



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1997 Volume V: The Blues Impulse

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## **They Lived in Music—Blues Women Sing Their Song**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.05.01  
by Charlene Andrade

Oscar Brockett, preeminent theatre educator, states in his text, *The Essential Theatre*:

Of all the arts, theatre has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanizing force, for at its best it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others. To know (emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually) what it means to be human in the broadest sense ought to be one of the primary goals of both education and life; and for reaching this goal, no approach has greater potential than theatre, since humanity is its subject and human beings its primary medium.

I chose a theatrical format to guide my students on this journey into the exploration of the “blues impulse”—its roots and its fruits—as it was manifested in the lives of some ordinary yet extraordinary African American musicians, because as teacher and director, I have seen time and time again the power of theatre to cultivate empathy, collaboration, self realization, self-esteem and love. The experiential nature of theatre sharpens cognitive skills as well.

My curriculum unit is performance ready and hopefully user friendly. It covers a chronological history of the blues up to and including a brief mention of jazz. The musicians discussed are Mahalia Jackson, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. The format is roughly comprised of narration and monologues, with musical and visual enhancement. Slides and tapes will be made available at the Institute office for use during rehearsals and performances. Although I have laid out a specific form and direction for this presentation, you should feel free to sweeten it with the creative juices of your own unique collaborative efforts.

In the interest of artistic and pragmatic considerations, the material is not presented in great depth or at great length; however, I will augment the individual and collective learning experience with pre-show and post-show activities/assignments, the bibliography and discography which accompany the performance piece.

(Recommended for History, Music and Theatre, grades 7-12)

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