Blues Composition

Concepts: Students will understand the origins of the blues and how the lyrics are structured.

Length: 25-30 minute class period

Objectives:
1. Students will recognize the blues as a musical response to the experiences of African Americans in the rural South.
2. Students will distinguish the blues from other musical forms.
3. Students will recognize how music can be an outlet for self-expression and, in the case of the blues, often dealing with hardship and negative experiences.
4. Students will write their own blues based on an experience in their life.

Materials: recording of “Backwater Blues” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRTHHkeQ8sE

Missouri DESE Music GLEs: AP1A3-5, HC1A3-5, HC1B4, HC1C4

National Standards: MU6, MU9

Cross-Curricular Connections: English, Social Studies

Further Resources: The Blues Classroom, from PBS provides lesson materials that deal with the blues through English, Social Studies, and Music.

Introduction

The blues is an unmistakable American art form. Adopted in many genres of music, the blues first made its appearance in parts of the rural deep South during the late 1800s. It was heavily influenced by the traditions of work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and gospel hymns. A musical response to the experiences of African Americans in the rural South during the time of slavery, blues music recognizes pain, suffering, injustice, or the loss of a loved one.

Like most types of music, blues has a specific musical form with both a harmonic and lyric component. This lesson focuses on understanding the lyric form of a blues. Most blues lyrics follow a certain formula:

Statement - Restatement - Resolution

Each of the above three sections are four measures or bars each. This results in a total of 12 bars. These 12 bars make up the form of a typical blues, meaning that these 12 bars are repeated over and over throughout the song.

When talking about the lyric content, each of the above sections represents a stanza. The first stanza states a problem. The second stanza restates the problem. The third stanza resolves the problem. This is often linked to call and response or conflict and resolution. For example:

Statement: My dog ate my homework and now I gotta stay after school
Restatement: My dog ate my homework and now I gotta stay after school
Resolution: Now he’s the world’s smartest dog, but he treats me like a fool

Note that the last word of the third stanza rhymes with the last word of the first two stanzas. This is certainly a common feature of the lyric form, but it is not always the case.
Activity

- Begin the class by playing “Backwater Blues” by Bessie Smith (for more information on Bessie Smith, click here). At the conclusion, ask the students if they know what type of song you played. Explain that the song they heard was a blues.
- Using the information from the introduction of this lesson and your own research, introduce the concept of the blues, its history and importance in American culture.
- Explain that although each blues is unique, they all share the same basic twelve-bar form. Blues lyrics also have a standard form that they follow:
  
  Statement – Restatement – Resolution

- Continue by discussing how each section comprises four measures/bars and, when combined, they make up the twelve-bar form of the blues.
- After you have discussed the lyric form, go back and listen to “Backwater Blues.” Have the students listen for the statement-restatement-resolution form you have been discussing. This form repeats itself 7 times. Follow the chart on the next page to see the lyric structure in each chorus.
- Discuss some of the lyrics in the song with the students. What themes are present? Does the Bessie Smith sound happy or sad? What kind of events might make her feel that way? Have any of them ever felt down or sad?
- Ask the students to name some things that make them sad or upset. Pick one and use it to write lyrics for a blues as a class. Remember to, if possible, make the last word of the statement/restatement rhyme with the last word of the resolution.
- As either an in-class assignment or as homework, have all the students write their own blues lyrics based on something in their own life; it could be happy or sad.
“Backwater Blues”
singer: Bessie Smith
pianist: James P. Johnson (click [here](#) for more information on James P. Johnson)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>:04 1st Chorus</th>
<th>:32 2nd Chorus</th>
<th>1:00 3rd Chorus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>piano</td>
<td>When it rains five days and the skies turn dark as night</td>
<td>I woke up this mornin’, can’t even get out of my door</td>
<td>Then they rowed a little boat about five miles ‘cross the pond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restatement</td>
<td></td>
<td>When it rains five days and the skies turn dark as night</td>
<td>I woke up this mornin’, can’t even get out of my door</td>
<td>Then they rowed a little boat about five miles ‘cross the pond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td>Then trouble’s takin’ place in the lowlands at night</td>
<td>There’s been enough trouble to make a poor girl wonder where she want to go</td>
<td>I packed all my clothes, throwed them in and they rowed me along</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1:27 4th Chorus</th>
<th>1:54 5th Chorus</th>
<th>2:21 6th Chorus</th>
<th>2:48 7th Chorus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>When it thunders and lightnin’ and when the wind begins to blow</td>
<td>Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill</td>
<td>Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go</td>
<td>Mmm, I can’t move no more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restatement</td>
<td>When it thunders and lightnin’ and when the wind begins to blow</td>
<td>Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill</td>
<td>Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go</td>
<td>Mmm, I can’t move no more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>There’s thousands of people ain’t got no place to go</td>
<td>Then looked down on the house were I used to live</td>
<td>Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go</td>
<td>‘Cause my house fell down and I can’t live there no more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There ain’t no place for a poor old girl to go</td>
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</tbody>
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