

B.B. KING MUSEUM AND DELTA INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Curriculum Lesson Plans Grade 6 - 8

Singing the Blues

Content Area(s):

Language Arts
Social Studies
Music - Blues
Career Education

Related Themes:

Blues
Biography
African American History
American Music
Entertainment
Popular culture

Overview of the lesson:

Students will get to know the artist, B.B. King through viewing and accompanying videos of live performances. They will write their own lyrics to create an original blues song.

Proposed Time Frame:

Two 50-minute class periods or more.

Materials:

History of the Blues
Sample Blues Lyrics

Equipment:

Internet connection and video projector; music examples; computer speakers

BIG IDEA: Singing and playing the blues is a meaningful way to express feelings. Bluesman B.B. King communicates those feelings through his singing and by playing his guitar, Lucille.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will...

1. Describe what they discover about the Blues by viewing a brief documentary and watching live performance videos.
2. Experience the concept of expressing the feeling of the Blues by accompanying a performance video.
3. Compose lyrics for a Blues song by studying sample lyrics.
4. Perform an original Blues song created during class time.

LESSON BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Blues is the name given to both a musical form and a music genre that originated in African-American communities of primarily the “Deep South” of the United States around the end of the 19th century from spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads. The blues form, ubiquitous in jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll is characterized by specific chord progressions, of which the twelve-bar blues chord progression is the most common. – Wikipedia

Book Cover Statement - B.B. King has the blues running through his blood. Growing up in the rural poverty of the Mississippi Delta, King first experienced the blues at nine years old, when his mother passed away. The man of the house before the end of his first decade, he used this strife as a source of inspiration and launched one of the most celebrated musical careers in American history.

King has led a remarkable life...[dramatized by] his whirlwind adventures from the Memphis of the forties to the Moscow of the nineties with unflinching candor and sincerity. But most of all, B.B.’s story is the story of the blues – the evolution from country acoustic to urban electric, the birth and explosion of rock’n’roll – and B.B.’s own long, but ultimately triumphant, struggle for crossover success, during which he remained unwaveringly true to the music of his heart. – *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King*, by David Ritz, 2011, book cover quote

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 maps, videos and curriculum guide <http://msbluestrail.org>

Vocabulary:

- After beat
- Bars or Measures
- Blues
- Chorus
- Crossover
- Pop Charts
- R & B/Rhythm and Blues
- Urban Blues
- Verse

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

PROCEDURES

- Prior to the lesson, read *The Story of the Blues – A Concise History* (See Lesson Resources).
- Preview the audio soundtrack and videos to be used in the lesson.
- Invite the students to take a journey into the world of the Blues. Ask them to close their eyes and imagine a wide open area out in the country where crops are grown. While they keep eyes closed, play the *introductory sample from the audio book version of Blues Journey*.
- After listening, ask students to open their eyes. Ask them what caught their attention, what they noticed about the text that was read. Also, ask them about the sounds they heard and how they felt as they listened.
- Ask the students if they have seen a marker of the Blues Trail in Mississippi. From their responses, determine what the students already know about Mississippi as the “Birthplace of the Blues.”
- There are 170 markers in the state (2013) and eleven outside of Mississippi. These blues markers demonstrate the significance of the blues in Mississippi, and the many people and places that are featured.
- Play the video: *Experience the Blues Where They Were Born*. Ask students what they noticed about the photos and interviews they saw. Listen for comments about rural life, images of the landscape, poverty, early musicians, entertainment, audiences, and present day performers.
- Give a brief overview of the history of the blues (see Lesson Resources). Comment, or ask students to reflect upon the conditions of daily life for the people who lived in Mississippi’s rural agricultural communities.
- Show the video, *Blues Boy Tune*. This video demonstrates B.B. King’s unique guitar style. Describing his playing in his own words, he said, “When I sing, I play in my mind; the minute I stop singing orally, I start to sing by playing Lucille.”
- The song title, *Blues Boy Tune* comes from a nickname that was given to young Riley King when he first started playing in Memphis night clubs. His friends called him the Blues Boy of Beale Street, which was later shortened to B.B.
- Ask the students how the video made them feel, or what the music might be trying to express. Note: the music is slow and mournful. Notice the facial expressions. Watch the fingers closely to see what B.B. King does to create his unique guitar-playing style.
- Not all blues tunes are slow. The next example is a fast tempo blues, *Bad Case of Love*. Listen to a short segment. Invite the students to play along with the recording by using “found sounds.” Suggestions: tapping a hand on a thigh; snapping fingers, tapping a pencil on a hard surface, rubbing two pieces of paper together, tapping a plastic ruler on a book.
- Give students time to decide what kind of sound they will make. Remind them that their task is to make music (not noise) to accompany

GuitarTube videos of selected performances by B.B. King.

- Visit the website of the Mississippi Blues Trail to see B.B. King's markers and to discover other information and lesson plans related to the blues.
- Read and study the book, *Blues Journey* by Walter Dean Myers. The book is graphic and visually powerful in its treatment of the topic of the Blues.

Standards and Competencies

Common Core State Standards

ELA Writing Grade 6:

Text Types and Purposes

W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

- d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events.

ELA Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- d. Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate

the artist. Guide the performance by varying who plays at what time. Divide the class into groups and let the groups play different sections of the song. Choose a student conductor to bring in the different groups. Ask students to begin after the introduction, so that everyone can hear the beat before starting to play the accompaniment.

- Assess the students' performance via verbal feedback, or facilitate a self-assessment, paying particular attention to whether the accompaniment was faithful to the feelings expressed by the song, and made musical sense.
- Blues song lyrics follow a pattern. The first line of the lyrics makes statement; the second line repeats the first. The third line gives new information, and it usually rhymes with the last word of the first line.
- Ask the class to decide what they might write about to create an original blues song. Explain that the text is built on a 4-beat pattern of twelve bars (measures) of music. Begin with a statement of the problem; *i.e.*, My **dog** kept **barking** and he **kept** me up all **night**. Continue, creating the last line and maintaining four beats per line.
- Decide if the class would be better prepared to write their own lyrics if they created a second verse as a class. When students seem sufficiently confident, divide them into groups of two or three to write a blues song.
- Ask each group to create blues song lyrics of at least three verses that fit the 4-beat pattern. Monitor the groups as they work.
- Based on your observation of the students' work, invite one or two groups to read aloud the lyrics they created.
- Ask if anyone would like to improvise a blues tune to sing their lyrics. If there is a volunteer, remind students to be respectful of their classmate who is performing. Invite the class to accompany the singer by patting lightly on their legs on the after beat during the song.
- Collect the groups' lyrics for use another day, or to assess them.
- Close the lesson by reminding students that while the blues were created in the early and middle of the 20th Century, the music of the blues continues to influence performers in today's music groups.

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

ASSESSMENT(S)

1. Evaluate student responses to discussion questions to determine their background knowledge and what additional information needs to be taught.
2. Analyze and give feedback to the students about their ability to successfully accompany the recording of *Bad Case of Love*, and their selection of sounds to accompany it.
3. Evaluate the student-created blues verses, giving feedback on the meter, story line, word choices and content, in general.

understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

**Social Studies – Reading
Integration of Knowledge
and Ideas, Grades 6-8**

RH.6-8.7. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

**2011 Social Studies
Framework Grade 6,
Culture**

8. Understand how location affects the cultural aspects of both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.

- b. Analyze how physical features of a region affect the cultural development of a population.

**Visual and Performing Arts
Framework: Middle School
Music Level II (6th grade)**

7. Analyze a wide variety of music for expressive qualities, using both musical and aesthetic vocabulary. (A)

- a. Demonstrate understanding of mood or feelings expressed while performing or listening to music.

4. Ask individual students to respond orally or to write what they have learned about the Blues, and how B.B. King has created his own style of singing and playing the Blues.

LESSON RESOURCES

1. *Blues Journey*, Walter Dean Myers – Audio book sample, 4:20. The narrative is written in Blues verse form. The book’s author reads the text. The sample includes blues guitar, harmonica and sound effects, as well as effective use of silence.
<http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Journey-Walter-Dean-Myers/dp/0823420795>
2. Article: *The Story of the Blues – A Concise History*, by Charles Sawyer
3. Video: *Experience the Blues Where They Were Born*, 4:44 – an introductory video on the home page of the web site of the Mississippi Blues Trail. <http://msbluestrail.org/>
4. Video: *Blues Boy Tune*, 3:12 – B.B. King plays an instrumental blues (no vocals). This selection was used in the PBS mini-series, *The Blues*, that was broadcast in 2003.
<http://www.guitar-tube.com/watch/bb-king-blues-boys-tune-live>
5. Video: *Bad Case of Love*, 6:39 – includes features by several band members.
<http://www.guitar-tube.com/watch/bbking-bad-case-of-love-hd>