

## How to Blues

by  
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### THE BLUES AS A TEACHING UNIT

Around the turn of the century, this unique African-American music and poetry art form was born. It was more than just music and poetry about feeling “blue,” “low,” or “troubled” coming from the African American culture, as commonly defined. The philosophy of the blues is a universal one—by confronting your situation, sharing your troubles with others, and being self-reliant in learning to deal with your problems, you have learned how to live; you have become a hero, so to speak. The improvisation of lyrics and music with style and flexibility in this art form addresses the pain of discrimination, oppression and personal discontent.

Through readings in prose and poetry, I learned to more fully appreciate the philosophy of the blues, which has given me greater perspective and depth of understanding of this art form. *Cane*, by Jean Toomer, (2) is a literary masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance from the early part of this century which is part drama, part poetry and part fiction. In a contemporary criticism of this book it is said that “the difference between the possibility of black life and the reality of black life is the blues. Yet the blues idiom itself celebrates life; it celebrates the will to endure and the necessity of survival, to keep on keeping on.”(3) In this book, a character named Kabnis is tortured as he confronts his problems of being a northern teacher in the South; he is one of them, yet set apart from them. He gives intellectual expressions to the burdens of oppression and persecution through descriptions of his personal pain and dialogues with his friends. In a book by Gwendolyn Brooks (4), a woman by the name of Maud Martha had to confront poverty, an unsatisfactory social life and the feeling of being trapped. She did this by being thankful for little things, such as the dandelions in his yard, or freeing a mouse from a trap; she used her imagination to cope with a distressing reality.

My unit is for fourth grade students in the Martin Luther King and Lincoln Bassett elementary schools in New Haven who are mostly materially disadvantaged African Americans. They need to become knowledgeable about their African American heritage in order to develop more self-esteem and pride. As they learn about, and participate in, various African and African American experiences in poetry and music that are a part of the blues, they will increase their knowledge of geography, historical events, contributions of musical performers, vocabulary associated with this art form and most important, a relevant philosophy of life.

In addition, many of the nine national music standards, part of the legislation of America’s schools 2000, are addressed through this unit. These include: standard a) singing alone, and with others, a varied repertoire of music, b) performing a varied repertoire on instruments, c) improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments, d) composing and arranging within specified guidelines, e) listening to, analyzing and describing music, f) evaluating music and music performance, and g) understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.

Students have music two one-half hours per week. Throughout September and October, my strategy is to have everyone first read aloud a brief background of a section of the unit (five minutes), and then learn to sing either an African song or African American spiritual or work song with the accompaniment of at least one African type percussion instrument (twenty minutes). The last five minutes will be an oral assessment through questions, or visual or written assessment (to be handed out as homework, such as answering questions or expressing text through drawings). The musical elements explored will include singing, playing instruments using particular patterns, the call and response form, syncopation, ostinatos, polyrhythms, and vocal and instrumental improvisations.

From January through March, students will continue to read together a brief historical and musical background (five minutes), and listen to and sing the blues (fifteen minutes). In the second class of the week, they will learn to accompany their singing by playing a sequence of chords in the blues form on the small keyboards, as well as the C major and pentatonic scales and two blues notes (twenty minutes). The last five minutes of each class will incorporate some type of assessment, whether oral, or visual or written homework. Students will write, sing and accompany their own blues verses as a culminating project. The musical elements explored will include singing, playing scales, blue notes and chords on a musical keyboard, vocal and instrumental improvising, and listening to and recognizing instruments, compositional form and various vocal and instrumental performers and styles related to the blues.

Eleven sections comprise this unit. They are:

1) African Roots, 2) Spirituals, 3) Work Songs, 4) The Blues, 5) The Classic Blues and Bessie Smith, 6) The Country Blues and Blind Lemon Jefferson, 7) Leadbelly, 8) The Chicago and Urban blues with Muddy Waters and B.B. King, 9) The Blues and Louis Armstrong, 10) The Blues and Duke Ellington, and, 11) Playing and Writing the Blues.

### **Objective One:**

Students will learn the roots of the blues in African culture, and demonstrate or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation.

### **Activity 1:**

Students will read about music in African society. (5)

Music is a vital part of African life from the cradle to the grave and covers the widest possible range of expression, including spoken language and all manner of natural sounds. It means poetry, singing, dancing and playing on instruments which is shared by, and serves the whole community. Music marks the special events of life, as well as being a comprehensive preparation for life.

Vocal music is center of such music. The utilization of the voice includes its different qualities obtained by such means as stopping the ears, pinching the nose, vibrating the tongue, and producing echoes. The objective is to translate everyday experiences into living sound. Anyone can sing, and everyone does; it is not a specialized affair. This is the essence of the collective aspect of African music. People perform it everyday of their lives as a confirmation of the importance it has in their society.

A great variety of musical instruments are used, all hand made. Children even make their own instruments at an early age. Instruments, critical to African music, are primarily used to support the spoken or sung language. The xylophone and drum are especially important. Drums are always present in this music, or hand clapping and stamping as a substitute. They are even used to communicate messages from one place to another. The types of drums used differ in construction and techniques from region to region.

African music is structured to promote participation of all peoples, such as in call and response song. Improvisation (to make up as you go along) is encouraged and individual contributions are welcomed; thus from a young age, as children learn traditional songs, they also learn to improvise around these songs, both with their voices and instruments.

**Activity 2:**

Students will read a definition of improvisation. Selected students will demonstrate improvisation on three African types of percussion instruments—the conga drum, agogo bells, and affouchet, and the pentonic scale on the xylophone.

**Activity 3:**

Students will learn an African call and response song “Kye Kye Kule” (6) by repeating each short phrase with movement after it is demonstrated by the teacher. It is a very popular motion game played by young children in Ghana. The words do not have specific meaning, and the emphasis is on mastering the traditional movements. A student leader will then sing the call alone, followed by the student response.

**Activity 4:**

Students will read definitions of ostinatos—short repeated patterns. and polyrhythms—contrasting rhythms heard at the same time. They will then create ostinatos and play them together to create polyrhythms on African type instruments for a musical accompaniment to the African song.

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) conga drum, agogo bells, affouchet and xylophone.

**Objective Two:**

Students will learn the roots of the blues in spirituals, the church music of early African Americans, and demonstrate or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation.

**Activity 5:**

Students will read about the history and musical practice of African-American spirituals.(7)

Slaves were brought from West Africa to the United States from around 1600 to the 1800's, especially from Senegal, the Guinea coast, the Niger delta, and the Congo. The first expressions of these enslaved peoples in music were limited to the spirituals—church songs, and work songs. As African vocal performance practices included slides, slurs, notes slightly flatted or sharpened, whistles, yodels and changes in rhythm and types

of sound, when they combined their musical style with the church hymns of white people, a whole new type of music was created—the spiritual.

There was always tension in the words of the spirituals, and, despite the troubles they faced and the wish to leave, the early African Americans expressed an affirmation of life in that there was always a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The spirituals were a striving for humanity in a society of oppression and racial hatred. For example, in the spiritual “This Little Light of Mine,” (8) the hope of people was symbolized by a light that was going to shine or endure through the pain of the black experience in this society. Improvising the music as a solo singer or collectively with the group was a way through by which each person could express his or her joys and sorrows, and somehow get the courage and strength to make it through. The music united them as a community, and gave them power; the music was functional in their life, as in their home in Africa.

The African American tradition of singing these spirituals was in a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) style using the pentatonic or five tone scale, commonly used in Africa. As a part of congregational hymn singing, the call and response form that was used would include a proposition or call by a lead singer, with the congregation responding to the soloist in the same convincing tone, mood and emotion. A strong beat was kept throughout the singing. Each singer would be encouraged to improvise to better express the lyrics, and improvisation was collective—a group of singers simultaneously asserted itself within a group. There was space for innovation; this caused a healthy competition. Foot stomping and clapping with up beat tempos were sometimes used in this religious music.

The philosophy and style of this singing as a powerful and unique expression of early oppressed African Americans provided the roots for the later blues and jazz.

**Activity 6:**

Students will read a definition of syncopation—shifting the rhythmic accent to a normally weak beat of music, and sing a cappella the familiar spiritual “This Little Light of Mine,” (8) with clapping on the second and fourth beats of the measure to demonstrate this element, important in African rhythm. They will tell what the words mean to them.

**Activity 7:**

Students will improvise the pentatonic scale on small xylophones.

**Activity 8:**

Students will learn to sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” (9) as well as other spirituals. Students will sing each phrase after it is modeled by the teacher, and then sing the whole spiritual. A selected student will sing the verses in an improvised style, followed by the group singing the response “Comin’ for to carry me home.”

**Activity 9:**

Students will create their own African American music book by having a page for the words of each spiritual with questions to answer, and a space to draw a picture to accompany such words, such as shown in a sample lesson. They will tell how these peoples expressed hope and joy in a difficult situation.

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## MY AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC BOOK

### 1. SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

Refrain (repeated part)

“Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin’ for to carry me home,

Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin’ for to carry me home.

*Verse 1:*

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, Comin’ for to carry me home? A band of angels comin’ after me, Comin’ for to carry me home. Refrain

*Verse 2:*

If you get there before I do—Tell all my friends I’m a comin’ too.” Refrain (9)

1. What words are repeated many times? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What did home mean to the early African slaves? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Even though the words express suffering, the music itself is (a) angry (b) sad (c) pleasing.
4. What is a spiritual? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Draw a picture to express these words.

### 2. Spiritual: Walk in Jerusalem Just Like John (10)

“I want to be ready, I want to be ready, I want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem just like John.

*Verse 1:*

John said the city was just four square, Walk in Jerusalem just like John, And he declared he’d meet me there, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.

*Verse 2:*

Oh, John, oh John, what do you say? Walk in Jerusalem just like John. That I’ll be there in the coming day. Walk in Jerusalem just like John.”

1. What words are repeated many times? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How is this spiritual like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?” \_\_\_\_\_
3. What does “walk in Jerusalem” mean? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Draw a picture to express these words.

***Materials needed:***

a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) African American music books.

### **Objective Three:**

Students will learn the roots of the blues in early African American work songs, and demonstrate or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation.

#### **Activity 10:**

Students will learn about the history and practices of African American work songs through a group reading.(11)

Songs were a natural part of group work in the African tradition. Early African American slaves in the South developed songs to help lighten the load, and keep up the pace. They cleared and ploughed the land, as well as harvested crops on plantations and prison farms. They also built roads and railroads, and worked on the boats.

The work songs had a steady rhythm and short rhymed phrases, and were sung in a call and response style between a leader and the work team. Often the leader would holler in a higher type voice, in order to be heard. The song had to engage the imagination of the workers in order to get the work done, and keep up the spirit. The leader had to be able to improvise on topical events; being a lead singer meant being excused from the regular labor. The early blues came out of this tradition, particularly in the Mississippi Delta region. "Take this hammer—huh! (in a growl) Carry it to the captain—huh! (3 times). Tell him I'm goin'—huh! Tell him I'm goin'—huh!" (2 times) (12)

#### **Activity 11:**

Students will read about the background of the song "Pay Me My Money Down."(13)

The call and response work song "Pay Me My Money Down" comes from Georgia. The story is told of men who loaded the boats being cheated out of their pay, because the captain took the boat away in the middle of the night.

#### **Activity 12:**

Students will sing each phrase of the song after it is modeled by the teacher, and then sing the whole song. A selected student will sing the verses in an improvised style, followed by the group singing the response "Pay Me My Money Down." A strong, steady beat will be kept with clapping and stamping, and an improvised tambourine accompaniment. Students will tell how a difficult situation is made more bearable with words that are direct and often humorous.

#### **Activity 13:**

Students will read about John Henry. (14)

John Henry was a famous folk hero; there are many songs and stories about him. He was a six foot African American who could outsing and out-drive any other man on the job. He worked on the Big Bend Tunnel in the West Virginia mountains for the C & O Railroad. When the newly invented automatic steam drill was brought to the Big Bend, a

contest was staged between the man and the machine. John Henry was said to have swung 20 lb. hammers for thirty-five minutes of the test, and beat the machine.

**Activity 14:**

Students will sing the work song “John Henry” in a call and response style.

“Oh John Henry-Oh John Henry, Told his captain-Well a man’s got to-Act like a man-And before-Steam drill beats me-I will die-Hammer in my hand.” (15)

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) African American Music Books.

**Objective Four:**

Students will learn the meaning of the blues through its philosophy, history and definition, and demonstrate or describe the word form and content and the musical elements of form, scale and chords.

**Activity 15:**

Students will read a definition, philosophy and history of the blues. (16)

Around the turn of the century, a unique African-American music and poetry was born—the blues. The early blues singer, with guitar accompaniment, confronted his life situation, shared his troubles with others, and learned to deal with the problems in his world through improvisation in this special form of song which had a length of twelve bars using three basic chords, such as C F and G.

The roots of this music lay in Africa, where music was at the core of daily life, and in the early African slave music of the spirituals and work songs. After the Civil War, as African Americans looked for employment, they wandered from one migrant labor to another, facing discrimination and difficult lives. The blues came about as a response to this life; they affirmed the essential worth of African Americans, and expressed through words and music their strength to survive.

The form of the text was AAB, with the first line of text (A) a statement which was then repeated (A), and followed by a comment, (B) often humorous, or with an ironic twist. The musical style, coming from African roots, included what is known as blue notes, high cries, hums, growls, moans and shouts. The singer improvised with his voice or on his instrument in the “break,” the space between each line of text, which later evolved into jazz, America’s unique contribution to music in this century. The pentatonic or five tone scale was used with blue notes, the flatted third and seventh notes of the common major scale, such as E and B flat of C major scale.

**Activity 16:**

Students will read three blues verses, find the repetition. and explain the problem and how it is addressed.

1. "Good Morning, blues, Blues, how do you do? (2 x)  
Good morning, how are you?" ( 17)
2. "Ain't got nobody in all this world, Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
Is gwine to quit my frownin,' And put my troubles on the shelf." (18)
3. "De railroad bridge's  
A sad song in de air. (2x)  
Ever time de trains pass  
I want to go somewhere"(19)

**Activity 17:**

Students will learn to sing two verses of "The St. Louis Blues" (20) by imitating each phrase as modeled by the teacher.

"I hate to see the evenin' sun go down (2x) Cause my baby, he done left this town.  
Feelin' tomorrow, like I feel today (2x), I'll take my bag, and make my getaway."

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the group reading and question sheet, b) words and music of the "St. Louis Blues," by W. C. Handy. (20)

**Objective Five:**

Students will learn about the role of W.C. Handy in the blues development, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation of the classic blues style as expressed by Bessie Smith in "The St. Louis Blues." (21)

**Activity 18:**

Students will read together short biographies of W.C. Handy and Bessie Smith.

**THE CLASSIC BLUES**

W.C. Handy was a composer, bandleader, cornetist and music publisher. He was born in Alabama in 1873, and died in 1958. He has been called the "Father of the Blues" because he valued the universal appeal of the blues, and wrote the first and several of the most famous of the published blues, thereby bringing about a fundamental change in popular music in this country. One of his most famous blues is "The St. Louis Blues." (20)

Bessie Smith was born in Tennessee in 1894, and died in a car accident in 1937. She began to sing professionally in her early teens in what is called the classic blues tradition. These blues were in demand as a form of entertainment in the theater in the cities. She recorded over fifty records in the twenties, one record selling over a million copies. She was so successful that she was earning close to two thousand dollars for a personal appearance, and was known as "Empress of the Blues." This type of blues was for a female singer, and accompanied by ragtime or stride style piano, or a New Orleans style jazz band. In the recording of "The St. Louis Blues," (21) she is accompanied by a

harmonium, a kind of organ, and a trumpet, played by a most famous jazz musician, Louis Armstrong.

**Activity 19:**

Students will identify the trumpet improvisation in the “St. Louis Blues” (21) by putting their thumbs up.

**Activity 20:**

Students will identify the emphasized words “sun”, “see”, “tomorrow” and “feel” with changing pitch and tone quality by clapping their hands.

**Activity 21:**

Students will sing the two verses of the “St. Louis Blues” (21) by first following the recording, and then the teacher’s piano accompaniment, changing the third line of verse one to the words “I’m on my last go-around,” as sung by Bessie Smith.

**Activity 22:**

Students will answer the following questions orally.

- a. What problem was expressed by the singer, and how was it addressed?
- b. Choose some of the following adjectives to best describe Bessie Smith’s voice. -soft-strong-loud-sweet-direct-entertaining.
- c. How did she improvise? Did she use few or many notes?
- d. Was the music slow or fast?
- e. What words did she improvise for the third line in the first verse.
- f. How was the trumpet’s part a contrast to the singing? How did it support the singing?
- g. Does an improviser repeat or constantly vary his or her musical lines?

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the group reading and question sheet, b) a recording of “St. Louis Blues” by Bessie Smith. (21)

**Objective Six:**

Students will learn the history of the country blues style, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation as expressed by the blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson in “The Matchbox Blues.” (22)

**Activity 23:**

Students will read together about the country blues style, Blind Lemon Jefferson and the words to the first verse of “Match Box Blues.” (23)

The country or downhome blues originated around 1890 to 1905 in the Mississippi delta and east Texas. A male singer accompanied himself with an acoustic steel-stringed guitar. All singers used the blues inflections, that is, the lowered 3rd and 7th and sometimes 5th notes of the major scale, but varied the voice quality, contour, enunciation and range. Typically, rhythms were layered, called polyrhythms, an important of African music, and avoided a stressed rhythm, such as a march in European music. Individuality was very important; each blues singer had a unique

expression. The guitar bottle-neck technique was sometimes used. This practice originally started by stretching a broom wire on a board, and striking the string while sliding a glass bottle along its length.

This region produced the most blues artists during the early part of the century. This rich agricultural land had opened up in the late nineteenth century, and big plantations were established. The prosperity and opportunity attracted African-Americans to work on the farms. Blues musicians provided entertainment for this large African-American community, as well as for the cities and towns nearby. The blues derived from the field holler style in which the singer sang at the top of his range in loose rhythms from high to low pitch, using the pentatonic or five tone scale, important to African music, as well as the work songs, which emphasized a steady rhythm and short rhymed phrases.

Blind Lemon Jefferson was a famous country blues singer. He was a great virtuoso on the guitar. He was born blind in 1897 in Texas, and performed in his early teens. He used the Texas style of guitar playing by thumping the rhythm on the bass string, while playing a rhythmic figure on the higher strings. He would freely improvise on the guitar after each vocal line, and often accused of breaking the time, and people could not dance to his music. He was known for his strong, expressive, high and clear voice, and for his ability to improvise lyrics. He recorded over one hundred blues. He traveled much of his life, like many blues singers, between Texas and Mississippi towns, and Chicago and Memphis. His tragic death occurred in Michigan after he lost his way; he froze to death in the snow. Matchbox Blues—"I'm sittin' here wondering, will a matchbox hold my clothes. I'm sittin' here wondering, will a matchbox hold my clothes. I got so many matches, but I got so far to go."

**Activity 24:**

Students will identify the guitar improvisations in the "Matchbox Blues" (22) by raising their right thumb; they will cross hands when a change occurs.

**Activity 25:**

Students will answer the following questions orally:

- a. How is poverty expressed in the words of this blues?
- b. Compare with Bessie Smith.

**Materials needed:**

- a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet,
- b) a recording of "Matchbox Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson. (22)

**Objective Seven:**

Students will learn the role of the Leadbelly in the development of the blues and popular American music, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation as expressed in his "Good Mornin' Blues."(24)

**Activity 26:**

Students will read together a short biography about Leadbelly, and the words to the first verse of "Good Mornin' Blues."(17)

Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, is one of the most influential figures in all of twentieth-century American popular music. He was born in 1889 in Louisiana, and performed all kinds of songs as he traveled around the area when he was young, even working with Blind Lemon Jefferson. He used a twelve string guitar which produced a stronger sound than the regular six string guitar. Unfortunately, he got into trouble with the law several times, and spent much time in prison. He was discovered and recorded in the Louisiana prison by John and Alan Lomax, who were recording and writing about African American folk music in the United States. He was released from prison, gave concerts around the country, married and went to live and perform in New York. He was the first folk blues singer to give concerts to white people, and even toured France. He initiated a revival in the country blues and other folk music, and many of his songs gained great popularity, such as “Good Night, Irene.”

### Good Morning Blues

“Good morning blues, blues how do you do?  
Good morning blues, blues how do you do?  
I’m doing all right, good morning, how are you?”(17)

#### **Activity 27:**

The blues use a particular harmonic structure in the twelve bars. Using the C, F and G chords, Chord C would be used for bars one to four, and chords F C G C would alternate every two bars, with the last bar being a bridge for a return to the beginning. Students will identify the chord changes in “Good Mornin’ Blues” (17) by raising their right thumb.

#### **Activity 28:**

Students will identify spoken improvisation by clapping their hands.

#### **Activity 29:**

Students will answer the following questions orally.

- What words does Leadbelly use to confront his troubles in a positive way?
- Does Leadbelly sing in a higher or lower voice?
- Describe his style of singing. Is it fast, loud, clear, slow, energetic or soft?
- How does he differ from Bessie Smith or Blind Lemon Jefferson?
- Name the instruments that accompany him in a New Orleans jazz style.

#### **Materials needed:**

- Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) a recording of “Good Mornin’ Blues” by Leadbelly. (24)

#### **Objective Eight:**

Students will learn about the role of Muddy Waters and B.B. King in the Chicago and urban blues, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation as expressed in “Long Distance Call Blues.”(25)

**Activity 30:**

Students will read about Muddy Waters, B.B. King and the Chicago and urban blues, and the words to the “Long Distance Call Blues.”(25)

McKinley Morganfield, known as Muddy Waters, was born in Mississippi in 1915. As a country blues singer, he was recorded in 1941 by Alan Lomax, a researcher of African American folk music in the United States. He migrated to Chicago in the mid 40’s like many African Americans from that area, and at first found work in a paper mill. He aggressively sought out club jobs, and eventually won fame with his first recorded blues hit “I Can’t Be Satisfied” in 1948. As an important leader in the development of the Chicago electric blues, so called because of the use of electronic amplification, he made this music very popular in the postwar era.

In the Chicago and urban blues style, a male singer led an instrumental group. The composed lyrics often told a story. They expressed the group experiences of rootlessness and anxiety of the city. Marvelous improvisations were heard by the harmonica, piano and electric guitar players with such blues singers as Muddy Waters, showing the influence of gospel music. The form was the regular blues form, but with the drums and bass establishing strong dance rhythms with ostinatos or repeated patterns. In the urban blues as represented by the famous blues singer of today, B.B. King, saxophones or brass sustain chords and play riffs (short melodic ideas or motives) in the accompaniment, thus sounding closer to the jazz band style. The words of the “Long Distance Call Blues” are “You say you love me, Darlin,’ please call me on the phone sometime.(2x) When I hear your voice, Hear that word of mine.”

**Activity 31:**

Students will clap a steady beat to “Telephone Conversation Blues;” they will identify each line of words by raising their hand.

**Activity 32:**

Students will identify the polyrhythms (layered patterns of rhythm, deriving from African musical practices) in the improvisations by the harmonica, guitar and bass players by raising their right thumb.

**Activity 33:**

Students will answer the following questions orally.

- (a) What is the problem expressed by the singer? What is he going to do to solve it?
- (b) What instruments besides the guitar are used in this blues?
- (c) How does the singer improvise the words in music? Does he shout, hold and change notes, or speak?
- (d) Does he use a high or low voice?
- (e) How would you describe the quality of his voice—rough or smooth, and how does he compare to Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leadbelly?

**Activity 34:**

Students will see a short video of B.B. King. (26)

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) a recording of “Long Distance Blues” by Muddy Waters (25), c) a B.B. King video. (26)

**Objective Nine:**

Students will learn about the development of jazz from the blues, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation of the “West End Blues,” a jazz masterpiece by Louis Armstrong. (27)

**Activity 35:**

Students will read together about jazz, blues and Louis Armstrong.

Jazz can mean a style of playing, or a piece of music. It developed from the pauses or breaks between the lines of the blues, which were filled in with improvisations by the singer or instrumentalists, and were called “the jazz.” (3) In the blues played by the instrumentalists in the band led by W. C. Handy, such as “The Memphis Blues,” these breaks developed into solo variations on the theme with the repeat of each chorus (the twelve bar blues), and were called hot jazz, and became standard technique with all the bands traveling up and down the Mississippi. Such improvisations provided an outlet for individual expression, as well as dialoguing and competing with each other, in the framework of set parameters, such as musical form and chords, and improvising together. An important element of jazz, besides the polyrhythms and syncopation (African roots), is the unpredictable music (improvisation), which can surprise, shock, or provide a grim humor for the listener. In addition, unusual instrumental tone qualities and sounds are utilized, as in the solo blues singer’s style.

Louis Armstrong, a trumpet player, was one of the greatest jazz musicians. He was born in a New Orleans slum in 1900, and was raised by his mother. He got into some trouble as a young boy, and was sent to a special home for boys where he learned the cornet (like a trumpet). He joined Kid Ory’s Jazz Band in his late teens, and, following the closing of many of the clubs in New Orleans, in 1922 he joined King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in Chicago. He became famous and toured across the United States; later he performed in Europe. He also appeared in many films. He made significant recordings from 1922-28 with his “Hot Five” and “Hot Seven” bands, one of the most famous of which is “West End Blues.” He became famous for his “scat” singing—using nonsense syllables and other peculiar vocal effects, which can be heard in this recording showing a dialogue (call and response) with the clarinet.

**Activity 36:**

Students will identify the chord changes in “West End Blues” by Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five Band by raising their right hand.

**Activity 37:**

Students will identify the order of instruments by placing a number one to five beside the correct instrument. Trumpet \_ Trombone \_ Vocal \_ Clarinet \_ Piano \_

**Activity 38:**

Students will answer the following questions orally.

(a) What is the main function of the banjo and drums in this piece? (b) Describe the trumpet solo. (c) New Orleans jazz style is referred to as Dixieland jazz, and features everyone improvising together. How is this achieved in West End Blues? (d) Could you describe the styles of improvisation used, whether slow or fast, energetic or calm, direct or timid? (e) Where is scat singing heard in this piece?

**Materials needed:**

a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) a recording of “West End Blues” by Louis Armstrong. (27)

**Objective Ten:**

Students will learn the contributions of Duke Ellington to the development of jazz, and demonstrate, identify or describe the form, instruments, vocal techniques, scale, rhythm and improvisation of his “C Jam Blues” with jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald. (28)

**Activity 39:**

Students will read together about Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. (29)

Edward Kennedy Ellington, known as “Duke,” is considered the most important jazz composer, band leader and pianist. His greatest genius was in his ability to produce distinctive, inventive sounds in his orchestra. He was able to use the individual qualities in each of his instrumentalists and vocalists and weave them together into a unique musical sound. He was a visual artist, and thought of each of his musicians as a particular color on his palette; he liked to mix them in startling combinations. He became a world figure, receiving 119 awards and citations from nations around the world, including fifteen honorary degrees from colleges!

He was born in Washington, D.C. in 1899, and died in 1971. His parents provided a comfortable life style for the family, and he was raised a Christian. He began taking piano lessons after he had been hit with a baseball bat, and formed his own band in high school with himself being the agent. In 1923 he went to New York, and was hired by the Kentucky Club. Later he played at the Cotton Club. He increased the size of his orchestra from nine to fifteen pieces in order to realize his arrangements. He was in a movie and appeared onstage in New York. He made many recordings, and toured Europe several times; he was especially famous for his “Take the A-Train.” He attracted the greatest instrumentalists of his day, and they stayed in the band normally for decades. He paid them all very well, even when he had to use his own funds.

Ella Fitzgerald was the most well-known jazz vocalist. She was born in 1918, and died recently. She was an orphan at 15, and tried out in talent shows; she became a star at a young age, and sang with many important jazz bands. She made many recordings of jazz, show tunes and popular songs. She is most famous for her scat singing.

**Activity 40:**

Students will clap a steady beat to “C Jam Blues” by Duke Ellington, and improvise scat-singing with Ella Fitzgerald; selected students will dance after being shown a video which illustrates people dancing to this music. (29)

**Activity 41:**

Using the numbers one to five, the students will indicate the order in which they hear a featured instrument or the famous Ella Fitzgerald jazz singer.

Trumpet \_\_\_ Piano \_\_\_ Ella Fitzgerald \_\_\_ Saxophone \_\_\_ Clarinet \_\_\_

**Activity 42:**

Students will answer the following questions orally.

- (a) What is the problem expressed? How is it addressed? How are the words varied?
- (b) How does the musical style help convey the meaning of the words?
- (c) What type of vocal improvisations does Ella Fitzgerald use? Circle the appropriate ones. Scat singing-shouts-bending-slurs-speaking voice-held notes-wide range/volume
- (d) Which instrument s(or voice) improvised alone, then were accompanied by a band?

**Materials needed:**

- a) Copies of the student group reading and question sheet, b) a recording of “C Jam Blues” by Duke Ellington.(28)

**Objective Eleven:**

Following a curriculum book, students will learn how to perform the keyboard accompaniment for the blues, using the chords C F and G and pentatonic scale and blues notes, as well as to sing both a traditional and an original blues to such accompaniment.

Activity (a): Students will play/improvise the C major and pentatonic scales and blues notes E and B flat.

Activity (b): Students will play the C, F and G chords.

Activity (c): Students will play and improvise the C, F and G chords in the following twelve bar blues form. Each bar or measure has four beats.

*(figure available in print form)*

Activity (d): The class will be divided into two sections; one will improvise the accompaniment of chords or melody, and the other will sing the “St. Louis Blues,” beginning the second and third lines when the F and G chords are played. Selected students will add the drums and bass part to complete the musical sound.

Activity (e): All students will write a three line blues, and a selected student will improvise one vocally with the chord and melodic accompaniment as performed by the class. They will begin by finishing the lines “I hate..... (2x), ‘Cause....., and then write their own, based on this model.

Activity (f): A final “Blues Book” will include all the students’ verses.

Activity (g): Visual interpretations of the blues poetry studied by the students will be done at the Lincoln Bassett school, in cooperation with the art teacher.

Activity (h): A music program in March will include a presentation of original blues by one or more selected students; if possible, a blues singer will be invited to participate.

**Materials needed:**

- a) Copies of the curriculum book. b) musical keyboards.

In conclusion, the blues is a twentieth century African American music which is the foundation of many other musical styles, such as evidenced in great jazz compositions of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, as well as in gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, rock, pop and rap. By learning the musical and poetic elements that comprise the blues, my students have developed a greater appreciation for the contributions of African Americans to the world

For myself, it has been an enlightening journey to view the world from an African American perspective; not to just read about, but to understand the black experience as told by black writers. The use of symbols and improvisation, such as in *Train Whistle Guitar*,<sup>(30)</sup> by Albert Murray, were a revelation to me; for example, he wrote “I use to say My name is also Jack the Rabbit because my home is in the briarpatch, and Little Buddy (than whom there was never a better riddle buddy) used to say Me my name is Jack the Rabbit also because my home is also in the also and also of the briarpatch because that is also where I was also bred and also born.” The briarpatch is the thorny and problem-filled world; Jack the Rabbit is a description of the main character as someone that can move quickly, and that confronts where he comes from. The bear refers to the oppressive world that puts him down. This prose writing helped me to unlock the mysteries of the musical elements of jazz, which, although I have listened to, and can play to some extent, never really understood as musical composition, having been trained in European classical music for twenty years.

I could relate to the conflicts in the religious attitude towards the blues expressed through the course readings, as I was raised in a Protestant home and had a rigid attitude about what is correct music to study and perform, reinforced by music teachers and the church. Fortunately, my father’s love of the big band music of the 30’s and 40’s, which was played much at home, was important to me as later in life I developed an interest in the blues and jazz. At least I had some knowledge of American music.

I look forward to listening to, and playing the blues and jazz with greater comprehension and understanding, as well as sharing with my students the new insights I have gained with a study of the blues, truly the most unique musical and poetic art form of this century. In the preface to *Nothing But the Blues*, Lawrence Cohn states my feelings perfectly—“The blues has helped me through troubled times . . . afforded lessons in American history that could not be gained through books . . . blues is not only a people’s music, blues is the music of the people.”<sup>(31)</sup>

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## Notes

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Nineteen unusual call-and-response songs, story songs, game songs and multipart songs from the Akan people of Ghana and the Shona of Zimbabwe.

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This book is a collection of thirty-three songs with vocal/piano arrangements that were sung by Bessie Smith, and includes a short biography.

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This book is about African music; its forms, musicians, instruments and the place of music in the life of the people. It has many illustrations and an excellent discography.

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This book was originally published in 1923, and is considered a principal literary masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance. It is an innovative literary work—part drama, part poetry and part fiction.

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