

## **Langston Hughes and the Blues**

### **Rationale**

An authentic African-American folk-music and the foundation for much American music including rock and roll, the blues is a unique expression of black American culture. In addition to being an art form in its own right, the blues has inspired many writers and artists including Langston Hughes. Exploring the connections between the blues and the poetry of Hughes will enrich students' understanding of the African-American experience in the early part of this century.

### **Objectives**

During the course of the unit, students will:

1. develop an understanding of the historical roots and basic elements of the blues;
2. recognize the blues as an important expression of African-American culture;
3. examine the relationship between the blues and the poetry of Langston Hughes;
4. explore the question of whether one ethnic group can write accurately and honestly about another.

### **Materials**

CDs/tapes/records of selected songs; song lyrics; poems.

### **Timeframe**

4-5 lessons

### **Audience**

Suggested for 7-12 depending on choice of poems, music, etc.

### **Procedures**

#### **Lesson 1: Introduce Blues**

1. Read Langston Hughes' 1940 essay "Songs Called the Blues." Ask students to discuss Hughes' main points about the blues: songs of black (southern) life, songs with tension between heartache and laughter. Discuss the origins and history of the blues.
2. Play examples of blues, discussing the basic musical and lyrical elements. Using Hughes' explanation, "The Blues...have a strict rhyme pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line...is slightly changed and sometimes...it is omitted." 1
  1. What are the subjects of the blues (everyday life, love, work, family, etc.)?
  2. Find examples of tension between heartache and laughter in the songs.

## Lesson 2: Introduce Hughes' Blues Poetry

3. Read examples of Hughes' blues poetry. Use both "The Weary Blues" in which Hughes describes a blues piano player but does not follow blues form and poems such as "Po' Boy Blues" or "Homesick Blues" that adhere more closely to blues form.
  1. How are the poems similar to or different from blues songs listened to in class?
  2. What blues elements does Hughes incorporate into his poetry?
  3. Which of the poems seems closest to the blues music?
  4. How do the blues and Hughes' blues poetry express the "Negro soul?"

## Lesson 3: Introduce "Note on Commercial Theatre"

4. In "Note on Commercial Theatre" Hughes reflects the views of W.E. B. DuBois who wrote that Negroes don't want whites to write about them. Hughes felt that whites often distorted the picture of blacks and wrote about them only for personal financial gains. A similar controversy about the blues among blues scholars, fans and musicians exists today:  
Can white musicians really play authentic blues? Discussion questions:
  - Why would blacks object to whites writing about them or appropriating their music?
5. Introduce terms and allusions in poem.
  - Blues are sorrow songs of the common Negro. W.C. Handy who wrote "St. Louis Blues" has been called the "Father of Blues."
  - "And you mixed 'em up with symphonies." Paul Whitman known as "King of Jazz" played a concert of classical jazz in 1924 at the New Lafayette Theater in Harlem.
  - "You took my Spirituals..." "Run Little Chillun" by Hall Johnson presented songs which were heralded as spirituals; IN 1919 Daniel Gregory Mason, a white composer published "String Quartet on Negro Themes" using such spirituals as "You Bury Me in the East" and "Oh, Holy Lord." *Porggy*, a popular drama by Debose Heyward, a white playwright, was produced in 1927. Spirituals added to its emotional appeal.
  - You Put Me in Macbeth...A Haitian Macbeth, a modernistic version of the play, was presented in 1936. It contained voodoo chants and dances. *Carmen Jones*, a musical, was a white-created Negro version of Bizet's *Carmen*. Many consider it a caricature of the opera.
  - *Swing Mikado*, a jazz-inspired play produced by the Federal Theater in Harlem based upon Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*.
  - "And in everything but what's about me." Poet could have been referring to:

*Ziegfield's Show Boat* by Edna Ferber  
*The Emperor Jones* by Eugene McNeill  
*Green Pastures* by Marc Connelly  
*Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green

*All God's Chillun Got Wings* by Eugene O'Neill  
*The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith

- "I reckon it'll be me myself." Hughes referred to blacks who would write truthfully about the black experience.

#### **Lesson 4:**

Interpret "Note on Commercial Theatre"

6. Have students read poem silently and answer questions:
  - What accusation was made against those who have "taken my blues and gone"?
  - Does the poet use "me" in the singular or plural sense? (The plural - he speaks for all members of his race who share this same attitude.)
  - What adjectives does the poet use to describe his race?
  - Explain the last two lines. Has this idea become an actuality? (Not a complete actuality, but blacks are more and more speaking and writing about themselves in books, plays, films, television, etc. Books by Leroi Jones, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker; plays by Ossie Davis and Lorraine Hansberry; films of Sidney Poitier and Spike Lee; and television by Diahann Carroll and Flip Wilson; rap music)
  - Why do you think whites write about the black experience? (For financial gains, to continue the myth of the black man's inferiority, to reveal the degrading racial and social conditions of blacks).
  - Interpret the poem orally for a deeper appreciation of its language and emotional appeal.
7. Summary Discussion
  - Do you think one ethnic group can write honestly and accurately about another?

#### **Evaluation**

Have students write an essay in which they compare and contrast a blues song and a poem. Analyze the elements of blues in the poetry and the elements of poetry in the blues. Finally, discuss both works as an expression of the "Negro soul."

#### **Extensions**

Compare Hughes' attitudes in "Note on Commercial Theatre" to those found in "Theme for English B," a poem in which Hughes explores the conflict between ethnicity and universality.

Have students write several verses of blues lyrics, using blues lyrics as well as poems of Langston Hughes as models.

Read Hughes' short story "The Blues I'm Playing" in which the division between art and life is a major theme. In light of this theme, how does the story present the blues?

Explore visual art produced during the Harlem Renaissance such as the paintings of Aaron Douglas or the photographs of James Van Der Zee.

Compare blues and jazz poems of Langston Hughes. How do they each translate music into poetry? How are they similar or different from each other? Some jazz poems include: "Jazzonia," "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," "Trumpet Player," "Dream Boogie."

Play some later blues recordings from the 40s, 50s and today and compare to blues Langston Hughes would have been familiar with during the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Selected Recordings**

Until the advent of the compact disc, the recordings of early blues greats such as Bessie Smith were difficult to find. Since the late 1980s, however, record companies have been actively re-releasing the work of many blues artists as well as producing some excellent blues anthologies. Check your local library in the folk section. Some suggested blues songs/artists from the 1920s and 1930s include:

"Stack O' Lee Blues" by Mississippi John Hurt  
"Matchbox Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson  
"Cross Roads Blues" by Robert Johnson  
"Love in Vain" by Robert Johnson  
"Sweet Home Chicago" by Robert Johnson  
"Statesboro Blues" by Blind Willie McTell  
"Prove It On Me" by Ma Rainey  
"Downhearted Blues" by Bessie Smith  
Selected Hughes' Blues Poems: "Blues Fantasy"

"Bound No'th Blues"  
"Evenin' Air Blues"  
"Hard Daddy"  
"Hey! Hey!"  
"Homesick Blues"  
"Midwinter Blues"  
"Misery"  
"Po' Boy Blues"  
"Song for a Banjo Dance"  
"The Weary Blues"  
"Young Gal Blues"

### **Further Reading**

*The Blues Line: A Collection of Blues Lyrics from Leadbelly to Muddy Waters*, compiled by Eric Sackheim, The Ecco Press, 1993.

*Blueprints: For Teaching and Learning About The Harlem Renaissance*, National Alliance of Black School Educators, 1994.

Davis, Francis. *The History of the Blues*. New York: Hyperion, 1995 (a companion volume to a PBS series of the same name).

*Nexus: The Harlem Renaissance*, Cleveland: Pallas Communications, 1996.

Santelli, Robert. *The Big Book of Blues*. New York: Penguin, 1993.

## **Background**

### **The Blues**

The blues is an African-American folk music which was born in the rural south around 1900. Descended from call-and-response work songs sung by freed slaves after the Civil War, the blues described the everyday lives and feelings of African-Americans living in the early decades of this century. The blues offered a release of tension by expressing the anger and frustration felt by many African-Americans facing poverty and racial prejudice. Unlike the group singing of work songs or spirituals, the blues are solo songs. Blues lyrics are full of irony, humor, earthy imagery and commentary on daily life and love.

The basic blues form is simple: 12-bars consisting of three lines of four bars each; the lyric is a couplet with the first line repeated once (sometimes with slight variations). Each line of the lyric takes about 2.5 bars with the rest of each 4-bar segment being improvised fill, sometimes vocal but usually instrumental on the singer's own guitar or piano. The blues are not played in major or minor keys but in what is known as "blue mode" with off-pitch "blue notes" which cannot be played on the piano and are thought to be descended from African music.

Although the blues had been sung since 1900, the first blues record, a song called "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith, was made in 1920. The 1920s are considered the period of "classic blues," featuring female singers such as Bessie Smith with small jazz band accompaniment. These singers often played in northern cities at places like The Cotton Club in New York's fashionable Harlem neighborhood. Of course, many regional styles of rural blues continued to be played in the south from the Mississippi Delta to Texas. During the late 1930s and 1940s, a new blues style, called "electric blues" or "rhythm & blues," began to emerge. This style featured electric guitars, bigger bands, more sophisticated instrumentation and more urban lyrics. In the 1950s, this style of blues contributed to the rise of rock and roll. Also in the 1950s, white musicians like Paul Butterfield, John Koerner, John Hammond and Dave Van Ronk tried playing authentic blues. In the 1960s, the blues and rhythm & blues were major influences on rockers such as The Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The blues continue to be played to this day, by both black and white musicians.

### **The Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes and the Blues**

The classic period of the blues coincided with the flowering of black American arts and letters that has become known as the Harlem Renaissance. During the 1920s, black writers found themselves for the first time a significant group in American literature. Harlem became the cultural Mecca and to it flocked such writers as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. Harlem also became a center of musical entertainment with black and white audiences flocking to the uptown clubs, ballrooms and theaters. There they saw such jazz performers as Louis Armstrong, Mamie Smith and Duke Ellington, black artists such as Paul Robeson performing in the classical European tradition, and blues musicians like Bessie Smith. In fact, millions of black Americans seeking a better way of life migrated to the big northern cities between

1890 and 1920. Taking note of this change in their living patterns, many writers gradually shifted their themes from the Southern Plantation Tradition to the urban experience. A similar move from the country to the city also occurred in the blues. Although they often protested against social and racial injustices, many writers seemed more interested in describing these conditions than in using their pens for social and political reform. Of great importance to many of them was a new spirit of pride in one's race and African heritage, and this new sense of "somebodiness" found its way not only into literature but also into history.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967), whose writing career spanned more than 40 years was the first black man to earn a living by writing. In 1924 he moved to Harlem where he spent the rest of his life. He wrote poetry, essays, plays, songs, short stories and novels about the defeats and triumphs of the people he loved. He was among the earliest African-American writers to re-create black speech and music in literature. Hughes was a gentle spirit whose humor often pervaded much of what he wrote. His writing is essentially urban, and his insight into the lives of ordinary blacks along with his skillful use of their language gained him the title of "Poet Laureate of Black America." Along with jazz, the blues were a major influence on Hughes and references to the "black and laughing, heartbreaking blues" (The Big Sea) abound throughout his work. In fact, Hughes supposedly was first inspired to write poetry after hearing the blues on a Kansas City street corner at the age of nine.<sup>2</sup> Hughes viewed the blues as an expression of the "Negro soul," a major theme of his work as well as that of other Harlem Renaissance writers. In his blues poetry, Hughes undertook the difficult task of communicating the poetry of the blues through the written word alone.

### **Notes and References**

Section on "Note on Commercial Theatre" contributed by George Harley, Shaker Hts. High School.

1 Preface to *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927.

2 *Emanuel*, James A. Langston Hughes. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1967. p. 137.

**Source:** The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (<http://www.rockhall.com/teacher/sti-lesson-2/>)