divide students into pairs for a “Think, Pair, Share” activity.
2. Ask students to write down one item they use on a daily basis that is powered by electricity.
3. Next, ask students to imagine how that task could be accomplished without electricity. (For example, if the student said they used a computer for word processing, they might identify a manual typewriter, or even a paper and pen.)
4. Students should share their responses with their partners.
5. Ask each pair to discuss the advantages of electricity for this particular tool or gadget. Does it have any disadvantages? What was gained and what was lost by the creation of an electrified gadget that could accomplish this task?
6. Ask a few pairs to share their findings with the class as a whole.

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that in this lesson they will investigate the ways electricity began to change popular music, particularly the Blues, in the 1940s and 1950s.
2. Play the short clip of Robert Johnson playing “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” (1936) [:00-1:00] and discuss:
 - What instrument(s) do you hear?
 - Where would you guess Johnson is playing?
 - Why do you think Country Blues artists like Johnson played acoustic guitar?
 - Why do you think so many Country Blues artists performed as solo artists? (Be sure students are aware that such artists often moved around from place to place, which was relatively easy if the only equipment they needed was a guitar they could sling across their backs.)
 - What is the overall effect of Johnson’s performance? What mood does it create? What images come to mind when you hear it?
3. Play the short clip of Elmore James playing “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” (1959) [1:00-1:52], and discuss:
 - What instrument(s) do you hear? How many musicians do you think were involved in this recording?
 - Where would you guess the musicians are playing? What is the overall effect of the performance? What mood does it create? What images come to mind when you hear it? What are the main differences between this recording and Johnson’s?
 - What are the main similarities between the two recordings? Would you classify them as belonging to the same genre of music? Why or why not? (Please note that while both recordings can be described as traditional Blues, the first is considered Country Blues, while the second is an example of Urban or Electric Blues.)
 - Why do you think an artist like Elmore James might have wanted to use an electric rather than an acoustic guitar? What are the advantages of an electric guitar?
 - Based on what you have heard in these recordings, do you think the overall effect of the electric guitar on the Blues was positive or negative? Support your answer.
4. Note to instructor: The “Dust My Broom” video ends with a clip from the 1967 version of the song by Canned Heat, the California-based Blues Rock band. If you have time and inclination, you might play the segment for the class, and discuss how it relates to both the Robert Johnson and Elmore James versions. Explain to students that the song offers an example of how Blues was adopted and transformed by young, white Rock musicians in the 1960s. Questions to discuss include: What instruments do you hear? What is the overall effect of the recording? How is the clip similar to the Elmore James version of the song? How is it different? Would you describe the Canned Heat version as Blues or Rock? Or both?
5. Divide students into groups of five. Explain that the groups will work together to create an illustrated timeline of the early history of the electric guitar.
6. Distribute Handout 1: Questions About the Electric Guitar. Explain to students that they will use a website created by the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation at the Smithsonian Institution to answer the questions on the handout. After the students have accessed the site, discuss the following (answers can be found on the site):
 - What is the Smithsonian Institution? What is the National Museum of American History? What is the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation?

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

- How do we know the websites created by these institutions are reliable sources of information?
 - What are some of the ways you can judge the reliability of a website?
7. Allow students sufficient time to answer the questions on the handout with the help of the website.
 8. Briefly go over the discussion questions with the class as a whole.
 9. Explain that in order for each group to create its illustrated timeline, each student in the group will be in charge of researching one early electric guitar model. Each student must identify at

least three reliable Internet sources to use in completing his or her research.

10. Distribute one set of handouts to each group. The guitar models they will research are:
 - Rickenbacker Frying Pan
 - Gibson ES-150
 - Les Paul “Log”
 - Fender Telecaster
 - Gibson Les Paul
11. Allow students sufficient time to research their particular guitar model and complete the handouts.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. After all of the students have completed their handouts, each will briefly report his/her findings to the group.
2. Next, each group must place the handouts in chronological order. Each group should then decide on an appropriate format for their timeline (e.g., booklet, poster) and assemble a final product.
3. Discuss with the class as a whole:
 - How did the introduction of the electric guitar begin to change popular music in the 1940s and 50s?
 - How did the introduction of the electric guitar help pave the way for Rock and Roll?
 - In general, what are some of the ways technology influences history? Do you think Rock and Roll would have been possible without the electric guitar? Why or why not?

WRITING PROMPT:

- How did the electric guitar begin to transform the Blues in the 1940s and 1950s?
- What were some of the key technological developments and early models that helped bring the electric guitar into the mainstream?

EXTENSIONS:

1. Have students research the development of the electric bass, which followed naturally from the rise of the electric guitar. Until the development of this instrument, the bass was played on large upright models that were difficult to transport and could generally be handled only by trained players. With the invention of the fretted electric bass – most notably the Fender Precision Bass, introduced in 1951—the instrument was much more portable, and could be played by guitar players.
2. Have students research the life and career of guitarist Les Paul. Paul’s solid-body “log” was a milestone in the early development of the electric guitar. The Gibson Les Paul, one of the first mass-produced solid-body electric guitars, is one of the best-selling models in the history of the electric guitar, and is still manufactured today. Paul, a Jazz and Blues guitarist, continued to perform regularly with a Gibson Les Paul up until his death at the age of 94 in 2009.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

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 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

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

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

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

- Robert Johnson, Elmore James, Canned Heat - Dust My Broom

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Robert Johnson
- Muddy Waters

HANDOUTS

- Fender Telecaster
- Gibson ES-150
- Gibson Les Paul
- Handout 1: Questions About the History of the Electric Guitar
- Les Paul “Log”
- Rickenbacker Frying Pan