



The Blues Impulse—An Era and the Ambiguity of Adolescence

Curriculum Unit 97.05.06
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The years a student spends in middle school are ones of transformation from childhood (ragtime) to young adulthood (jazz), but to successfully evolve one must experience the “blues”. Adolescence is a time of growth through personal and social reflection. The expression of these growing pains and joys can be considered equivalent to the musical blues intonations of melancholy.

The blues is defined as a type of music that uses a twelve-bar format and has a ‘flattening’ of the third and seventh notes, also called blue notes. These blue notes are not notes found in the scales of European music, yet they are often used in African music. The blues notes are what gives the special emotional quality to the music. The notes and the flattening or bending of the notes allows the musicians to put more feeling into the music.

The musical notes are not the only different quality of blues music; the words also have a special presentation. Most lyrics are written in a three line format. The first line usually makes a statement which is repeated by the second line. Then, the third line concludes the thought. For example,

I went lookin’ for my baby, but she ran away from me

I went lookin’ for my baby, but she ran away from me

When I couldn’t find her, I was blue as I could be. (1) The repetition of verse adds to the emotionality of the singer’s cause, whether it be lost love or a wandering spirit.

The blues as a musical genre dates from the period after the Civil War and reflects the changing life-style of freed slaves. Emancipation forced many black people to roam from one migrant labor job to another. The train, the popular mode of transportation at the time, was used by many blacks. There are numerous blues songs about jumping the boxcars, riding the rails and various other train travel related pieces. Most of the songs are lyric poems that express personal joys or sorrows in response to everyday matters, such as work or love. Other common subjects for blues singers were poverty, illness, wealth, liquor, and luck. Some blues songs are notable for their social comments. This unit will have students investigate aspects of the blues from a historical and personal viewpoint.

It is an interdisciplinary unit, approximately ten weeks in length, with a two fold purpose:

1) to have students explore the writings, music and art of the 1920's and 30's, particularly in Harlem. One poem that I propose to use with students to show the mood of the era is Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*. The historical occurrences within the United States will be discussed to clarify the social climate of the time period.

and

2) to have students explore their own 'blues' in relation to their physical and social development. They will be encouraged to explore their feelings through written, artistic and musical expression.

The ultimate goal is to have the students do a comparative analysis of the blues influence of the 20's and the 'blues' impulse of the adolescent years.

Middle school students should relate to this topic quite well. While they are quite talkative, conversations about their inner feelings are often difficult. They think, or at least hope, that their friends are also worried about friends, relationships, looks, clothes, being cool and growing up. Many urban students are also concerned with drugs, disease, gangs, child birth and often troubled parents. Positive vehicles of expression are vital to these student's futures.

One might frown and say school is a place where students should feel safe and free from the pains of the world. But urban schools have become much more than just educational institutions; instead, they have been expected to be social change agents. So a unit such as this one is quite appropriate to teach historical prospectus, while having the students confront their own pain and joy. Much of the blues deals with pain and a vital question a teacher must ask is, "Do we teach pain to children?" My response is that children feel and inflict pain, particularly during adolescence, and must be helped to work through that pain in an intellectually productive manner. Systems that teach social development and/or conflict resolution are already dealing with the issues of pain. Adolescence itself might be described as the affirmation of the value of one's self—pain and joy experienced help us become us. Granted, some students have experienced situations too personal and painful to share, but expressions of the blues do not have to be that deep at the instructional level.

The instructional level requires students to read and listen to others expressions of 'blues'. Then, discuss, critique and reflect upon the author's or musician's concepts relative to their lives, remembering that there is joy in the blues too. Adolescent blues can be as simple as a bad hair day or as complex as a drug addicted parent, yet students can all appreciate a vehicle to express themselves that does not feel like it is subject specific. A classroom full of students, then, can become a living play woven together much as the seven characters are in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*. The students will be instruments of adolescent blues representing their segment and perspective of a cultural blues. The image of up to twenty seven guitars playing a collective blues reflecting their experiences is enlightening.

This is a curricular unit that should take approximately ten weeks or one marking period to discuss all of the information and complete the projects planned. Ideally it would be coordinated between the two specialties,

preferably music first and then art.

The concept of blues music and the historical time period effecting the music would be covered first. Second is a concentration on the blues women and their contribution to the era, musically and through their lyrics. Thirdly, a literary introduction to blues language in literature would be done with the study of *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooka and “Karintha” a story from *Cane* by Jean Toomer. An emphasis would also be given to Langston Hughes’ poetry. Intertwined within the lessons would be art lessons to help students express their impressions of the blues. The culminating project would be the students own blues productions, as well as a presentation on their family’s migration history. The following piece outlines in more detail information and materials for teacher preparation. This is by no means an exhaustive unit, but merely a suggestive piece to excite a teacher to address the ever prevalent need for adolescents to express *their* blues.

LESSON

Goal— To learn to express one’s feelings through the color blue

Objectives —The student will be able to:

1. define and identify blue
2. use shades of blue to create a mood that depicts their feelings
3. write a story/poem from another student’s “blue” artwork.

Vocabulary

color depict
mood artwork
create expression
shade monochromatic

Materials

Various shades of blue construction paper

Tissue paper

Blue crayons

Tempera paints (Blue/White)

Blue fabric, ribbon, feathers

Magazines and catalogues

12’x18’ white paper

3x5 index cards

Activities

1. The teacher will give each student a card and ask them to define the word blue without using the dictionary. Students will write their definitions for the word blue.
2. The teacher will then give each student a piece of white paper and place the other materials on a table. The instructions will be for the students to create a collage using any or all of the materials provided to define blue.
3. Finished pictures will be displayed and reflected upon.
4. Each picture will be numbered. Each student will pick a number and will be asked to write about that “blue” piece. What is it saying about blue ? Does it create a particular mood ? The writing should be brief, yet detailed, and either short story or poetry form.

Evaluation

Index card activity participation

Finished Blue Artwork

Written piece about one artwork

Timeline Two class periods

THE MUSIC and MIGRATION

Although “the blues” was defined in the introduction in musical terms, the term really is much more complex. It can be further defined as an emotion, as well as a technique , a musical form and a song lyric. Most generally, “ the blues” refers to a feeling or mood of despondency or extreme struggle. It is common for everyone to experience this feeling at some point. However for African Americans, particularly post Civil War, the blues were a way of life that evolved from the peculiar circumstances of their existence in the United States.

Steven C. Tracy in his book *Langston Hughes and The Blues* describes the blues as “ a particular misery and sadness, a particular blues, unites African Americans whose common heritage—in Africa, slavery and a theoretical freedom...” (2) In other words, the blues music (lyric and songs) came about as an expressive way to deal with societal oppressions, an individual and collective expression that affected African American life beginning as field work songs and progressing to migratory travel experiences.

Tracy also discusses in his book two types of blues, eight bar and twelve bar, and how the stanza lengths, as with poetry, can be looser than the standard definition since a musical passage or vocal line may be shortened or extended at will to produce a seven or thirteen and a half bar blues. The emotional involvement of the singer and musicians is the ultimate indicator of stanzas and phrasing. The audience responsiveness can also be a determining factor.

The blues music could then be considered a way for someone to control and shape his/her own destiny by asserting both personal and community pride and values through music. This music attempted to reflect at least one segment of the African-American population at the time. The early blues music expressed the African-American individuality and separateness from American society. The emergence of classic blues indicated the many changes that were taking place. The African-American sense of place within American society was evolving and the lyrics became more recognizable to mainstream America. The classic blues attempted a universality, the lyrics contained situations and ideas that held broad human meaning. Students should be able to compare and contrast these ideas and times to hip-hop music and their own expressions of their present day community. Discussions and exercises will be done to have students understand their part in the historical migration that has occurred in their families until now.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his book, *A First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, simply describes the blues as “ a kind of sad, slow music, usually with words, that developed among blacks in the southern United States.” (3) Students prior knowledge must be examined, using maps, to review the vast areas considered southern. The remoteness and rural attitudes, as well as the segregated nature of the times should be highlighted for students. Many southern states became noted for their own variation of the blues. The sounds and language were indicative of their regional culture. Consider, for example, the Memphis sound as compared to the Cajun Blues. To illustrate this, have students listen to Bessie Smith’s “ *St. Louis Blues*” and Ida Cox’s “ *I’ve Got the Blues for Rampart Street*” (New Orleans). The subtle differences in cultures should be mentioned to help students visualize the differences that will appear in their “blues” pieces—due to their own diverse backgrounds.

The migration of southern African Americans to northern cities and the introduction of the phonograph record helped popularize the blues music and helped it attain commercial status. The attraction of the northern states must be presented for student understanding. The popular northern cities were meccas of the industrial age and manufacturing centers. Chicago, Detroit and St. Louis were very popular migration route destinations. The automobile industry and other machine factories were employing many of the previous outside laborers for good wages. There were also plenty of houses, hotels and other establishments to clean. These cities represented opportunities for advancement and upward mobility. The East coast was represented by New York and Boston and other smaller cities, like New Haven. Harlem was considered ‘the’ place for African American cultural activities.

A collective of musical, literary and artistic talent flocked together to create the most centralized and exciting time in African American cultural existence. There was a freedom, openness and yet still a sadness expressed by those ‘artists’ of the day. While they were writing and performing for themselves, their works were being largely enjoyed by white audiences. The emotions were very cyclical, the African Americans were expressing their individual and collective blues, but more blues was created because they could not easily perform for each other. To share these feelings they formed collaborations, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston or Hughes and Romare Bearden. Musicians would do improvisational numbers together to express their blues. The growth of these jam sessions lead to the birth of jazz. The blues then represented a blending of older instrumental and vocal techniques into a new kind of music and the reworking of it lead to still another type of music, jazz.

The blues are a reflection of southern religious spiritual music and has some of the traditional gospel elements. Particularly the concept of lining (reciting the words to be sung) or more aptly named the call and response. A line of words and/or music is given and then repeated by the next voice or instrument. This allows for simultaneous ideas of individualism within a group, certain freedoms are noted within a communal feeling.

Hence, personal performance is accommodated within a collective improvisation of tight harmonic structure. Playing the blues in this manner allowed for a healthy competition amongst singers and musicians and between instruments.

Traditionally, the primary blues instrumentation was the guitar. Played skillfully, the guitar could nearly imitate a human voice whining as if it were talking through a problem. The popularity of this instrument was its practicality. It could easily be made, was quite portable and multi-functional. The strings could be plucked, held and rubbed while the wood could be beaten for drum sounds. Students can make guitars from recycled materials at any point during this unit and may use them to accompany their poetry readings, other productions or simply as an artistic piece. They should be reminded the first guitars were probably made from African gourds and gut string.

When playing musical selections for students one should also point out the hymn concept of a chorus or choral response is lacking. Blues is mostly individual dialogue (writer/singer) between two or perhaps three people. The lyrics represent a transcendence. To talk about ones problems, struggles or blues allows you to get over them or at least feel better about them. One realizes he/she is not alone in his/her blues and the notion that someone understands is therapeutic. Point out that there is an element of humor in most blues despite its often sad sound.

So to personalize each student's experience lessons have been written to have students explore *their* families' migration to New Haven. While, the blues is considered a part of African-American tradition, anyone who has moved from one place (home, school, church, etc.) to another has experienced the blues of migration. This 'blues' is a mix of sorrow and anticipation of the known and unknown. Sometimes it feels like intermittent hopelessness and flashes of hope. Therefore, as Walter Mosley describes the blues in *RL's Dream*— "the blues as an expression of black poetry and black tragedy and how they sit in judgment of the American experience.", (4) so can students describe adolescence. Most students can associate with this concept and write about or express through some medium such an experience, perhaps explaining a move to a new state, apartment, or school. They will also trace their family history to New Haven, it may be necessary to go back two or three generations.

Fair Haven, as well as many other New Haven schools, has a high African American and Hispanic population. The migration topic is quite relevant to both ethnic groups. The Puerto Rican migration is comparable, from island to mainland because it also happens to be south to north. The adjustments to such things as weather, housing conditions, food and expectations of a better life. A concept to compare with the 1920's is the decisions that follow the realization that the high expectations may not be met by the move. In such cases, do families return, move elsewhere or stay and make the best of the new situation?

Students will use various literary forms of expression—poems, journals, short stories, skits, plays, etc. -to examine the changes they have made in their short lives. These forms will be used to compare the physical and psychological changes that puberty has and will have upon their middle school years. Students will be responsible for and have ownership of their products. Social and musical comparisons will be made between the 1920's, and the 1990's, with an emphasis on commercialism and its importance.

LESSON

Goal —Recognize and create three line lyric ‘blues’.

Objectives —Students will be able to:

1. recognize three line blues lyrics.
2. create a three line poem (four to five stanzas per poem).
3. share their creations with the class.

Materials

Lyrics from *Doggin’ Me Around Blues* by Jenny Pope and *Southern Blues* by Ma Rainey

Activities

1. Teacher will read each of the poems with emotion and inflection.
2. Students will identify the rhyming patterns and discuss the stories told by each song.
3. Teacher illustrate the written form of these songs (either on the board or by distributing copies of the songs).
4. Students will be assigned the task of writing their own blues poem.
5. After revision, students will be asked to read their pieces aloud.

Evaluation/Assessment

Student Discussion Participation

Written Assignment

Student Oral Presentation

Timeline One to two class periods

LESSON

Goal— To have students understand themselves as participants in a historical phenomenon, modern migration.

Objectives—The student will be able to:

1. define migration.
2. identify migration routes African Americans have taken from the south to the north and the reasons for these moves.
3. create a migration route for their family to New Haven.
4. create a collage using family member stories.

Materials

Lawrence, Jacob *The Great Migration: An American Story*.

Everett, Gwen *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie*

North America maps including Caribbean islands (world maps can be provided if necessary)

Family photographs

scissors

glue/tape

construction paper—especially black and red.

crayons

markers

tempera paint

Activities

1. Students will use world maps and trace African American migration routes from Africa and the islands south. Then trace various southern routes north.
2. Students will gather family migration information.
3. Students will make a report with a map and collage of family member migration stories.

Evaluation/Assessment

African American migration map

Written description of African American migration (homework writing prompt)

Student family collage

Timeline One to two weeks

THE WOMEN

Research of the topic shows the first professional blues singers were men, but the first to get commercially recorded were women.(5) The wandering from town to town was done mostly by the men; it was much harder for women. A few women traveled with the minstrel shows, but it was easier for women to go to cities where blues was in demand as a form of entertainment. During the research phase I explored the roles of gender and color in the blues concept and expression as a point of personal interest. Musically females were allowed to tell the tales, particularly of woe:

Now when a woman get the blues,

*Lord, she hangs her head and cries.
But when a man gets the blues,
Lord, he grabs a train and rides.*

—“Easy Rider Blues” (6) But were women writing these songs? Also, did these songstresses have to be of an acceptable color and stature? The answer to both questions is yes.

Women were active participants in the evolution of the blues as it moved from the countryside to the urban areas and back. These women transformed their personal feelings into artistic expression, which bonded them

to other black women, by skillfully mixing the ingredients of heartbreak and joy to create the songs that caused people to flock to their shows and buy their recordings. Women's blues worked its way through the interpreter's personal experience; therefore, there was a divergence in style and depth of feeling from one singer to the next. For instance, Ma Rainey focused on topics familiar to southern rural folks floods, crop failure and mistreatment by lovers. She enhanced her live performances with her boisterous wit. Ida Cox, Bessie Smith and Clara Smith moved away from the country style and developed sophisticated flexible blues styles that adapted to the piano and slick city sounds. Their husky, throaty sounds complete with moans and groans had a cross appeal to urban and rural blues listeners.

To illuminate my point I will highlight Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Ma Rainey was described as a short, stubby woman with wide low lips, gold rimmed teeth and played with her audiences in a flirtatious manner. Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 27, 1886, the second of five children, in Columbus, Georgia. Columbus was an industrial port center that was a regular on the minstrel circuit. At the age of fourteen Ma began her career in a talent show. It was during one of these shows that she meet show manager William "Pa" Rainey. They married on February 2, 1904 and began to travel. Although the theater work was glitzy and Rainey was known for her flashy outfits and jewelry, she was reported to be a hard worker who spent much time outdoors. Many of her performances were in barns, schoolhouses and dance halls for hardworking people. Paramount talent scouts found her in 1924 taking her to New York and Chicago where she made about ninety records. In these cities her performances were a little out of place, but she continued to perform until 1935. Ma Rainey moved back to Columbus and lived in a house she built for her family. She bought several theaters and had stop performing by age fifty. Ma Rainey, "Mother of the Blues", died December 22, 1939.

Bessie has been described as a big, handsome woman, two hundred pounds and nearly six feet, with a flair for flashy clothes. Bessie was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894 (?) to a very poor family. Her father and two brothers died soon after she was born and her mother died when she was nine. Bessie and five siblings had to make do. She and one brother would sing on the streets. Another brother joined a minstrel show where he was able to get Bessie an audition. Ma and Pa Rainey were with this same show at the time and Bessie and Ma forged a relationship. Bessie struggled, singing with jazz musicians in Atlantic City in 1920; being turned down by record companies for being too loud and lowdown; returning south and touring but not enjoying it. Finally, Columbia Records sent a man to Philadelphia to bring her to New York. There she recorded "Downhearted Blues", which sold three quarters of a million copies. In 1923 she married a Philadelphia policeman, Jackie Gee. Ms Smith's life improved, her popularity increased, she was making and spending money. Then her drinking problem became her misery leading to marital and money problems. Bessie Smith, "The Empress of the Blues", died after a car accident in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey sang women's songs. Ma's were often her own or her musicians and told of lonely women, violent and troubled women. Bessie sang more about love, sex and good and bad men. Her songs had more references to city things. The women had different feelings for the South. Ma had a home there and returned to live ,whereas Bessie lived in New Jersey and only went South to work on occasion. Bessie had no real roots to the South other than the pain of her childhood.

Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters and other women of the blues represented a collective expression of the blues. Their lives and lyrics can be used very effectively to examine the woe and joy of the blues. The lyrical abilities and appearances of these women can help students work through adolescent differences.

THE LITERATURE

The blues writers often use personification to illustrate points, for example in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* 'The City' becomes a character with a capital letter for a name and human qualities, "The City was speaking to them." or " ...when they and the City have grown up.." (7) as if they and the city were siblings or the same age. Often with middle school age students the neighborhood and/or the school become characters in their lives. Each place takes on an interesting persona that greatly affects the student's life. The blues itself can become an active character with human traits. I would not teach *Jazz* to this age level, but it has some sample passages that show how words can be used to imitate music and would be best read aloud.

Thomas Marvin in an article entitled "*Preachin the Blues*", describes the blues as "a supernatural force that can take on human characteristics and possesses its victims." (8) The blues conversation usually begins a new relationship between the individual and the world. In other words, to write about and discuss the struggles an individual is experiencing helps them move past it,—life is too short to moan unless the purpose is to make you feel better! Students should feel better once they have expressed their feelings.

As a literary comparison, students will analyze Karintha from Jean Toomer's *Cane* and *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooks, to read how expressing blues made them feel better about themselves. These are two women who experienced inner struggles, one the result of her burdensome beauty and the other, her lack of beauty. Their stories are full of vivid colorful language that students can read and interpret the blues language. Also, Langston Hughes has several poems that will also illustrate the literary blues.

Lesson

Goal: To have students interpret Langston Hughes poetry in terms of his neighborhood versus their neighborhood.

Objectives: Students will be able to:

1. Interpret a Langston Hughes poem.
2. Express the written words in visual terms as a group.

Vocabulary:

interpret//representation

visual//comparison

illustrate//collage

comparison//Romare Bearden

Materials:

The Block Collage by Romare Bearden Poems by Langston Hughes

Art supplies—construction paper, markers, crayons, felt, paint etc.

A tape of blues tunes

Activities:

1. Small groups of students (2-3 people) will be given a poem to read and interpret (without the pictures).
2. The group will decide what the poem means and relay that meaning to the class.
3. Together they will draw a picture on their poem

5. After all groups have made their presentations they will be shown Bearden's collage that goes with the poems for comparison and discussion.

Evaluation/Assessment:

Student Discussions

Group presentations oral and visual

Extensions of Lesson: Have students take one part of their block draw it and write a brief description. Or the block where the school is located, or if several students live on the same street they can work together

LESSON

Goal: Relate the blues migration to the next musical phase, jazz and use the migration principal to examine a jazz non-fiction piece.

Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. recognize non-fiction as a literary form
2. recognize mood changes
3. recognize the similarities between the blues era migration and the evolution of jazz and its migratory occurrences.
4. listen to and express feeling about music.
5. draw their *own* image of Romare Bearden's *Uptown Sunday Night Session* the picture is shown in the student book.

Vocabulary:

blues//literary

migration//similarities

evolution//mood

Materials

Vistas in Reading Literature Gold Level McDougal, Littell & Company

(New Haven's present sixth grade reading book) *Joe Oliver The King* by Studs Terkel with Milly Hawk Daniel

Vocabulary list provided plus others.

Jazz tape of your choosing ... I have put one together that reflects the different moods of music mentioned in the story.

12"x18" white paper

crayons and markers

Activities

1. Teacher will introduce vocabulary. Students will define the words using the glossary. Students will then be directed to replace a given word in dictated sentences with one of the vocabulary words.
2. The teacher will read the story to the students as a jazz tape plays in the background.
3. Students will be asked in small groups or pairs to make migration route for Joe Oliver and then transfer the route onto a map. A story location map.
4. Students will be given parts of the Check and Selection Tests provided with the story.
5. Students will asked to write an answer to the following question—Did the music playing create or suggest any feelings within you as the story was being read ? Explain in detail.
6. Students will draw their own version of the jam session painting.

Evaluation/Assessment

Discussion/Vocabulary and test papers

Group migration map

Jam session drawing

Timeline Two to three class periods

This entire unit includes the possibilities of photography exhibits, video and musical recordings being made by the students to enhance their projects. Perhaps something in the vein of Van der Zee's " *Harlem Book of the Dead*" where instead of images of bodies laying in state, the student can do photos expressing middle school student "blues". The students will be encouraged to stretch their imaginations in the expression of their feelings (blues) through words, dance, music, drama and especially art. A collaboration with the art teacher, will allow for the lesson development of the student art panels that can accompany their literary pieces about family migration. You can also coordinate the integration of the visual arts portion of the curriculum with the language arts and social studies portions.

Music and lyric writing can help a student understand their past, present and possibly their future. The introduction of the blues format style is perhaps the awakening of many future learning experiences for your adolescent student as they affirm their place in the world and assert their own "blues impulse".

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7. Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992 p.32.
8. Marvin, Thomas F. "Preachin' the Blues" *African American Review* . Fall 1994, v28 n3 p. 413.

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