



THE AMERICAN BLUES IN BRITAIN

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

In what ways did American Blues affect English musicians in the early 1960s?

OVERVIEW

“[Before the Beatles] The pop music in this country was very watery and weak, not worth talking about. Things like Cliff Richard.” – Pete Townsend of the Who on British popular music in the early 1960s

This lesson looks at the Blues scene in England that prefigured the British Invasion. Though young people there were able to hear Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, and other artists associated with early American Rock and Roll, the music they could call their own, British popular music, sometimes left them dissatisfied. As Pete Townsend describes in the epigraph above, he was among those who found the home offerings “watery and weak.”

But if one thing marked the U.K. at that time, it was a respect for American music. Yes, for Rock and Roll -- but also for the Blues tradition. Artists who had never left the States came over to England, France, and Germany and found themselves welcomed and celebrated. American Bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy found they could have careers in Europe when in the States they had little going on. Starting in 1962, the European interest in American Blues was fed by the American Folk Blues Festival, an annual touring festival that brought Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, and many more to European audiences intermittently over the next few decades. In the audience for those first shows were future members of the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and other major acts of the 1960s and 1970s.

Central to this lesson is a comparison of Cliff Richard and the Shadows, as an example of early 1960s British popular music, with the Blues that a young person in the U.K. might have seen at an American Folk Blues Festival. Students will get a chance to consider what the Blues might have meant to musicians like Cyril Davies, Alexis Korner, and Long John Baldry, all key figures in the British Blues explosion.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The importance of American Blues to the musicians who were a part of the British Blues explosion
- The differences between British popular music of the early 1960s and the American Blues that was coming over to the U.K.
- The British musical scene from which groups like the Rolling Stones emerged

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Extrapolate arguments about music by assessing sound, mood, tone, instrumentation
- Draw connections among various print, audio, and visual texts
- Write creatively for personal and/or small group expression
- Common Core: Students will read a text and analyze how the individuals and ideas interact over the course of the text; students will gain knowledge by recognizing the key details and ideas of the text (CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Reading 3)
- Common Core: Students will view multiple videos and analyze the speaker's point of view (CCSS Speaking and Listening 3)
- Common Core: Students will write a narrative of an imagined experience using well-chosen details taken from the lesson (CCSS Writing 3; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2); students will conduct research for a short research paper (CCSS Writing 7)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Explain to the students that they'll be watching two clips and taking notes about what they see, withholding their immediate responses until both clips have been shown and they are able to do a focused comparison. (Note: Do not supply information about either clip.)
2. Show the Cliff Richard and the Shadows performance of "The Young Ones" from 1962. Then show the clip of Big Mama Thornton, with Buddy Guy, performing "Hound Dog."
3. Ask students to write a comparison of the two performances, either in columns or in sentence form.
Questions to address:
 - How do the artists sound different?
 - How do they look different?
 - Which performance has more energy?
 - If you were a young person growing up in England, which performance might be more exciting and why?
4. Have the students share their responses in a teacher-directed discussion.

PROCEDURE:

1. Show the class the first minute or so of the interview with the Who's Pete Townsend, from which the epigraph above is taken. Ask them the following questions:
 - How does Townsend describe the British popular music of the early 1960s, before the Beatles hit?
 - What is his characterization of Cliff Richard?
 - What does Townsend say about the music and culture of the States as an alternative to what he and others felt was "watery and weak" in English music? (Note: Explain that Townsend wasn't alone in his thinking. Other young people in Britain were looking for music that spoke to them when pop acts like Cliff Richard didn't. What many of them found most exciting as an alternative was American Blues.)
2. Have students read "Long John Meets John Lee Hooker," the Rock's Backpages article from 1964 in which American Bluesman John Lee Hooker meets young British Bluesman Long John Baldry. Have the students break into groups of three to answer the following questions about the article:
 - How would you describe the relationship between the two musicians?
 - How old was Long John Baldry when he started listening to American Blues?
 - What seems to be Baldry's relationship to American Blues music?
 - What would you say are the differences between the two men?
 - How did Baldry come to know so much about John Lee Hooker?
 - Why do you think Hooker matters so much to Baldry?
3. Have the groups pick a presenter to share their answers with the class.
4. Explain to the students that many American Blues performers came to England during the 1950s and 1960s and that Long John Baldry and others got to see many of them in concert. One series of traveling performances, called the American Folk Blues Festival, would visit France, Germany, and England for many years, starting in 1962. Members of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin attended some of these shows, as did Long John Baldry. What follows is a clip from one of those shows:
5. Show Muddy Waters performing "Got My Mojo Working" as a part of the American Folk Blues Festival.
6. Ask students what they think Long John Baldry might have liked about the performance, based on the article they read.
7. After discussing their answers, have them watch Baldry perform the same song with Cyril Davies. Discuss the following questions:
 - What do Davies and Baldry borrow from Muddy Waters' version of "Got My Mojo Working"?
 - What is different in Baldry and Davies' version of the song?
 - How does the Davies/Baldry performance differ from what you saw of Cliff Richard earlier?
 - How would you say their version of "Got My Mojo Working" is a reaction to the kind of Pop played by Cliff Richard?
8. What do you think the American Blues brought to young people in England?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Have the class watch J.B. Lenoir’s “Alabama Blues,” from the American Folk Blues Festival. Ask the class to imagine that they are 15 years old, living in England, and tired of the kind of music their friends are listening to, by groups like Cliff Richard and the Shadows. Ask students to write a paragraph explaining why, as young people in England, Lenoir’s music seems more “real” to them. Ask three or more students to share their reflections.

Finally, ask the class if there is a music from today that feels more “real” than the pop they typically hear.

HOMEWORK ASSESSMENT:

Assign one or more of the following:

- **Written Expression:** Building on the last part of the class discussion, have students write a page about a performer they feel is especially “real,” a performer who speaks to them in ways that some mainstream pop does not.
- **Creative Expression:** Ask students to imagine they are the Long John Baldry of today and to write a Blues lyric that connects to the traditions of Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and J.B. Lenoir.
- **Research:** Assign students to research Cyril Davies, Alexis Korner, or Long John Baldry, focusing on what these musicians did to inspire groups associated with the British Invasion like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and the Yardbirds.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a 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 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 based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

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 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 9: Global Connections

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)
- Big Mama Thornton and Buddy Guy – Hound Dog (1965)
- Cyril Davies – Got My Mojo Working (1963)
- Muddy Waters – Got My Mojo Working (1963)
- The Who – The British Invasion (1966)
- Cliff Richards and the Shadows – The Young Ones (1962)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Long John Baldry
- Cyril Davies
- Buddy Guy
- John Lee Hooker
- Alexis Korner
- The Rolling Stones
- Big Mama Thornton
- Muddy Waters
- The Who