



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

Creating Blues: An Interdisciplinary Study

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.05.05
by Medria Blue

"The music which awakens all nations, in the words of James Weldon Johnson, is the song of a bluesman or a famous trumpet player. He is a timeless echo in the universe." (*The Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* , Abradale 129).

The blues, *near tragic, near comic lyricism*, manifests itself not only in music but also in literature, visual arts, and creative writing. In this unit, I propose to create lessons that give an interdisciplinary approach to learning and living a blues folk philosophy.

Professor Wallace, quoting from Ralph Ellison, states that to speak of the blues is to "speak, more broadly, of a survivalist sensibility," or "an impulse" in artistic representation "to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experiences alive in one's aching consciousness." If this statement is analyzed while simultaneously looking at Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, a link can be made between alive painful details and creativity. No matter what the painful detail, no matter what medium is used for expression, creativity is the soul's way of surviving, unleashing the pain and transferring the lesson. Likewise, Walker writes of Phillis Wheatley's survivalist sensibility, "It is not so much what [reference to poems] you [Wheatley] sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*." Wheatley is a bluesman, a timeless echo in the universe. In this unit, I have used the blues to demonstrate how the *notion of a song* is what generations have inherited and how this inheritance can be used to express *near tragic/near comic experiences*.

The unit will allow students to study blues lyrics of artists such as Little Esther, Dinah Washington, and Muddy Waters to become aware of the concept of the musical features of blues—"sad sounding blue notes and brief, three-line compositions in twelve-measure form that invites improvisation" (Monceaux, I 1). More specifically, students will listen to blues songs that demonstrate a balance of sadness and humor. This understanding will lead to an acknowledgment of how the blues is a folk philosophy that affirms black life and challenges and survival. Students will also be exposed to the music of John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Pee Wee Crayton and Miles Davis. As a final project, students will research a jazz artist and write biopoems, dramatic monologues, children's books or a short illustrated biography.

In the unit, students will examine works of three artists, Johnny Otis, Archibald Motley and Romare Bearden, who represent regions: West Coast, Chicago's Black Belt, and New York. Recognition of each artist's success with improvisation of blues experiences and themes will lead to the culminating unit assignment in which students will be required to create vernacular art using everyday life images and/or objects to create collages.

The unit's literature section, written to employ Reader Response theory and a Writers Workshop model, delves into poetry and fiction that is written in a blues tradition. Its central theme explores the impact of blues traditions, culture, impulses and expression in literature-both written and read. Students will read short stories, vignettes, and poetry to examine how authors use metaphors for problems and issues. Students will read selected vignettes from Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*; and short stories from Langston Hughes' *The Best of Simple* . Students will also look at contemporary blues elements as found in Eve Merriam's *The Inner City Mother Goose* and Clark Taylor's *The House that Crack Built*, two books which contain poetry that is a satire on modern-day vices and, therefore, represent the improvisational blues impulse. Students will write pieces in each genre studied that improvise on a blues experience. In addition, students will read and write poems that affirm.

(Recommended for Language Arts, Music, Art and Writing, grades 6-8)

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