

B.B. KING MUSEUM AND DELTA INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Curriculum Lesson Plans 6 – 8

B.B. King – A Life in Music

Lesson Title:

B.B. King – A Life in Music

Grade Levels: 6 - 8**Content Area(s):**

Language Arts
Social Studies
Career Education

Related Themes:

Careers
Blues
Biography
Migration
American Music

Overview of the lesson:

Students will meet B.B. King through stories and his music. They will discuss the life experiences that helped make him who he is today.

Proposed Time Frame: Two 50-minute class periods or more.

Materials:

B.B. King Biography Article
Time Line of B.B. King
Photos from various times
Discussion Topic Cards
Venn Diagram

Equipment:

Internet connection and video projector; computer speakers

BIG IDEA: Each person’s life story is a unique combination of circumstances, experiences, and the influences of individuals and events. Examining the life story of a famous person can teach valuable lessons.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will...

1. Get to know the musician, Riley B. King, through facts, stories, photos, emotions and music.
2. Write about how life experiences shape who we become as individuals.
3. Discover that “Lucille” is an important music-making partner with B.B. King.

Food for thought: “B.B.’s fame is worldwide. The details of his life story are full of the history of our times, and that story has much to offer anyone interested in the American South, in the changing economics and sociology of American race relations, and in the impact of technology on the social mechanisms of American society at large. Moreover, there is much to recommend the story of B.B. King as plain human drama.”

“...The trajectory of B.B. King’s life that runs through time, space and history from that sharecropper’s cabin in Berclair to the Capitol in Jackson* and beyond, has a breathtaking majesty. It’s important to step back and contemplate the arc of that curve, because the way stations in his life between those two points are benchmarks in the history of our culture and society. In many ways, the story of Riley B. King, known to the world as the King of the Blues, B.B. King, is the story of America from the first quarter-mark of the twentieth century into the first decade of the twenty-first century.” Quote source: B.B. King biographer, Charles Sawyer

* In February 2005, the Mississippi Legislature and Governor presented a proclamation to B.B. King on B.B. King Day in Jackson, MS.

PROCEDURES

- Prior to teaching the lesson, read through a short **biography** of B.B. King and select some **photos** to view. Preview three **videos**; two performance selections and one video that tells a story about when he was a teenager. See links to videos in the appendix.
- Make copies of a **Discussion Topic Cards** for small group task.
- Reflect on “Food for Thought” quotes. B.B. King’s life has spanned important periods of American History: mechanized farming, the Great

Curriculum Resources:

- *The Arrival of B.B. King*, an authorized biography by Charles Sawyer, 1980
- *B.B. King Treasures* (with CD) by B.B. King and Dick Waterman, 2005
- B.B. King Museum and Interpretive Center, <http://www.bbkingmuseum.org>
- B.B. King official website www.bbking.com
- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, <http://rockhall.com>
- Mississippi Blues Trail information and trail marker maps; videos and curriculum guide <http://msbluestrail.org>

Vocabulary:

- Album
- Blues
- Cut a record
- Gold album
- Gospel music
- Hit
- Platinum album
- Pop chart
- R&B
- Sharecropper
- Single
- Top Forty

Lesson Extensions:

- Visit the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center
- Research life stories of a different famous person
- Listen to examples of blues music by other performers
- View (preview first) additional YouTube or GuitarTube videos of

Migration, installation of electricity in rural areas, inventions of radio and the phonograph, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Era, building of the Interstate Highway system, growth of American music, advent of computers, the expansion of technology, etc.

- Introduce the lesson with a question, “Who is the most famous blues performer alive today?” If you get a right answer, follow-up with questions about what students already know about B.B. King.
- Share with students some photos and facts of B.B. King’s life as recorded in the biographies listed in the References / Resources section of this plan.
- Show the video, *B.B. King Remembers*. He speaks about his childhood and four men who had a lasting influence on his life.
- Invite students to think about what life was like for young Riley King. Divide them into groups of three to four. Give each group one of the **Discussion Topic Cards**. For three to five minutes, ask each group to imagine what life was like for people living in rural Mississippi between 1925 and 1940. Call time, and ask group members to form new groups of three to four. Each person in the new group will tell about what they discussed on their topic card. Listen to the groups’ discussions to see if they accurately comprehend the time period or topic they are discussing.
- Show the video, *Young Man in a Hurry*, where B.B. King tells about an accident with a tractor on Mr. Barrett’s farm. Ask students to reflect upon the story he told. Key points in the video are B.B. King’s decision to pay back the debt to Mr. Barrett, Mr. Barrett’s understanding, and an important lesson learned.
- Ask the students to write a short essay (specify assignment details) about how conditions in America during B.B.’s first 15 years (from 1925 – 1940) might lead to the development of Blues music and his personal choice to become a musician.
- Ask the students if they have heard B.B. King’s music, or if they have attended the annual Homecoming event held each year in Indianola. Ask any who responded to say more about their exposure to B.B. King.
- When he fled Mr. Barrett’s farm to go to Memphis, he was able to hear live music and play with local groups. He got his first music job there when he was in his early twenties. His first real hit was “Three O’clock Blues,” recorded when he was twenty-five years old, in 1951.
- In the 1960s, B.B. continued to cut records and perform outside of Memphis. These performances were usually in night clubs with all black audiences. Later in the 1960s he began performing for mixed audiences of black and white people. By 1970, when he won a Grammy for Best Rhythm and Blues Vocal Performance, he began performing in large concert venues, a practice that continues to this day.
- Show the video, *Let the Good Times Roll*. In this up-tempo selection, several band members are featured in addition to the guitar solos. Notice that the band members seem to know when it is their turn to play a solo, and how long they should play. This comes from experience working

selected performances by B.B. King.

- Visit the website of the Mississippi Blues Trail to see B.B. King's markers and to find other information related to the blues.
- Read the text of the interview with Marc Meyers (see resources #8)
- View the Guitar Lesson (Resources #9) to learn about finger bending technique.

Standards and Competencies

Common Core State Standards

ELA Writing: Text Types and Purposes

8.1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

ELA Speaking and

Listening: Presentation of knowledge and Ideas

SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation

Writing History; Text Types and Purposes

WHST.6-8.1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
b. Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that

together, and from following the cues of the leader, B.B. King.

- If any of your students play guitar, ask them to describe some of the techniques that were seen or heard.
- Play the video, *Guitar Lesson, Early Influences*. In this video, B.B. discusses the technique of finger bending that became part of his own playing style.
- B.B. King's recordings have sold millions of copies. He has won at least fourteen Grammy awards, and numerous other awards and honors. Today he tours in a special coach, performing about 100 concerts per year.
- Ask the students: Have you ever had the blues? What does that phrase mean to you? Are the blues something everyone experiences at one time or another? One of B.B.'s original songs, *The Thrill is Gone*, won a Grammy award. As we listen to a performance of it, be prepared to describe what made this blues song popular with audiences.
- Show the video, *The Thrill is Gone*. Ask the students why they think this selection became very popular with audiences.
- Play the recording of *Cryin' Won't Help You Baby*. Ask students to work in pairs to compare and contrast the two performances using a Venn diagram.
- Closing discussion: In 1998, the U.S. government designated B.B. King its "Ambassador of Music," under which title he represented the United States at the World Expo in Lisbon, Portugal. When you think of his humble beginnings, what qualities do you think led to him becoming a world class celebrity? What would it be like to be B.B. King for a day?

Note: There are two more lessons in this curriculum for grades 6 - 8.

ASSESSMENT(S)

1. Small group discussion: Listen to small group discussions to assess how well students address the assigned topics, and share with other groups.
2. Writing assignment: Read through the students' essays; decide whether to grade them, or to acknowledge exemplary works.
3. Ask student pairs to present their Venn diagrams to the class; give verbal or written feedback.

LESSON RESOURCES

1. B. B. King's Life History article – birth to late teens
<http://msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/kilmichael-b-b-kings-roots#>
2. B.B. King Biography Article – <http://www.bbking.com/bio/>

demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.

Mississippi Visual and Performing Arts Framework

Music, Middle Level IV (8th)

7. Develop awareness of aesthetic qualities in works of music. (A)

- a. Analyze the way elements of music evoke or represent moods or feelings while performing or listening to music.

3. Video: *B.B. King Remembers*, 4:44 – King’s memory of his early life in Mississippi. He names four men who greatly influenced his character. <http://www.msbluestrail.org/films>
4. Video: *Young Man in a Hurry*, 2:26. – A story about working on Mr. Barrett’s Farm. <http://www.bbkingmuseum.org/web-films>
5. Video: *Let the Good Times Roll*, 4:38, North Sea Jazz Festival, 2009 performance. <http://www.guitar-tube.com/watch/bbking-good-times-roll>
6. Video: *The Thrill is Gone*, 4:32, 1991 performance <http://www.guitar-tube.com/watch/bb-king-the-thrill-is-gone>
7. Audio: *Cryin’ Won’t Help You, Baby*, 3:01, 1961 performance, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBR7TO_CjXw
8. B.B. King Interview (text only) with Marc Meyers, June 2011: <http://www.jazzwax.com/2011/02/interview-bb-king.html>
9. Video: *B.B. King Guitar Lesson – Early Influences – T-Bone Walker*, 7:26. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBR7TO_CjXw