

Blues as a Source for Popular Contemporary Music

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Overview

The style of music called “Blues” evolved from work songs, field hollers and traditional spirituals that emanated from the pain, struggles, despair, and determination of the transplanted Africans who were held in bondage in America. The melodies of these people were often built on a five note scale (pentatonic-black keys on the piano) and simplistic in its structure. There was often a series of chromatic turns that is referred to as “bending” the notes. This bending was likely a cultural idiom that allowed for the singing in western music and scales. For example, you may hear such micro-tonal singing in traditional Asian music.

The Blues lyrics often spoke of misfortune, loss and/or longing, so there was most frequently a poignant story of pain, wrongdoing, searching, anger, mistrust, and often physical and spiritual fatigue. The early blues singers, after emancipation, often carried news of significant events, various acts committed by people as well as personal observations and philosophical positions.

Originally, blues singers used a free form or structure when they sang. They were usually solo performers who accompanied themselves with guitar, banjo or harmonica. This free- form allowed the performers to ad-lib or emphasize certain lyrics or points of view or just “vamp” (play repeatedly) a section for a given reason.

As the size of blues bands grew, there arose the necessity to develop some sort of framework so all musicians would be at the same place at the same time. Later the recording industry further required a formula so the recording would be “neatly packaged” for a growing audience which began the twelve-bar and sixteen- bar blues form. The lyrics often came in AABC form. The harmonica structure or

chords I IV I V IV I and later I IV I IV I ii V I. The later chord structure became known as “blowing changes” when jazz musicians in small ensembles and large would play solos after starting the melody.

Blues ensembles ranged from duets and trios to big bands. Particularly popular during the 30s and 40s into the 50s, they included, Count Basie, Noble Sissle and Erskine Hawkins, to name just a few. The instrumentation of small ensembles often included piano and or guitar, bass, drums and sometimes harmonica. Horns such as trumpet, saxophone, and trombone expanded the blues sound.

The small ensembles were very flexible and often used talking instruments, wah-wah effects, to maintain a vocal quality in their playing. Harmonica players cupped their instruments with their hands and would move back and forth to get the desired effect. trumpet and trombone players used “plungers” for the effect and sax players used alternate fingerings and bending the reed with their embouchure for this effect. With these techniques blues musicians could heighten the emotional effect of a song.

Moving from place to place was often a theme and a reality for blues artists. The guitar and particularly the harmonica simulated the sound of the locomotion moving down the railroad tracks with the baleful sound of the steam whistle, the rhythm of steel wheels on steel rails and the rhythmic chugging or choo-choo of the steam engine.

The meter or time signature of the blues was overwhelmingly 6/8. This rhythm moved in groups of three’s or triplet patterns. This became the rhythmic foundations for, of course, rhythm and blues, and early rock and roll. Later, when the British musicians emerged as rock and roll musicians, they didn’t hesitate to pay homage to blues legends such as B.B King, Howling Wolf, James Brown, and others. And as further recognition of the influence and staying power of the blues, Eric Clapton began to focus on the blues as a classic style worthy of renewed attention. Today the blues audience is wider and more varied thanks to blues legends and contemporary artists. Like other classic music forms, the blues continues to influence artists, styles and people around the world.

This curriculum is intended for students in grades three through five. The ages range from eight through eleven. These students are accustomed to listening to popular music that include Rhythm and Blues, Rap, Hip-Hop and Rock. When these students are asked where this music comes from or how old do you think this style is or when do you think this style began, they most often respond in their time reference. For example, one student answered, “Rap began in the eighties,” because someone in his family had related that was when they began to listen to rap. Upon engaging them in a discussion of the evolution of the rap

genre, they were intrigued to hear of the many influences that were in the mix of rap. They followed this discussion up with conversations with older members of their families that covered jazz, soul music, rhythm and blues, gospel and “the blues.”

“The blues as lyric/sung poetry is a medium through which passes the essence of life experience, both its travails and ecstasies. The portrayal of life without façade enables an audience to identify with content and mood, on an honest, personal level even though Blues composition is usually grounded in individual experience.”

Many of the languages of the Africans were indeed tonal. So the language would appear to be half spoken and half sung. Added to this was the element of singing micro-tones, (small vocal movements not found in the western tempered scale but often in Asian and Indonesian music as well). This laid a solid foundation for singing what later was called “blue notes.” This particular characteristic of the blues found its way into Euro-American marches, Euro-American Concert music, Euro- American Popular Music and even some European concert music.

The melodies were often built on a five-note pentatonic scale (playing only the black keys on a piano). This gave the music a kind of melancholy wistful sound that would easily evoke a saddened emotion. As mentioned above, work songs were part of the foundation of the blues. When the transplanted Africans were working in the fields, they would begin singing. Whatever the reason, they would sing strong and loud in order to be heard by as many fellow workers as possible. They would in turn answer in song. This music was much of the time improvised by leader and group alike. This served to ease the burden of work and communicate some message or event.

Two distinct elements were present in this singing:

1. Call and Response; a leader would sing a phrase and the gathering would answer with a corresponding phrase.
2. Linear structure; the music was melody oriented. Harmony was not a conscious effort in that it became present as a result of natural voice range and limitations.

The call and response was the foundation for the AAB pattern of the later 12-bar blues format.

The rhythm of the blues was a series of long and short pulsations, e.g. ____ _ ____ _ ____ _ . Today it is sometimes referred to as “Honky Tonk” blues or sometimes “Gut Bucket” blues. This rhythm is part of a rhythm often found in West African

drumming, singing, and dancing. There would be 6 or 12 pulsations to a measure grouped in three's. The pattern would appear thus: --- --- | --- --- | in 6/8 or --- --- --- --- | --- --- --- --- | in 12/8. When the first two pulsations are tied together, ___ ___ | ___ ___ | in 6/8 or ___ ___ ___ ___ | in 12/8. This same pattern later on became a standard rhythm for jazz drummers for decades.

Today we have various styles:

- Delta Blues: from the Mississippi Delta; an earthy style often single melody with single line accompaniment
- Urban Blues: primarily from Chicago where many blues artists landed; a gritty style talking about hard times and hard relationships
- Rural Blues: developed mainly in Georgia, the Carolinas, Mississippi and Texas
- Honky Tonk Blues: using instruments—piano, bass, drums and sometimes horns with or without vocals and a strong ---- - - - - long-short rhythm.

All of these variations came from the rural sound developed in the Southern United States. After the Civil War, blues singers would often wander the land for a variety of reasons. They carried with them stories, news or accounts of events, information and sometimes messages. These early blues singers, mostly men, would accompany themselves with either a guitar, a harmonica, a banjo or sometimes they might sing without accompaniment.

In the very early years of the blues, there was no structure as we know it today. Singers were free to intone as they wished, change the melody if they so chose or change the rhythm as they felt necessary. Songs were often a collection of verses rather than a narrative. It was a free form of music in the early years and it was largely vocal. When instruments were used, they often answered the singer using techniques that imitated the voice. The instruments were made to whine, cry and sometimes mimic talking. The electronic device that allows a guitar to produce a wah-wah effect is a device that allows the guitarist to imitate a sound created by blues artists as far back as the nineteenth century. This wah-wah was produced on the harmonica by cupping the hands around the harmonica when playing and opening and closing the hands. Later on when brass instruments became a part of the blues bands, they used toilet plungers to get the same effect. Guitar players would bend the strings of the instrument to get a crying or whining sound akin to the human voice. Even today with the addition of sophisticated engineering

equipment, wah-wah and fuzz pedals and musical instruments, including the electronic keyboard, blues remains primarily a vocal style.

The blues found its way into the American music culture by way of several avenues. 1. The individual early blues musicians moving from region to region. 2. The migration of Black people from the rural south to the industrial north 3. The traveling minstrel shows and later through the recording industry. The recording industry reached a very wide audience in a relatively short time, given its distribution network. These blues recordings were distributed under the title of "Race Records" and the primary record label was Okeh Records. Some of the blues artists with successful recordings include Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Boy Fuller, Willie Brown, Robert Johnson and Johnny Shines, John Lee Hooker and Aaron "T-Bone" Walker. T-Bone Walker was a primary influence on the legendary B.B. King. These were solo blues artists who accompanied themselves. As the blues evolved into an arranged band style, W.C. Handy emerged as a gifted and renowned composer, arranger and performer. William Christopher (W.C.) Handy was a very successful and influential bandleader and composer who made some recordings of blues songs. Handy went to Huntsville A&M College to get a teaching degree and he taught music there for a couple of years. He left Alabama and moved to Chicago. "Memphis Blues" was a very successful W.C. Handy recording. He went on to record "St. Louis Blues" and "Beale Street Blues" which became blues standards for decades into the 1950's.

Black women also emerged as solid attractions as blues performers. Women such as Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, Bessie Smith and Big Mama Thornton began making recordings in the 1920's. Ma Rainey was given the title, "Mother of the Blues". She was the prototype female blues artist; she toured tent shows and cabarets with her husband William "Pa" Rainey. She performed in the South and Mid-West with her own show and at times showcased Bessie Smith and Thomas A. Dorsey, who later became known for his Gospel compositions. During her career, Ma Rainey recorded more than 90 songs.

The energy, power and magnetism of the blues influenced Euro- American composers such as Bernard Groffe, composer of the Grand Canyon Suite, John Phillip Sousa who wrote marches such as "Liberty Bell" and a host of composers working in a section of New York City known as "Tin Pan Alley." Tin Pan Alley was the center where popular "American" music was composed for sheet music, recordings and often Broadway. Early jazzmen such as Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong also used blues material when performing for national and international audiences. After World War II, a new generation of blues performers came on the scene. Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Elmore Jones, Little Walter Jacobs and Otis Spann were some of the headliners.

Blues and jazz are closely related. Many of the early blues recording artists used jazz bands to back them up. These jazzmen would in turn use some of the blues licks and techniques as part of their material. The artists who were labeled as Rhythm and Blues performers of course sang with that blues feeling, sensuality and emotion they derived from hearing, learning and living the blues. Indeed, the part of this music that was the “rhythm” was a faster form of the blues style using those seductive tonalities and forms.

Rationale

It is not unusual for children to think that the music in their world came about when they began listening to their music sources. They often remark with a mixture of surprise and delight that their parents, grandparents or some other member of their family listen to “That music from back in the day.” They should understand that as members of a family grow and change and still remain part of the same family tree, so does music grow and evolve and yet remain connected to the original source.

Given the social norms of America during the latter part of the nineteenth century and more than two-thirds of the twentieth century, it was only natural that three major genres of popular music would emerge. For the White population, there was the music of Broadway and “Tin Pan Alley”, a section of New York City where established and aspiring songwriters worked. There was Country and Western music which for decades was the most popular music in America.

The Black population in America certainly heard the above styles but substantially contributed to the musical direction and taste with its powerful and captivating offerings of Spirituals, Gospel, Jazz and Blues. The music industry later assigned the title Rhythm and Blues to include music that was slow blues, fast blues and jazz with blues material and sound.

This music from the African-American population was powerful, haunting, rhythmic, exciting and very danceable. As the audience attracted to blues music grew, its impact grew more and more substantial not only in America but around the world. Today that impact is still present in the music Jazz, Rock and Roll, Rock, Rap, and Hip Hop.

This curriculum will provide background information and samples of the development of the style of music called “The Blues” and its influence on generations of audiences and musicians alike.

- The blues have had a tremendous impact on Rock music. Early rock and roll singers such as Elvis Pressley and Bill Haley not only used blues material but tried to emulate the blues singers style of delivery and stage movements. Pressley’s hit song. “You Ain’t Nothing But A Hound Dog” was a major hit for the blues artist Big Mama Thornton. The blues artist, songwriter and producer Jesse Stone wrote the hit song “Shake, Rattle and Roll” recorded by Bill Haley and the Comets. As a matter of fact, the term rock and roll is a phrase borrowed from the blues lyrics, which referred to an intimate encounter between a man and a woman. Bill Haley would take blues musicians with him on European tours. The young British musicians acknowledged their blues influence. These musicians included The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, John Mayall and Eric Clapton Canned Heat and Cream. American rock musicians including Paul Butterfield, Marcia Ball, the Allman Brothers Band and Stevie Ray Vaughn also came under the blues influence.²

Objectives

- Students will engage in a discussion of the term “blues”
- Students will present examples or anecdotes of feeling blue
- Students will tap and clap some blues rhythms
- Students will listen to blues rhythms played on a live instrument in class
- Students will listen to recordings of various blues artists
- Students will learn selected blues songs
- Students will reflect on blues material by way of discussion and written response
- Students will be encouraged to engage family members in discussions of blues artists and their music

Strategies

Listen to a mix of blues artists from various eras and styles, e.g., B.B. King, “Blues” Bland, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, James Cotton, Robert Johnson, Etta James, Willie Dixon, Billie Holiday, Robert Cray, Ma Rainey, John Lee Hooker, Hudie (Leadbelly) Leadbetter and others.

Sing selected blues songs from the music curriculum and from other collections

Discuss elements and techniques and instrumentation found in the blues

Compare blues selections to contemporary popular music

Create blues song including lyrics, melody and accompaniment

Perform standard and original blues songs

Classroom Activities

Lyrics A topic or situation will be presented to the class. A sample of the twelve-bar AAB blues form will be presented on the chalkboard. Students will be challenged to compose one blues verse. After the first attempt, the teacher will demonstrate one blues verse. **Students** will begin their second attempt. Volunteers will then read their blues verse. As their endeavors improve, they will increase the number of verses they compose.

Collaboration Students may choose to work as teams in developing lyrics, stories, rhythms and moods.

Melodies Students will use the notes between do and so (from the scale do re mi fa so la ti do) to compose their melodies. A demonstration and discussion of the “blue notes” will help them embellish the compositions.

Listening Students will listen to a blues recording and compare their offering. Students will be given opportunity to listen to a variety of blues artists

Accompaniment All student composers will learn three basic blues chords: **I IV and V** in triad form on the piano. They may choose a steady quarter-note rhythm pattern or the long-short 6/8 rhythm pattern

Performance Students will present their work as soloists or groups with vocal and instrumental back-up.

Week One

Materials--- Stereo system, Piano, C D’s assorted percussion instruments

Day One

Begin with a discussion of the term “blues”. What do you think blues means? What does it mean to you? The teacher facilitates the discussion but does not answer the questions. Ask students to share a blues experience. After some discussion, play a blues recording “Joe Turner’s Blues” or another recording.

Compare this story to your interpretation of the blues. Homework: have students ask family to share any information concerning blues artists and/or experiences.

Day Two

Students share any information that they may have learned from their families about blues artists and/or experiences. Listen again to Joe Turner's Blues and sing. Listen to "Good Morning Blues" by Hudie Leadbetter

Week Two

Day One

Provide students with examples of music that laid the foundation for the blues. Berta, Berta: Wynton Marsallis CD titled "I Heard You Twice The First Time" Old Alabama: Alan Lomax album titled "Negro Prison Songs"

Have the students describe the songs they are listening to. Explain that the above selections are work songs. Do they paint a musical picture of men working? What sounds in the music suggest men working? What is the mood of the workers in these songs?

Day Two

Review the songs "Berta Berta" and "Old Alabama". Form groups of from three to four persons. Through movement and/or dance, act out the story heard or felt in these songs.

Week Three

Day One

All students place paper piano keyboards on their desks. Students are then instructed to find the keys, moving from left to right, with the letter-names C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C again and D again. Students will practice placing their fingers on the Keys C, E, and G for the I chord, F, A, and C for the IV chord and G, B, and D for the V chord. The teacher will move about the room helping students as needed. Students with prior keyboard experience may also assist other students.

Day Two

Students review the finger positions on the paper keyboard. They may now apply this technique to the piano keyboard. Once they find the notes, they may practice

striking a steady quarter-note rhythm. More advanced students may try the syncopated long-short 6/8 pattern

Week Four

Day One

Discuss with the class the 12-bar AAB blues form . Write an example on the board.

Good morning blues, blues how do you do
Good morning blues, blues how do you do
I'm feeling alright, Good morning how are you

Students individually or in teams compose one blues verse. If some students are able to compose more than one verse, they may do so.

Day Two

Using percussion instruments and hand clapping, students read their blues verse in rhythm with a rhythm accompaniment from the class. Next students read or sing their verse with a piano accompaniment.

Week five

Day One

Students may now listen to excerpts from selected blues artists and present verbal responses to the selection. Students then listen to contemporary artists and try to determine if they can hear blues influences or blues techniques

Day Two

Invite a guest artist to class for a mini performance. Guest, students and teacher have a blues jam session

Evaluation

Review previous session. Present information on early foundations including field hollers, levee hollers and work songs. Provide listening samples with commentary. Discuss motives and emotions that prompted blues singers and the areas in which these artists developed.

Consider the changes brought about as the blues moved from solo performer, self accompanied, to larger structured blues bands. Begin discussion of Urban Blues and major artists. Provide listening samples of blues artists. Determine the style(s) presented and explain what identifies the style.

List and discuss styles of music influenced by blues artists.
Play examples of music and artists influenced by the blues. Direct the students' attention to music clichés and devices that derive from the blues.

Listen to examples of contemporary music and determine how they were influenced by the style of music known as the blues.

Notes: 1, Ortiz M. Walton.-*Music: Black White and Blue*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972.

2. African-American Registry: The Godfather of Rock and Roll, Jesse Stone

[www. African-American Registry. Com](http://www.African-American.Registry.Com)

Annotated Bibliography

Boyars, Marion- *The Roots of the Blues*. Boston and London: Samuel Charters, 1981.

This book gives a detailed chronicle of the development of the blues in America with specific information on the African influence on the blues.

Bunsar, Gene.- *The Rhythm and Blues Story*. New York: Julian Messner, 1985.

This book gives a thorough background on well known and lesser known blues artists. It includes the lyrics of field hollers, levee hollers and spirituals as evolutionary blues material.

Carr, Roy.-*A century of Jazz*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976.

This book covers the evolution of jazz and blues from the late nineteenth century to the mid part of the twentieth century

Cohn, Lawrence.-*Nothing But the Blues the Music and the Musicians*. New York: 1981.

This book gives detailed autobiographical information on the lives of the blues musicians, their compositions and skills their mentors and those they mentored.

Haskins, James-*Black Music In America*. New York: James Haskins, 1987

This book gives significant information on the African roots of and influence on the blues. Examples are cited of African rhythms that morphed into western music and dance

Harrison, Max and Oliver, Paul.-*The New Groove, Gospel, Blues and Jazz*. New York: 1986.

This book covers the power and excitement of the music and musicians from the African- American experience with focus on the mid to late twentieth century music and artists.

Walton, Ortiz M.-*Music: Black White and Blue*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972.

This book not only gives historical information but speaks as well to the spiritual, emotional and philosophical content of the blues experience.

Discography

CD's

After Hours. A collection of three discs featuring various artists: Madacy Entertainment. Canada and New York, P.O. Box 1445 St. Laurent, Quebec, Canada H4L 4Z1 2000

Marsallis, Wynton . I Heard You Twice The First Time. Columbia-Sony Entertainment. 1992

Cray, Robert. Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark. Polrgram Records 1988

Pickett, Wilson. In The Midnight Hour. Atlantic Recording Corporation 1997

Collins, Albert Copeland, Johnny and Cray, Robert. Showdown. Alligator Records 1985

Various Artists. Solid Gold Soul. Time-Life- Music New York 1999

Various Artists. Rhythm and Blues Legends. Time-Life Music 1998

Cassett Tapes

Bland, Bobby. The Best of Bobby Bland. M.C.A. 1982 University City, Ca.

Bland, Bobby. Touch of the Blues. M.C.A. 1984 University City, Ca.

Brown, James. Please, Please, Please. Creative Sounds LTD. Alberquerque, NM

Collins, Albert. Trucking With Albert Collins. MCA Records 1981 Universal City, Ca.

Cotton, James. High Compression. WEA Music of Canada 1810 Birchmount Road , Scarborough, Ontario

Cray, Robert. False Accusations. High Tone Records Los Angeles, Ca.

Cray, Robert. Strong Persuader. Polygram Records New York

Hooker, John Lee. Boogie Chillen'. Creative Sounds LYD Alberquerque,NM

Jackson, Mahalia. 10 Most Requested Songs. Sony Entertainment New York

Kahn, Chaka. I Feel For You. Warner Brothers Burbank, Ca.

King, Albert. Roadhouse Blues. Fantasy Special Products Berkeley. Ca.

Various Artists. Best of the Blues. MCA Records Universal City, Ca.

Various Artists. Best of Chicago Blues. Flashback Records Los Angeles, Ca.

Withers, Bill. The Best of Bill Withers. Sony Entertainment New York

Albums (vinyl)

Charles, Ray. Greatest Hits. ABC Paramount New York

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Franklin, Aretha. Lady Soul. Atlantic Record Corporation New York

Holiday, Billie. Lady love. United Artists Records U.S.A.

Hopkins, Lightnin'. Autobiography In Blues. Everest Records Los Angeles, Ca.

King, B. B. Indianola Mississippi Seeds. Dunhill Records Los Angeles, Ca.

Leadbelly. Leadbelly. Everest Records Los Angeles. Ca.

Various artists-Live Recording.. Negro Prison Songs. Everest Records Los Angeles, Ca

Various Artists-Live Recording Negro Songs Of Protest Rounder Records Somerville. Mass.

Redding, Otis. Tell The Truth. ATCO Records New York.