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

A Guide Through the Culture of the Blues

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.05.11
by Sloan E. Williams III

This unit relates many historical facts in the context of the black performers dated from 1619 to present day conflicts seen within the modern school classroom. The many present day experiences that young Black students encounter might appear to them as events that happen inside a vacuum. It helps students to understand how the arts can be used to educate and develop a winning process of self-development and set a direction of achievement for the future, even when the future may not look great. This was often the case for many talented black artists. They made many contributions to positive changes in our country without direct violence or disruption.

Today, many people have at least heard of the "Blues." What teachers and students alike might not know is the history and development of the Blues in this country. The Blues is more than just moaning about how bad life is. Its style, humor and form have shaped and defined a perspective about life which is as American as "Drive Thru." This unit outlines the beginnings of slavery and pre-middle passage musical song forms of West Africa. It also makes a link that traces modern "Rap" to "Big Band," "Bee Bop," "Rock and Roll," "Gospel," and "Folk Songs." Singing the blues can be fun and educational for teachers and students alike.

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

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