

The History of the Blues

with

the blues berries



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The History of the Blues

Blues” music is defined as a verbalization of deeply felt personal feelings in a musical form. It evolved from the plight of the African *people* (who were brought over to America nearly 400 years ago) in the United States. As slaves without entitlement to any rights, the African people endured harsh working conditions that left them very little joy or relief.

Exercise 1

To help your class better understand what slavery may have been like for Africans, have them go through an imaginary exercise.

It is from their misery that the seeds of blues music first sprang roots. It is believed that the beginnings of blues music came directly from the field, where *the people forced to work as slaves in the field* engaged in a kind of singing sometimes called “field calling”, “hollerin’” or “chanting”. These songs, sung while they worked, helped make their back-breaking work more bearable and served to lament their treacherous situation. The ‘caller’ would sing out one line, to which the others in the field would sing a response. And thus, the earliest and most pure form of blues music was born. In those early days, the songs were largely unaccompanied by instrumentation of any kind, though sometimes, the banjo (also known as a “banza” or “banjar”) *which originated in Africa* was used in as early as the 17th century. Aside from that, clapping was commonly used to accompany the songs. The American slave owners had banned the drum, a traditional African instrument, from use because they felt it would incite slave riots. The lyrics were the black people’s way of expressing how they felt. By expressing their feelings in song, their situation seemed less hopeless; singing brought them a small bit of happiness. And so it became a strong tradition carried down through the decades of slavery. The dual purpose of blues music in the early years was to verbalize personal feelings and to call a community’s attention to those feelings.

Exercise 2

This exercise will help children appreciate the form blues music took in the early years.

With the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War in the U.S., slavery came to an

end. Though blues music was closely tied to and developed from slavery, it did not die with the emancipation. In fact, blues music now had a new lament. For many of the former slaves, the future as a free people was no more hopeful than their past as an enslaved people. The *people now* had another challenge ahead *of them*. Blues songs now revolved around the *people’s* feelings of displacement and uncertainty as *they were* left to navigate their own way through life in America.

At this time, during the 1800s, many more different types of instrumental accompaniment (besides the banjo) made their way into blues music. Many of the people were poor because they had few job opportunities, so they resourcefully fashioned instruments out of everyday household objects, like a steel wash tub normally used to wash clothes or a milk jug. The wash tub was transformed into a washtub bass and the milk jug into a tuba-like instrument. With these everyday objects the people had instruments with which to enjoy and play their blues songs. Blues music had reached the next stage of evolution.

Exercise 3

Your class can make their own simple instruments, like those used in early blues music, out of everyday objects, too.

Throughout the 20th century, many different blues styles evolved: urban and classic blues played by women and bands in dance halls and clubs in cities; country blues played by traveling musicians in rural areas all over the U.S.; and “zydeco” or “cajun” (which came from the mixing in European cultures in Louisiana). Today, the influence of the blues can be seen in other musical styles including pop, jazz, swing and rock ‘n’ roll. Blues music can be heard in venues throughout North America and the world, and is still a distinct heartfelt expression of not only weariness and sadness, but also happiness and joy.

Class Exercises

Understanding Slavery

Exercise 1

Have your class close their eyes. Tell them to imagine they are together with their families and friends in their communities (school or home) doing everything they like to do. Now have them imagine that a spaceship lands in their community. Strange creatures, speaking a language they've never heard before, emerge from the spaceship and force the children to get on the space vessel, as they are shipped to another planet that is completely foreign to them. Ask them to imagine these creatures forcing them to work on this planet day in and day out, with little food or water and minimal rest. They know neither the language nor the land, and are punished for speaking to one another or doing anything these space creatures don't want them to do.

Using the Basics of Blues Music

Exercise 2

Break your class into 3 groups and get each group to clap or stomp a pattern:

For Example:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|---------------|--|------|-----------|------|------|--|--|------|-----------|------|------|--|
| Group 1: | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ξ | | | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ξ | |
| Clap pattern | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | clap | clap | clap | rest | | | clap | clap | clap | rest | |
| Group 2: | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | ξ | ↓↓ | ξ | ↓ | | | ξ | ↓↓ | ξ | ↓ | |
| Clap pattern | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | rest | clap clap | rest | clap | | | rest | clap clap | rest | clap | |
| Group 3: | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | | | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | ↓↓ | |
| Foot stomp | $\frac{4}{4}$ | | LR | LR | LR | LR | | | LR | LR | LR | LR | |

While the class is performing these rhythms, try a field call and get them to respond.

For Example:

Got to get to school (caller)

Got to get to school (class repeats)

I said, got to get to school (caller)

I said, got to get to school (class repeats)

I said, got to get to school (all together)

And learn the golden rules (all together)

Get the class to make up their own field chants.

Class Exercises

Exercise 3

Making Instruments

You can have the children in your class bring some of the materials needed to make any of the below instruments. After they have been made, the children can personalize or decorate them. Have them experiment with the sounds each instrument makes.

Rhythm Sticks

Materials:

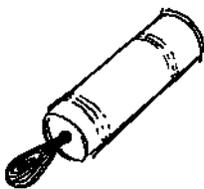
- sticks or stick-like objects such as wooden spoons, parts of bamboo, broom handle sticks, plastic tubing, tree branches, pipes

Rhythm sticks may be made from any material that can be tapped together to add a new element of sound and rhythm to appropriate songs. You can use sticks (of different sizes and materials) to determine which ones resonate best. Try wooden spoons, parts of bamboo, broom handle sticks, plastic tubing, branches of a tree, or pipes. Many years ago, the black slaves even used rib bones! Your class can even decorate their rhythm sticks to make them their own.

Rattles

Materials:

- Any container that can be sealed & easily handled, like:



- soft drink or juice cans
- tennis ball can
- Pringles chips container
- paper cups with lids
- small plastic or cardboard boxes
- glass food jars
- metal boxes

Any container that can be sealed and easily handled makes a good rattle. Whatever you put inside of it as well as the material of the container itself will determine the sound produced.

Content Suggestions:

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| rice or macaroni | sand |
| rocks, pebbles, gravel | beans, seeds or |
| popcorn | marbles |

You can choose to wedge a handle onto the rattle. You will find the rattle will make a more resonant sound if not held in the hand.

Pen Cap Pipes

Materials: ballpoint/felt-tip pen caps
tape

Collect all the ballpoint and felt-tip pen caps you can find. Blow strongly across the open end of each cap until you can produce a pitch. Change the angle of blowing slightly if you have difficulty making a sound. (Some pen caps may be too small to give a clear pitch.) Arrange them high to low and tape them together so you have a set of pen cap pipes to give various pitches.



Comb & Tissue Kazoo

Materials:

- comb
- piece of tissue large enough to fold over the comb

Fold the tissue paper lengthwise evenly across the comb with the centre of the paper folded over the teeth of the comb. Place the flat side of the comb to your lips and hum through the paper.



Class Exercises

Exercise 3

Bleach Bottle Banjo

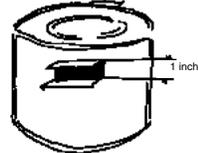
Materials:

- plastic bleach bottle about 2 - 4 quart
- 30" length of wood 1" x 3"
- About 3 yards of nylon fishing line
- Small piece of wood about 3/4" x 2" x 1/4" for the bridge
- 2 or 3 screw eyes (optional: dowel pegs)
- 2 or 3 - 1" finishing nails for hitch pins
- saw, hammer, utility knife

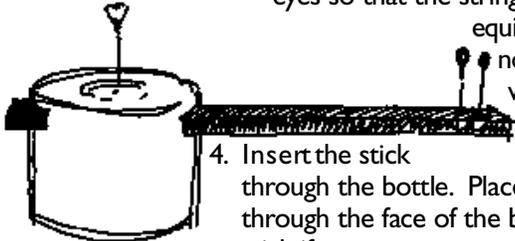
1. Cut off the bottom half of the bottle. Cut an H-shaped slot the size of the wood strip, starting about 1" from the bottom. The wood should fit tightly when the flaps of the bottle are folded out and the wood strip is inserted. The slots should be cut as close to the flat end of the bottle as possible.



2. Make an identical slot on the opposite side of the bottle.



3. Near one end of the stick, insert 2 or 3 screw eyes. Space the screw eyes so that the strings will be equidistant and will not interfere with each other.



4. Insert the stick through the bottle. Place a screw through the face of the bottle into the stick if necessary.

5. Place the same number of 1" finishing nails or small screw eyes on the other end of the stick.
6. Tie the string tightly between pairs of screw eyes.
7. Slide the small piece of wood under the strings and prop it up on edge. You may have to make a small notch for each string in the top of the bridge to keep the strings from sliding off.
8. To tune the strings, tighten or loosen them by turning the screw eyes. A nail inserted through the eye for leverage will aid in turning them.

You now have a fretless banjo. By stopping the string along the board neck with your fingers, you can pick out

scales and melodies.

Rubber Band Harp

Materials:

- several sizes of rubber bands: fat, thin, short & long
- container like small-to-medium sized boxes (match boxes, shoe boxes, cigar boxes, gift boxes, stationery boxes)
- 2 pencils

1. Take off the lid of the container and put some rubber bands around it so that they stretch over the opening and along the length of the box. If they are too loose or too tight, use different sized bands. Pluck each band until it responds with a reasonable "plunk".

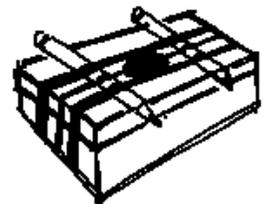


2. Place the pencils, one underneath the bands and on either end of the container. These pencils act as the "bridges" (as on a real guitar) which determine an exact string length and more accurate pitch. You can also place just one pencil over the centre of the opening of the box and pluck on either side of it. Move the pencils and experiment with the pitches you will hear as you pluck.



Variation:

You can also use the lid of the container for an even different sound. Cut a small hole in the centre of the lid and replace it on the box. Now, place all the rubber bands and pencils around the box as you did before, only this time with the lid on.



WRITING LYRICS

Strings are vertical, high E to the right. Frets are horizontal.

- ① Finger number to use.
- Means open string.
- X String not to be played.

EXERCISE 1:

A) This is a 12-bar blues and each bar has four beats, so first try listening to the song on Track #4 (on accompanying CD) and counting the bars while watching the chord chart to get a feel for the 12-bar progression.

B) Hear how the lyrics follow the melody line played the slide guitar. Here is the original first verse to the song *Can't Be Satisfied*:

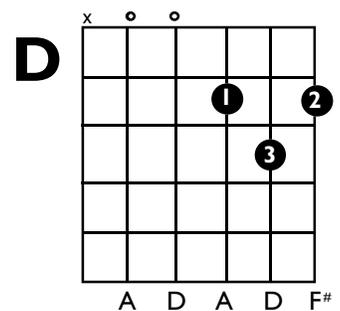
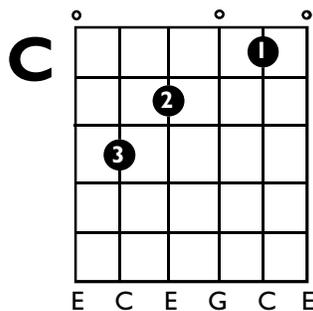
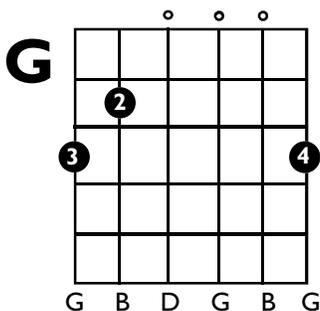
Well, I'm goin' down south, won't be back again > rhyme
Lookin' for my baby and I see a long lost friend >
Woman I'm trouble, I bid y'all good night > rhyme
Well I will never be satisfied and I just can't keep on cryin' >

Note: words with similar vowel sounds can be 'rhymes' – they don't need to be exact

C) Now try changing a few words in each verse to make the song your own.

I.E. *Well I'm goin' down home*
Won't be back too soon
Looking for my guitar
'Cuz I found a long lost tune

D) Now try your new lyrics with the music provided by The Blues Berries on Track #15 or play along with the guitar chart provided.



Can't Be Satisfied: Muddy Waters

G / G / G / G /
 C / C / G / G /
 D / C / G / D :||

EXERCISE 2:

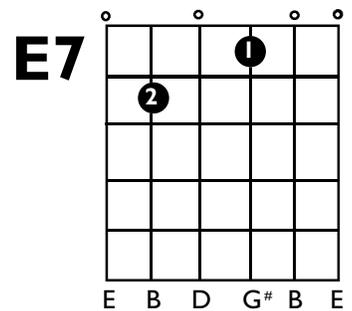
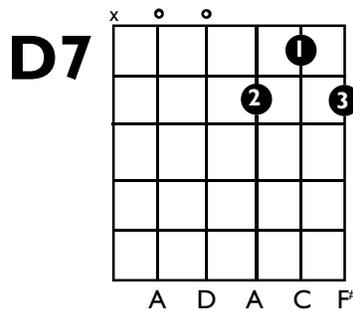
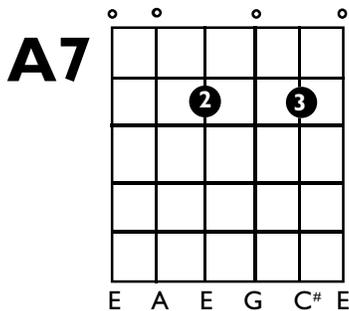
Original 1st Four Bars to My Guitar:

| | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|-------|--|
| | BAR 1 | | | | BAR 2 | |
| | Well I don't play tackle football, I think I'm much too small | | | | | |
| | BAR 3 | | | | BAR 4 | |
| | I don't play on the basketball team, those guys are 10 feet tall | | | | | |

- A) Count and clap the syllables in each bar of the original first verse.
- B) Choose a subject and re-write each verse to fit with the approximate number of syllables in each bar.

| | | | | | |
|------|---|-------|--|-------|--|
| I.E. | | BAR 1 | | BAR 2 | |
| | Feels like the weather's changin', as we head into the fall | | | | |
| | | BAR 3 | | BAR 4 | |
| | The leaves are a brand new colour, and you know I like them all | | | | |

- C) Sing your new songs to the accompanying tracks provided on Track #16.



My Guitar: The Blues Berries

A7 / A7 / A7 / A7 / Intro
 A7 / A7 / A7 / A7 /
 D7 / D7 / A7 / A7 /
 E7 / D7 / A stop; vocal only:||

EXERCISE 3:

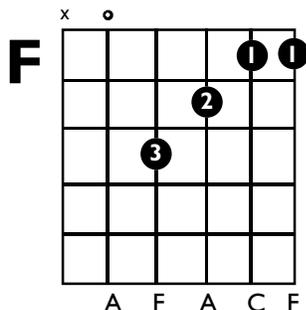
This can be done with several different people.

Step 1: Teacher makes up a one-line story to be sung over first two bars.
 (4 bars) I.E. I'd like to go outside but the rain's comin' down
 | BAR 1 | BAR 2 | (bars 3 and 4 are rest bars)

Step 2: Teacher repeats same verse over bars 5 and 6, bars 7 and 8 are rests again.
 (4 bars)

Step 3: Teacher then points to a student (during the rest bars 7 and 8) who has to make up an
 (4 bars) answer line that responds and rhymes to the initial call, and sing it over bars 9 and 10.
 I.E. Student responds, "So, I'll stay inside with the friends I've found".
 Every time a student can't do it, they are knocked out of the exercise.
Idea: to make this easier, let the kids know what you are going to say ahead of time and
 brainstorm rhyming words they can choose from.

Step 4: Try the exercise with the music provided by The Blues Berries on Track #17.



The Dance: The Blues Berries

*
 G / G / G / G /
 C / C / G / G /
 D / C / G / D :||

*Alternate first verse with shots

G F / G F / G F / G F /

Recommended Children's Literature

Ages 3 - 7 • Picture Book

Hurd, Thacher. 1984. Momma Don't Allow. Harper & Row.

Isadora, Rachel. 1979. Ben's Trumpet. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Ages 5 - 8 • Easy Fiction

England, Linda. The Old Cotton Blues. New York: Margaret K. McEderly Books

Sebastian, John. 1993. J.B.'s Harmonica. Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Ages 9 - 12 • Chapter Book

Bontemps, Arna. 1955. Lonesome Boy. Boston: Riverside Press, Cambridge Houghton Mifflin Company.

Ages 12 - 17 • Young Adult Fiction

Lincoln-Collier, James. 1994. The Jazz Kid. New York: Henry Holt & Company.

Websites

www.thebluehighway.com

www.blueschat.com

Additional Resource

The instructions for making the instruments in Exercise 3 were taken from Making Wood Instruments, by Dennis Waring (Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., New York 1990).