

Blues for Smoke

PAGES 2013-14 Teacher Resources for Visual Arts
Wexner Center for the Arts



Interviews and Appearances of Artists Perspectives from the Artists

1. [Gary Clark Jr.](#) : As an American guitarist and musician, Clark shares insight of the dichotomy of loss and love, immersed in the heart of his music and ultimately, a blues sensibility.
2. [Dr. Cornel West](#) : A Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice, West argues that blues is a narrative seeded in resistance and survival. He depicts blues music as a search for voice and identity.
3. [Henry Rollins](#) : As a spoken word artist, journalist, and writer, Rollins portrays blues as an encounter inseparable from the exploration and definition of humanity.

Articles and Websites

[It Don't Mean a Thing: The Blues Mask of Modernism](#): (an article by Kevin Young). *Excerpt*: The blues contain multitudes. Among the last mysteries, blues music resists not only sentimentality, but also easy summary: just when you say the blues are about one thing—lost love, say—here comes a song about death, or about work, about canned heat or loose women, hard men or harder times, to challenge your definitions. Urban and rural, tragic and comic, modern as African America and primal as America, the blues are as innovative in structure as they are in mood—they resurrect old feelings even as they describe them in new ways. They are the definitive statement of that new invention, the African American, though when Langston Hughes first wrote on them and through them in the 1920s, he felt as much resistance from black folks as white. Known by black churchgoers as "devil's music," the blues are defiant and existential and necessary.

[Poets.org/](#): offers useful resources for educators, which include lesson plans, tips and more useful information.

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/jazz/map.aspx>: Explore the compositional components of blues and jazz music as well as its influence around the globe with interactive tools.

[Exploding The Narrative in Jazz Improvisation.pdf](#) : (an article by Vijay Iyer demonstrating the kinesthetic influence of blues and jazz music as a rhythmic, holistic inclusion of various parts or tones to cultivate composition). *Excerpt*: Rhythm perception and production involve a complex, whole-body experience and that much of the musical structure found in rhythm-based music incorporates an awareness of the embodied, situated role of the participant. I show that certain kinds of rhythmic expression in African-derived music are directly related to the multiple roles of the body in making music and to certain cultural aesthetics that privilege this role.

Lesson Ideas

In what ways does the blues genre transpose words from the page and epitomize poetry in terms of movement, physical space, and finally, music?

[The music in poetry](#): This publication from the smithsonianeducation.org introduces students to the rhythms of poetry. The focus is on two poetic forms that originated as forms of song: the BALLAD stanza, found throughout British and American literature, and the BLUES stanzas of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/index612.htm>: This site explores the potential impact of jazz and blues music in the classroom. Through a diverse listing of lesson plan options, PBS provides ways in which the study of jazz might be executed in the areas of math, social studies, and language arts. The exercises allow students to visualize rhythms, discover the cooperative and collaborative methods in music composition, and transcend themes from music to poetry.

How is the understanding of the evolution of blues integral in contextualizing our nation's history?

<http://www.neajazzintheschools.org/lesson5/activity1.php?uv=s>: The National Endowment for the Arts and Jazz at Lincoln Center share materials for the implementation of music into the classroom. Through activities and lesson plans, the curriculum emphasizes the parallels of jazz/blues history and the history of America. Focusing on the growth of our nation and its influence on the progression of the jazz genre, the site illuminates this interwoven relationship through an interactive timeline and music tracks.

How can music prove a tool for promoting literacy and learning?

<http://www.ihobf.org/>: Programs through the Blues SchoolHouse teach anything from how to play harmonica to quilting, with classroom guides and workshop opportunities. Also, link to the for-profit site: <http://www.houseofblues.com/aboutHOB/>.

<http://www.rockhall.com/education/resources/>: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website, in the "Education" and "Resource" tabs, provides various lesson plan options to bring music into the classroom. The lesson plans span from utilizing music as a primary source material to distance learning options.

[resources\97.05.09 Visual Blues On the Move Visual Art Syntheses of the Blues Impulse.pdf](#): Martha Savage, of the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute, shares an immense variety of classroom activities central to the blues. In addition to providing intelligent literary, discography, and videography resources, the material is creative, insightful, and compelling. Each lesson seemingly allows a new approach toward understanding the blues and its expansive significance.

Themes to Explore

Does the blues as a genre pervade larger implications of social injustice and racial inequality?

Race Relations: The most significant paradox of blues music lives in its roots to express the cultural prejudice and unjust nature of black and white relations, while working ceaselessly to heal the wounds of segregation and hostility.

Link: [Visual artist Paul “Satch” Sachtleben talks about the Blues legends, Native Americans, and his projects - pdf](#)

How does the innate intention of blues music lend itself to the idea of travel?

Journey: Through both exploration of the genre’s history and the nostalgic venturing of the music’s tone, the idea of journey an evident theme in blues music.

Link: <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/multimedia/series/AudioStories/blues-journey.aspx>

In what ways does blues parallel the rhythmic structure of poetry?

Rhythm: The significance of the rhythmic and phrasing dimensions apparent in blues instrumentals and lyrics forges an important connection to that of poetry. Rhythm is a salient component of blues music, as is explored through syncopation, metered, and polyrhythmic sound.

Link: <http://www.soundjunction.org/jazzunderstandingsyncopation.aspa>

How did improvisational techniques fuel the unique sound of the blues? Why was the musician’s ability to make moment-to-moment decisions critical for the capacity of the blues to sustain and succeed?

Improvisation: As the founders of blues music were mostly illiterate musicians, improvisation proved an essential component of the music’s style and execution. “Call and response” is heavily associated with the evolution of this genre, as rhythms began to crystalize out of this revered structure.

Link: <http://www.iwasdoingallright.com/jazz-improvisation/learn-jazz-rhythm/>

What is the significance of music as a representation of emotion? How does blues music interpret and embody the human spirit?

Emotion: *Excerpt:* The blues philosophy, expressed through the music, includes the idea that the blues is something to be accepted; not something to be gotten rid of or fixed. The blues is experienced, lived through, and survived; not conquered or overcome.

Link: [resources\Deep Blues Relational Healing The Dasein Project philosophy. art. culture.pdf](#)

How does blues actualize aspirations of equality, democracy, and justice?

The American ideal: Musicians emulate and express their hope and trust in the dream of America and the ideal opportunity available to its people.

Link: <http://curiosity.discovery.com/question/jazz-model-of-democratic-action>

Supplemental Media Resources

How can the improvisational structure of blues be applied as an approach to writing?

[The Life of Riley](#): A film documenting the life of B.B. King. Revered as “The King of Blues,” B.B. King’s identifiable guitar style and emphasis on improvisation could serve as avenues to explore composition and originality.

What makes the blues sound so unique? How has this sound been transformed and integrated into the music of today?

[School Teacher Blues](#): Music by current artist groups, such as “Saffire: The Uppity Blues Women,” could serve as material to familiarize students with the unique sound and contribution of the blues genre.

<http://www.artfilms.com.au/Detail.aspx?ItemID=3159&CategoryID=20>: Jazz percussionist Max Roach employs the four “limbs” of his drum set to expose the role of collaboration and layering of rhythms in composition. Roach illustrates how movement emerges from different rhythmic patterns in an incredibly relatable approach to polyrhythmic diversity.

How does blues music symbolize greater social and political issues throughout the history of America? In what ways did the blues impact the narrative of American culture and experience?

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/>: As Congress declared 2003 “The Year of the Blues,” seven directors, including Executive Producer Martin Scorsese, have created a seven part film series to explore the evolution of blues from spiritual folk tunes to its contributions of our nation’s history and culture as a universal medium. An outreach campaign was developed to introduce the blues influence into the classroom, making available an extensive amount of educational material.

[Jazz](#): A film by Ken Burns, this film explores jazz music as “America’s greatest cultural achievement.” Regarding jazz as an outlet of democracy, this portrays the themes of independence, cooperation, collaboration, and individualism.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>: Through Billie Holiday’s recording *Strange Fruit*, students are asked to explore the significance of music in social

issues. Emerging initially as a poem, the song is utilized as a primary document to realize the vivid reality of social injustice, as the song depicts the lynchings of African Americans during a time of grave inequality.

**How do the lyrics and experience of blues music illuminate the human condition?
How does this exploration cultivate a physical representation of the blues sound?**

<http://landsvideo.com/vf-bearden.shtml>: Students are encouraged to identify the relationship parallels of jazz and art through the brilliant artwork of Romare Bearden. As the intention of Bearden's work is ultimately to "redefine the image of man," viewers are exposed to explanations and interpretations of Bearden's artistic exploration of humanity.

Book & Text Resources

Let America Be America Again by: Langston Hughes

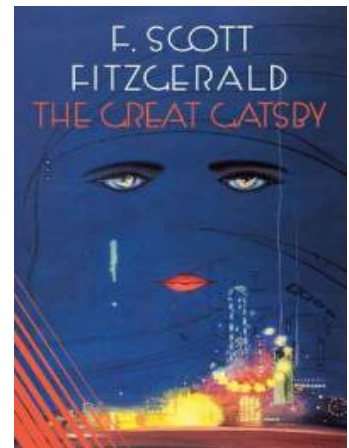
Hughes, a blues artist and writer, speaks to the hopes of freedom and equality promised by the opportunity of democratic America. As a black man, he represents the disadvantaged and critical eye of minorities and immigrants, questioning the reality of the American Dream. Through poetic devices, the text directly confronts the reader and challenges America to be better for the people who passionately believe in its possibility.

Link: [Analysis of Let America Be America Again by Langston Hughes -.pdf](#)

The Great Gatsby by: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Esteemed for its seemingly timeless literary significance, Fitzgerald explores the myth of the American Dream. The novel presents the ideals of American opportunity and reveals the contorted and corrupted nature of a nation's once fundamental principle based on possibility and equality. How does this novel compare to the themes expressed in Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*?

Link: <http://beatrixeppler.blogspot.com/2013/04/the-great-gatsby-poems-related-to-novel.html>

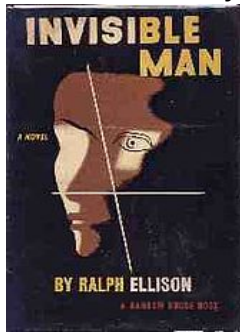


The Weary Blues by: Langston Hughes

Hughes evokes the tone and tempo of blues music in his poem "The Weary Blues" through diction, repetition of lines, and inclusion of blues lyrics, forging an appreciation for the state of mind of the blues musician.

Link: [resources\'The Weary Blues\' by Langston Hughes.pdf](#)

Invisible Man by: Ralph Ellison



Written like a jazz composition with solo parts and seemingly improvised events, Ellison portrays social issues concerning African Americans in the twentieth century. As a musician turned writer severely influenced by the jazz momentum, Ellison examines and probes black identity, rummaging in the idea of individualism through a man who considers himself socially invisible.

Link: <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/blackandblue.htm>

The First Book of Jazz by: Langston Hughes:

The official publication of Langston Hughes, this primary document serves as insight to the definition and mechanics of blues music. Filled with original text and illustrations, the book explores syncopation, composition, and improvisation.



Link: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/40423298@N08/sets/72157625289734072/>

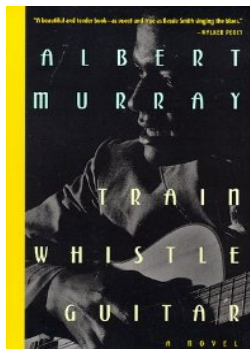
Poetry by: B.B. King

Analyze the relationship between text and music through a collection of poems by “The King of Blues.” Students might be encouraged to realize rhythmic significance, lyrical evocation, and emotional expression present in both the lyric and poetic text of a famed blues artist.

Link: <http://www.mibba.com/Member/201054/Poems/>

Train Whistle Guitar by: Albert L. Murray

Murray, a mid-century writer heavily influenced by the impact of jazz and blues,



emphasizes the pre-Civil Rights lives of African Americans. Writing in a disjointed narrative style, Murray crafts character development and imagery in a mosaic, jazz-inspired approach. The novel disperses the vast shades of the color blue to symbolically emphasize the identity of his characters. How does the narrative provide a definition for blues as a genre? What might a collage of blues evoke or expose in respect to the feelings and emotions felt by artists and musicians of the time?

Link: [Reading “Train Whistle Guitar” Into That Passionately Alive and Violent Country.pdf](#)