



# THE BLUES: THE SOUND OF RURAL POVERTY

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How do the Country Blues reflect the challenges of sharecropping, racial injustice, and rural poverty in early 20th-century African-American life?

### OVERVIEW

“As I began to get into the history of the music,” writes Amiri Baraka (writing under the name LeRoi Jones) in his book *Blues People*, “I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. [The Blues] was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative... the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life.”

In the beginning, the Blues was a music performed by poor African Americans for audiences of poor African Americans, and a reflection of their common experiences in the Jim Crow South. The Blues were one of the few forums through which poor, rural African Americans of the late 19th and early 20th centuries could articulate their experiences, attitudes, and emotions. They made music about heartbreak, about the challenges of their lives as sharecroppers, about the relentless Mississippi River floods, about the harsh mastery of white landowners.

This lesson focuses on the music through which those hardships were expressed and on the daily lives of southern blacks in the sharecropping era. It is structured around an imagined road trip through Mississippi. Students will “stop” in two places: Yazoo City, where they will learn about the sorts of natural disasters that periodically devastated already-struggling poor southerners, and Hillhouse, where they will learn about the institution of sharecropping. They will study a particular Country Blues song at each “stop” and examine it as a window onto the socioeconomic conditions of the people who created it. Students will create a scrapbook of their journey, in which they will record and analyze what they have learned about the difficulty of eking out a living in the age of sharecropping.



Bill Tatnall in Frederica, Georgia, 1935 | Credit: Alan Lomax

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How Country Blues music reflected the socioeconomic experiences of southern African Americans in pre-World War II America
- The basic workings and challenges of the sharecropping system
- The effects of sharecropping on the daily lives of African-American and white tenant farmers
- The effects of natural disasters such as river floods on poor southerners in pre-World War II America
- How the paintings of Jacob Lawrence represented African American life in the South before World War II

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Closely read song lyrics for information, point of view, and argument
- Extrapolate arguments about music by assessing sound, mood, tone, and instrumentation
- Use maps to find locations and construct a logical travel sequence
- Common Core: Students will examine visual texts for information, point of view, and argument and evaluate that content in small discussion groups (CCSS Reading 8; CCSS Reading 9; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will write an informative text that draws connections among various print, audio and visual texts in order to explain the connection between Country Blues and rural poverty and sharecropping (CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Writing 9)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

#### 1. Distribute Handout 1: Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson, and play the clip from Nas' "Bridging the Gap" (2004). Discuss:

- After listening to the lyrics of this song, what relationship do you think Hip Hop has with the Blues? (Note to instructor: You may need to explain to students who Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf were.)
- According to Nas, what is the relationship between music and a person's identity — who they are?

#### 2. Show students video clip of Howlin' Wolf performing "I'll Be Back Someday" (1964). Ask them to consider just what Nas might have connected with in this music.

#### 3. Display the quote below, from the 1963 book *Blues People*, by Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones):

*"[The Blues] was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative... the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life."*

## MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

### 4. Discuss:

- What does Baraka mean in this quote? How does Howlin' Wolf embody this? How would you put Baraka's ideas into your own words?
- Does "Bridging the Gap" support Baraka's thesis? What specific examples can you identify?

### PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that in this lesson they will take an imagined road trip through Mississippi to visit two sites where they will learn about African-American life in the South in the early part of the 20th century, and how that life was reflected in Country Blues music. Students will visit two stations where they will examine a series of artifacts including film clips, photographs, visual art, and readings. They will answer a series of questions about these artifacts. For a post-lesson homework activity, students will be asked to research a third stop, the hometown of famed Blues musician B.B. King, Indianola, Mississippi. The stations are:

- Station 1: Yazoo City in the Mississippi Delta. Poor southerners, black and white alike, lived in the shadow of natural disaster. Students will examine songs, paintings, and imagery to learn about the floods, pestilence, and drought that threatened the lives of southern field workers. The resources for this station are:
  - Video: Bessie Smith, "Homeless Blues" (1927)
  - Video: Charley Patton, "Bo Weevil Blues" (1929)
  - Video: Son House, "Death Letter Blues" (1968)
  - Image: Paintings of Jacob Lawrence from the Great Migration Series, Panel 9
  - Image: Photo of destruction from the 1927 Mississippi River flood
- Station 2: Hillhouse, Mississippi. Even though

slavery was abolished after the Civil War, African-American and white tenant farmers lived a life of grinding poverty under the rules of sharecropping. Students will examine texts to learn about this economic system. The resources for this station are:

- Video: Lightnin' Hopkins, "Cotton" (1959)
- Handout: Explanation of Sharecropping (from PBS, "Sharecropping in Mississippi")
- Image: Paintings of Jacob Lawrence from the Great Migration Series, Panel 17
- Images: Dorothea Lange, Photographs of Sharecroppers (c. 1937)
  - Cotton sharecroppers. Greene County, Georgia, 1937
  - Poor mother and children, California, 1936
  - Sharecropper's cabin and sharecropper's wife, ten miles south of Jackson, Mississippi, 1937
  - Thirteen-year old sharecropper boy near Americus, Georgia, 1937

2. Explain to students that after visiting the two stations, they will be asked to create a scrapbook based on their imaginary travels. (Note: It is up to the instructor whether this project will be completed at home or if additional class time will be provided, and whether it will be completed on an individual basis or by groups.)
3. Distribute Handout 2: Scrapbook Guidelines. Invite several students to read, having each read one part of the assignment aloud. Clarify any part of

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

- the assignment that remains unclear to students. Instruct students to be mindful of these guidelines as they visit the stations. Assign a deadline for completion of the scrapbook.
4. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Distribute Handout 3: Mapping Your Trip Through Mississippi, and instruct each group to complete the requirements on the handout.
  5. Distribute Handout 4: Questions for Road Trip Stations. Inform students that they now begin their journey through the stations. In order to accommodate the needs of the classroom, they will not actually follow the route they have planned. Instead, divide groups evenly between the two stations, instructing them to finish the first and then move on to the second.
  6. Instruct students to discuss the questions for each artifact as a group. Students should take notes on their own copies of the handout.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

After all groups have visited both stations, reconvene the class as a whole. Refer back to the questions posed in the Motivational Activity and discuss:

- How do the artifacts you have seen reflect the themes in Baraka's quote and in "Bridging the Gap?"
- How did the Country Blues reflect the experience of African-Americans in the rural South early part of the 20th century?

## HOMEWORK ASSESSMENT:

Have students complete the Scrapbook Activity, and have them also research a third station: Indianola, Mississippi, the hometown of Blues superstar B.B. King, who was born into a family of poor sharecroppers in 1925.

## WRITING PROMPT:

How did the Country Blues reflect the challenges of sharecropping, racial injustice, and rural poverty in early 20th-century African-American life? Be sure to make specific references to the artifacts seen and heard in this lesson.

## EXTENSIONS:

1. Assign students additional research as part of the scrapbook project. You may wish to ask students to identify additional Blues songs, images, artifacts, or performers, or to compile additional information about sharecropping and/or the 1927 Mississippi River flood.

## EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

2. Ask students to visit the website “Obama’s Secret Weapon in the South.” Once they have read the story and inspected the images, ask them to discuss and/or write about the connections among prehistoric geography, southern sharecropping, the Blues, and modern presidential politics.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

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 5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

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*

Writing 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

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*

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media

and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

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**

- J.B. Lenoir – Alabama Blues (1965)
- Howlin' Wolf – I'll Be Back Someday (1964)
- Nas – Bridging the Gap (2004)
- Bessie Smith – Homeless Blues (1927)
- Son House - Death Letter Blues (1968)
- Charley Patton - Bo Weavil Blues (1929)
- Lightnin' Hopkins - Cotton (1959)

### **FEATURED PEOPLE**

- Lightnin' Hopkins
- Howlin' Wolf
- Nas
- Bessie Smith
- Muddy Waters

### **HANDOUTS**

- Handout 1: Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson
- Handout 2: Scrapbook Guidelines
- Handout 3: Mapping Your Trip Through Mississippi
- Handout 4: Questions for Road Trip Stations
- Handout for Station 3: Explanation of Sharecropping