



# BLIND LEMON BLUES

A LEARNING LEGACY



EDUCATION GUIDE

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## INTRODUCTION

*Blind Lemon Blues: A Learning Legacy* for educators and students provides background information for the study of the blues. In addition, this guide addresses the historical significance of the blues in relation to the life and career of a seminal blues figure, Blind Lemon Jefferson, its relevance to the popular culture and music of young people today, and the ways in which musical theater can serve as a vehicle to convey historical and cultural narratives.

Looking back at this vital American musical genre through the story of Blind Lemon Jefferson, one of its earliest recorded performers, young people follow themes that flow from slavery through decades of life under Jim Crow and struggles for social justice, up to the realities of the contemporary world. The guide provides authentic traditional music and interdisciplinary activities that can be integrated easily into existing curricula and courses. These activities help students understand music in relation to history and culture; discover the music of other generations in their own music; study and perform music and theater exercises; and deepen decoding skills that improve literacy.

## OBJECTIVES

Students will learn:

- ▶ The historical and cultural significance of the blues
- ▶ The importance of Blind Lemon Jefferson and other blues musicians to U.S. history, music, culture, and literature
- ▶ The relationship of the past to the present
- ▶ The value of musical theater to personal expression

## EDUCATION STANDARDS

*Blind Lemon Blues: A Learning Legacy* is adaptable for Grades 4-12 and is interdisciplinary, weaving music, theater, literature, and history. The guide helps students meet national education standards in all these subject areas. Link to your state's standards at <http://edstandards.org/Standards.html#State> or to the sites below for national discipline standards. National Arts Education Standards include music and theater, <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards.cfm>. National Council for the Social Studies outlines ten thematic strands and grade-level standards in Expectations of Excellence, <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/stitle.html>. National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association provide overarching Language Arts Standards, <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>.

## BACKGROUND

Teachers and study leaders should look for information to excerpt and summarize for students.

### The Roots of American Blues

(Excerpted from *Meeting the Blues: The Rise of the Texas Sound*, by Alan Govenar. Schiffer Publishing, 2005)

Uprooted from their homelands and brought to North America against their will, Africans in this country endured the horrors of slavery. Yet despite all attempts to obliterate their identity for generations, African traditions persisted and evolved in the New World, propelling the growth of a unique musical form called the blues.

The blues expresses the hardships and joys of newly freed black Americans, struggling to survive the failed promise of Reconstruction. Racism, Jim Crow laws, and the day-to-day reality of the Ku Klux Klan were cruel obstacles to economic independence and self-determination. Early blues answered the need for a release from these constraints while recounting the circumstances and emotions of everyday life.

### An Intensely Personal Music

Blues music has an intense, personal nature that emotionally connects singer and listener.

In this way, blues differs from traditional West African songs, which usually concerned the lives and works of deities. Blues, with its emphasis on the individual's trials and successes on earth — from suffering to hope — reflects the twists and turns of African American life across the centuries and into the present.

As a musical form the blues shows little Western influence. The traditional three-line, twelve-bar, AAB verse structure of the blues arises from no apparent Western source, although some blues does incorporate Anglo-European ballad forms.

Early blues drew from the sounds of its time: field hollers and shouts, which it resembles melodically; songster ballads, from which it borrowed imagery and guitar patterns; spirituals; and gospel. These, with the exception of the ballad, were the descendants of African musical elements: polyrhythm, improvisation, call and response, and percussion.

Although blues derives from sacred music of both African and Western cultures, it was often considered sinful by the church. Blues singers were sometimes stereotyped as backsliders in their own communities. In many areas, blues was thought to be “the devil’s music.” Superstition both plagued and fed the blues, and the music often reflected the ambivalence of the world in which it thrived. The blues connected the domain of the spirit with the pleasures of the flesh. The blues singer had an undeniable power. Opposition to the blues varied from place to place. Rarely were blues singers completely ostracized. They lived on the margins of what was acceptable and created a livelihood from itinerant work, playing their music for tips at house parties and country dances. Some blues singers were known to sing in juke joints on Saturday night and in the church house on Sunday morning.

### **Oral Tradition and the Great Migration**

Blues was part of an oral tradition that developed in different areas of the South by the 1890s. Thousands of African Americans were migratory, looking for work and freedom from racism in the chaos following the collapse of Reconstruction. Blues singers often followed crop harvests, lumber camps, and boomtowns. Some settled down as sharecroppers, leasing small tracts of land from white landowners. Others roved from town to town, working odd jobs in the growing urban centers — Memphis, Dallas, Shreveport, New Orleans, and Atlanta — cities whose African American migrant populations were crowded into neighborhoods of “shotgun” houses (another cultural tradition that originated in West Africa and proliferated in the U.S.).

With the growth of the recording industry in the 1920s, the audience for blues expanded north with the Great Migration to cities such as Chicago and New York. John Lee Hooker, like Robert Johnson before him, left the Mississippi Delta, as did Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, Elmore James, Jimmy Reed, and a host of others. The blues in Chicago flourished with an unparalleled intensity and developed its own gritty, urban sound.

### **Rhythm and Blues**

In 1949 *Billboard* magazine introduced “rhythm and blues” as a substitute for the word “race.” “Race Records” had been the term since 1920 when the success of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” ignited the recording industry. In time, “race” became a catchall for any type of black recording — jazz, folk, pop, big band. After World War II, the connotations of “race” were acknowledged as offensive, and the term “rhythm and blues” came into use. The spirit of rhythm and blues differed from that of rural blues. Energized by the electric guitar and elaborated by a big band sound, rhythm and blues was a response to the realities of inner city life and urban migration.

### **White Crossovers and the Shaping of American Popular Music**

The white crossover to blues started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when black fiddlers, guitarists, and banjo players performed with white musicians at dances around the South. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certain white musicians, from Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, and Hank Williams to Patsy Cline and Elvis Presley, incorporated the influence of blues, but ultimately they did little to popularize its originators. It was not until the 1960s that African American musicians began to receive the national and international recognition they deserved.

As the momentum of the modern Civil Rights Movement dismantled the forces of social injustice and opened the broadcast media to a wider public, the blues shaped the course of American popular music. Jazz, rock and roll, soul, funk, rap, and hip hop all owe their existence to the blues.

### **Who Was Blind Lemon Jefferson?**

“Well, the blues come to Texas loping like a mule,  
I said, the blues come to Texas loping like a mule.”

*“Booster Blues,” by Blind Lemon Jefferson*

Born into a large African American family in the rural East Texas community of Couchman in 1893, Lemon Jefferson faced many hardships in life but became one of the most important musicians of his time. Little is known about his early life, his musical influences, or even the cause or extent of his blindness. He was reared in the Baptist church and probably heard black songsters and bluesmen who traveled through Texas. He took up music at an early age and learned to get around nearby small towns well enough to play for tips on the streets.

By his teens, Blind Lemon had followed the railroad tracks to Dallas, where he often played at the corner of Elm Street and Central Avenue. About 1912 in Deep Ellum (a colloquial spelling of Elm), a business district African Americans frequented, Blind Lemon met Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly, and they became musical partners. Leadbelly was born in 1889 in Louisiana near the Texas border. His wild and reckless youth in that frontier country foreshadowed the trouble that would plague much of his life until his discovery by the folklorist John Lomax and his son Alan in the 1930s. Leadbelly learned a lot about the blues from Blind Lemon, and he had plenty to contribute as a musician and a showman. Leadbelly was a dancer, too, and he'd often break into a "buck and wing," a kind of flat-footed shuffle, as the two performed on the streets of Deep Ellum. They were wildly popular but broke up in 1915 when Leadbelly left Dallas. In 1918, he was sentenced to prison for murder. The two apparently never saw each other again, although Leadbelly often talked about Blind Lemon after he was released from his second prison term in 1935. Leadbelly went on to become internationally famous as a folk singer who recorded such classics as "Midnight Special," "Rock Island Line," and "Silver City Bound," in which he recounts his travels with Blind Lemon. Leadbelly died in 1949.

In Dallas, Jefferson's ramblings often took him by R.T. Ashford's shoeshine parlor and record shop. Ashford wrote to Paramount Records about the singer, and a company scout came to Dallas. When he found Jefferson in Deep Ellum, he invited him to Chicago to make "Race Records," the term then used for recordings intended for African American audiences. Ashford accompanied him on his first trip in 1925, and by May 1926 Blind Lemon had a national hit. In only four years, Blind Lemon recorded 80 songs, including spirituals under the pseudonym Deacon L. J. Bates.

Blind Lemon's compositions, guitar style, distinctive singing, two-octave vocal range, and commanding performance style brought him acclaim. During the zenith of his brief recording career, from 1926 to 1929, Blind Lemon commuted between Dallas and Chicago. His producer for Paramount, Mayo Williams, also African American, marveled at the appeal of his songs. In appreciation of Blind Lemon's earning power, Williams bought him a \$725 Ford, and the singer hired a chauffeur to drive it for him. Blind Lemon's royalties accumulated quickly, an extraordinary feat for a black performer of that era.

In the early 1930s, the Great Depression devastated record sales. No one knows what would have happened to Blind Lemon Jefferson's career if he had lived. But in late 1929, he died in Chicago. The circumstances and date of his death are unclear. Some said he died of a heart attack; others said he had collapsed in his car and was abandoned by his chauffeur. Some believed that his chauffeur failed to pick him up at the train station and that he tried to walk to his hotel and froze after losing his way in the snow, which disoriented him by muffling sounds.

Blind Lemon Jefferson's death marked the end of the riotous 1920s, a time when the commercial possibilities of African American popular music were first explored. His art also looked forward. He was a major influence, not only upon other performers and songwriters of his time, but on generations to come. From Robert Johnson to Elvis Presley, T-Bone Walker to the Beatles, from the 1920s until today, Blind Lemon's musical legacy has endured. Today, more than a century after his birth, Blind Lemon Jefferson lies buried in the black section of the small Wortham cemetery. A historical plaque installed in 1967 marks his flat, windswept burial place, an eerie fulfillment of his musical plea, "See that my grave is kept clean."

### **Blind Lemon Blues**

"I listened to the music of Blind Lemon every day for five years. Blind Lemon Jefferson was the voice of black America at that moment."

– *August Wilson, playwright*

*Blind Lemon Blues* pays homage to the influence of Blind Lemon Jefferson, who emerged in the 1920s as the biggest-selling country blues singer in the U.S. Jefferson was discovered on a street corner in the Deep Ellum district of Dallas, Texas, in 1925 and made more than 80 records until his untimely death in 1929. Today, Jefferson is considered an icon in the development of American popular music and has been acknowledged as a seminal influence upon musicians as varied as Leadbelly, B.B. King, Carl Perkins, and the Beatles. Very little is known about Blind Lemon's life; there is only one authenticated photograph of him and few biographical details.

*Blind Lemon Blues*, a new musical by Alan Govenar and Akin Babatunde, is set in New York City in 1948 at the last recording session of Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, the legendary Louisiana-born singer who performed on Dallas streets with Blind Lemon Jefferson as early as 1912. Leadbelly brings Blind Lemon to life as he reminisces about their times together through the stirring, hilarious, sexy, and grim vintage songs that put Dallas on the musical map before the Great Depression. *Blind Lemon Blues* combines elements of traditional blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, doo-wop, and rap to evoke the enduring legacy of Blind Lemon and his contemporaries, Blind Willie Johnson, Lillian Glinn, Hattie Hudson, Bobbie Cadillac, Lillian Miller, and Leadbelly himself.

*Blind Lemon Blues* incorporates more than 60 Blind Lemon Jefferson songs to evoke his mythic legacy and the story of his life. The musical involves six actors and one guitarist. Aside from the actor portraying Blind Lemon, each actor assumes different roles defined by the situations depicted in each song.

In *Blind Lemon Blues* Govenar and Babatunde explore the relationship between blues music and the spectrum of the human circumstance — from pain to joy, despair to hope. Blind Lemon's lyrics merge with new arrangements and choreographed movement to propel the drama and reveal the intricacies that define the myth and the man.

The current production of *Blind Lemon Blues* builds on the success of regional productions of an earlier version of the show in Texas in 1998, 1999, and 2001 (Leon Rabin Award for Best New Work — Musical or Play). *Blind Lemon Blues* premiered in 2004 at the Forum Meyrin, in Geneva, Switzerland, and as the opening of the Festival of the Imagination at the Maison des Cultures du Monde in Paris, France.

### **The Playwrights**

Alan Govenar is an acclaimed writer, folklorist, photographer, and filmmaker who earned a doctorate in arts and humanities from the University of Texas at Dallas. He is the president of Documentary Arts and the author of 14 books, including *Meeting the Blues: The Rise of the Texas Sound*, *The Early Years of Rhythm and Blues*, *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged*, and *Osceola: Memories of a Sharecropper's Daughter* (First Place, Young Readers' Non-Fiction; New York Book Festival, First Prize; Boston Globe Horn Book, and Orbis Pictus Honor Book).

Akin Babatunde is an award-winning writer, director and actor who has worked in regional theater, on- and off-Broadway productions, film and television. He has been a resident company member of Trinity Repertory Theater in Providence, R.I., Florida Stage, the Alley Theater in Houston, La Mama Theater in New York, and the Dallas Theater Center, and is a director and playwright in residence with Troupe New York. He has toured extensively with the original one-man shows "Of Ebony Embers," based on the Harlem Renaissance, and "Before the Second Set: A Visit With Satchmo," written in collaboration with his brother, Obba Babatunde.

### **TEACHING TOOLS**

Use the *Blind Lemon Blues* education guide in various settings: classrooms, out-of-school programs, performing arts centers, theaters, libraries, museums, and intergenerational exchanges between young people and adults. Teachers and study leaders should first read the background on the roots of American blues and the musical *Blind Lemon Blues*. Choose appropriate excerpts to summarize or share with students. Review the interdisciplinary activities below to select those that meet your curricular needs and are appropriate for students' grade levels and interests. Use the guide to teach an entire unit or adapt segments to integrate into your existing curriculum. The accompanying *Blind Lemon Blues* CD contains many musical examples and other teaching tools. Reading fiction and non-fiction with young people will help bring the blues alive, as would sharing blues recordings in addition to the CD. Resources include recommended books and Web sites for students and teachers, as well as a discography.

## CULTURAL ROOTS OF THE BLUES — ACTIVITIES

### 1. NON-VERBAL EXPRESSION

Begin by discussing with students how blues emerged as a musical form in the 1890s among the first generation of African Americans born out of slavery. What are the feelings associated with freedom? Hope? Love? Longing? Joy? Fear? Leisure? Suffering? Ask students to express a feeling without using words. What does it feel like to be sick? To be in love? To be angry? To be relieved?

#### Activity

**“Moaning”** (Track 1: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

Ask students to imagine a situation that involves emotions and put some emotions in the form of non-verbal sounds, such as the following:

*The Hum*

*The Moan*

*The Sigh*

*The Grunt*

*The Laugh*

*The Wail*

Ask the students how they felt using non-verbal sounds to express emotions. How did these expressions differ from using words? For a group activity, ask students to work in teams or individually to come up with a short situation — for example, moving to a new town or facing danger — and create a musical phrase of non-verbal sounds. As they perform their phrases, classmates can listen and observe closely to see whether they can tell what emotions are being expressed. Finally, play a blues for students that includes non-verbal emotional expressions.

Musical example from Alfred “Snuff” Johnson, *Black Cowboy Blues and Church Songs*, Documentary Arts, CD1001. Johnson (1913-2000) was born in Cedar Creek, Texas, but settled in Austin after World War II. Most of his songs combined traditional lyrics and those he improvised. He sang with a deep, moaning tone, and accompanied himself on guitar.

### 2. ORAL TRADITION

Many songs and stories pass on through oral tradition from generation to generation. This allows for subtle changes to suit the tastes and needs of the current generation and individual musicians. Also, because traditional songs and stories pass on orally and are rarely written down, details change over time. Some people still teach history through musical and narrative oral traditions. Blues often tells a story and reveals history. Ask students to play this game to demonstrate oral tradition and as a warm-up theater exercise.

#### Activity

**“Telephone”**

Seat students in a circle and direct them to pass along a secret by whispering quickly. Start by whispering a sentence into the first student’s ear and adding a punctuating sound. For instance, “Blind Lemon Jefferson came from Texas, and he could really play the blues on his guitar (click your tongue).” Students pass on the sentence and the sound, and the last person in the circle reports to the rest of the group what s/he heard. Talk with students about how the secret and the punctuating sound may have changed. What oral traditions do they practice — for example, jokes, gossip, jump rope rhymes, and stories?

### 3. RHYTHM AND POLYRHYTHM

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, slave traders recognized the vitality of drumming, not only to communicate, but also to empower slaves, and they often forbade drums among their captives. In time, drum rhythms were manifested through hand clapping and body patting, known as “hambone” or “patting juba,” and other non-verbal sounds such as moans and field hollers that gave birth to blues and eventually to scat singing in jazz and contemporary rap and hip hop.

Introduce blues rhythm and polyrhythm through percussion and voice using found objects and hand clapping for percussion and the text of “Juba,” an old children’s song with West African roots. The folklorist Bess Lomax Hawes collected “Juba” from Bessie Jones, a folk musician from the Georgia Sea Islands, where residents still speak an African-influenced language called Gullah. Origins of today’s hand clapping games and jump rope rhymes lie in play party songs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Activity

##### “Juba”

Ask students to recite or “rap” “Juba,” experimenting with different rhythms and polyrhythmic interplay among themselves by clapping and drumming with found objects such as pencils and books or juice cans filled with dried beans.

*Juba this and Juba that and Juba killed the yellow cat  
and get over double trouble Juba, Juba*

*You sift-a the meal*

*You give me the husk*

*You bake-a the bread*

*You give me the crust*

*You fry the meat*

*You give me the skin*

*And that's where my mama's trouble begin*

*You just Juba...Juba*

*Say Juba up*

*Juba down*

*Juba all around the town*

*Juba for Ma*

*Juba for Pa*

*Juba for your brother-in-law*

*You just Juba...Juba*

*Juba this and Juba that and Juba killed the yellow cat  
and get over double trouble Juba, Juba*

(From *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*, by Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987)

### 4. CALL AND RESPONSE

For centuries in West Africa, drumming, complex polyrhythms, improvisation, and call and response patterns were important musical traditions and means of communication, spreading information about specific places and events. People from miles away could find out about a hunt, a birth, or a ceremony by hearing and interpreting particular rhythms. In many musical ensembles, a "master drummer" played "calls," a kind of language that was understood through its rhythms and provided recognizable patterns for drummers, singers, and dancers to respond to.

## Activity

### “I’d Rather Be...”

Have students write a call and response about work or chores. First ask them to write down four sentences about things they don’t like — for example, homework or house chores. The first sentence should tell us what they don’t like. The second sentence explains why. The third and four sentences tell us what they would rather be doing.

#### Example:

CALL	RESPONSE
1. I hate homework.	I hate homework.
2. It’s so boring.	It’s so boring.
3. I’d rather be playing	I’d rather be playing
4. In the park.	In the park.

Ask some students to share their examples and lead the class in a call and response. The leader calls a line; the class responds by repeating each line after the leader. Introduce a steady beat. Discuss the process of composing this example. Older students can write more lyrics and experiment with rhythm and polyrhythm as well as calling and responding.

## 5. FIELD HOLLERS AND WORK SONGS

Enslaved Africans continued to use song in much the same way their ancestors did. Field hollers, shouts, and work songs helped workers pass the time, pace their work, and cope with the grueling labor at hand, and, like spirituals, followed the call and response form. One worker might lead others in a song in the rhythmic sync of the call. The task determined the tempo and work pace. Enslaved Africans sang songs that echoed their homelands but often assumed new meaning in the plantation South. The words spoke of the harsh conditions of slavery but also used double meanings to express hope, protest, and the need to escape. There are numerous accounts of field hollers, shouts, and work songs (also called “arhoolies”) among African Americans on plantations in the American South before and after the Civil War. Field hollers and shouts were individual calls from one laborer to another and were sometimes in the form of a non-verbal plea or phrase. Work songs were group songs, chanted often through call and response among people picking cotton, planting rice, husking corn, or breaking rocks in a prison chain gang. Field hollers, shouts, and work songs are embedded in early blues and evidenced in the language, phrasing, diction, subject matter, call and response, and polyrhythmic patterns.

## Activity

### “Long John” (Track 2: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

Share information about field hollers and call and response work songs with students. Remind them that work songs are often improvised. The rhythm changes with each caller; consequently, the response is often repeated and sometimes improvised. Have students clap a rhythm until they are all steady and in sync. Ask one student to be the lead worker, the “caller.” The caller will call out each sentence in the song below, one at a time.

**Lead Call:** *It’s a long John, he’s a long gone.*

**Response:** *It’s a long John, he’s a long gone.*

After the caller says a line, the other students should respond in the rhythm that seems right to them. They can improvise rhythm and lyrics as they repeat the call several times.

*It's a long John, he's a long gone  
Like a turkey through the corn  
Through the long corn.*

*Boss man, boss man  
Can't you see  
What this work  
Is doing to me?*

*Gonna call this summer  
Ain't gonna call no more.  
If I call next summer  
Be in Baltimore.*

– From *Blind Lemon Blues*

## 6. SPIRITUALS

Spirituals are African American sacred songs that combine elements of Christian hymns with many of the same African musical elements that characterize the blues, including strong, syncopated rhythms (rhythms that skip a beat or accent the off-beat), slurring of notes, overlapping call and response, and improvisation. Like field hollers, shouts, work songs, and blues, spirituals originated in the Antebellum South and have been passed along from one generation to the next through oral tradition. Some spirituals, like “Steal Away,” contain hidden meanings, exhorting the singers to resist or escape to freedom. During the Civil Rights Movement, spirituals served as a rallying cry and unifying force in the fight for equal rights. Spirituals continue to have an important presence in African American life and community.

### Activity

#### Enacting the Story of a Song

Discuss with students the importance of African American sacred music and belief. Play one of the following songs for students and ask them to listen closely. Divide the class into three groups. One group will read the lyrics. Another group will hum. A third group will create a silent tableau that tells the story of a particular situation (like people packing to move) to express the emotions of the song. Then all will come together in a mini-performance. Give the groups a short time to practice. Ask Group 3 to form their tableau and stay in position as Group 1 reads the lyrics and then Group 2 hums. Finally, as students stand absolutely still, play an excerpt of the song from the CD. Afterward, ask students to take their places quietly and write down words or phrases about this experience. Use their responses to lead a discussion about the music, planning their interpretations and the mini-performance. They may want to repeat the process with other songs.

(Track 3: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

#### “Steal Away”

*Steal away, steal away  
Steal away to Jesus.  
I ain't got long to stay here.  
My Lord, He calls me  
Calls me by the thunder.  
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul.  
I ain't got  
I ain't got long to stay here.*

## **“Motherless Child”**

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.  
A long, long way from home.*

– From *Blind Lemon Blues*

## **7. PROTEST AND RESISTANCE**

African Americans threaded many cultural expressions with coded veins of resistance and protest against racism and discrimination. Like spirituals and work songs, blues used words from the well of African American folklore to tell black listeners a story that white listeners might not understand.

### **Activity**

#### **“Run, Run”**

This activity demonstrates the importance of oral tradition to secret resistance using call and response. Ask a student to stand outside a door and say, “Better run, run.” Assign a second student to answer from inside the door, “Better run, run, under the sun, under the sun.” A third student inside says, “Won’t get home.” The student outside responds, “Won’t get home till the morning comes.” Repeat the activity with the whole class responding to the student “caller.” This can start as a whisper and build to a crescendo, as if in celebration. Discuss other examples of how people resist oppression through music, such as the African American spirituals “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round” and “We Shall Overcome.”

## THE BLUES HERE AND NOW — ACTIVITIES

### 1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BLUES

Blues is rooted in oral tradition and often composed in an AAB structure. Line 1 may present an idea, emotion, or issue; Line 2 repeats it, perhaps with some variation; and Line 3 develops or resolves the idea, emotion, or issue. Often Line 3 rhymes with the other two. Yet many blues songs are free-form and do not use the AAB structure at all. Discuss with students that what makes a song a blues is not only the form, but also the way it is performed. Blues performers hold, bend, or slur notes (called “blue notes”) to express or accentuate their feelings. Blues is a means of self-expression. The imagery in blues is sometimes literal but can also be symbolic and metaphoric.

#### Activity

Compose a Blues Stanza

First ask students to improvise a blues stanza using the AAB form. Have one student write the first line, which is repeated, and say it to another student, who must improvise a response. Next, ask students to work individually or in teams to compose lyrics to a three-stanza blues song. They may choose free-form or the AAB form and include a refrain if they choose. Younger students may write a new stanza for one of the blues on the *Blind Lemon Blues* CD.

(Track 4: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

#### “Mosquito Moan Blues”

*Lamp sitting in my kitchen, mosquitoes all around my screen.  
Lamp sitting in my kitchen, mosquitoes all around my screen.  
If I don't arrange to get a mosquito bomb, I'll be seldom seen.*

*I bought a spray last night and I sprayed all over my house.  
I bought a spray last night and I sprayed all over my house.  
Mosquitoes all around my door, won't leave nobody out.*

– From *Blind Lemon Blues*

### 2. THE POETRY OF BLUES

Like poetry, blues employs meter, rhyme, repetition, personification, imagery, alliteration, symbol, and metaphor to express mood, setting, and story. Improvisation and call and response deeply affect blues, however. Someone in the audience may shout out a line, and the blues musician may improvise and put the words into the song. Contemporary poetry “slams” are performances that involve the audience with the poet and may borrow from the old blues traditions of a musician improvising and interacting in a call and response pattern with an audience. Repetition facilitates improvisation, giving the performer time to think of the next line. Play the following two blues excerpts on the *Blind Lemon Blues* CD for students, asking them to listen for repetition.

(Track 5: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

#### “Dry Southern Blues”

Leadbelly sings:  
*One train left the depot with a red and blue light behind.  
Train left the depot with a red and blue light behind.  
Well, the blue light's the blues, the red light's a worried mind.*

Leadbelly and Blind Lemon sing together:  
*I hate to tell you, Sugar, it ain't nobody there.*  
*Well, I hate to tell you, Sugar, it ain't nobody there.*  
*If a man stay here, he'll stay most anywhere.*

### “War Time Blues”

What you gonna do when they send your man to war?  
What you gonna do, send your man to war?  
What you gonna do when they send your man to war?  
I'm gonna drink muddy water, gonna sleep in a hollow log.

*Well, they tell me that southbound train had a wreck last night.*  
*Lord, that southbound train had a wreck last night.*  
*Lord, that southbound train had a wreck last night.*  
*You got a section foreman ain't treating your railroad right.*

– From *Blind Lemon Blues*

### Activity

In a class discussion, compare and contrast the poetic elements in “Dry Southern Blues” and “War Time Blues.” What does it mean to say, “I’m gonna drink muddy water, gonna sleep in a hollow log?” Why is it the southbound train that wrecks? What historical realities are being addressed in the lyrics? Why are trains a metaphor in many blues songs? Ask students to draw a picture or write a poem about listening to these two blues songs.

## 3. THE BLUES SCALE

Musically, the blues scale is pentatonic, meaning that there are usually five notes to an octave, instead of eight. The pentatonic scale is common to many West African cultures. In composing blues, performers not only improvise lyrics, but also make personal choices of notes, tempos, and rhythms. Ask students to listen carefully to a pentatonic scale and compare it with the eight-tone scale found on the *Blind Lemon Blues* CD.

(Track 6: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

### Activity (for music students)

Ask students to sing or sound out a pentatonic scale, or play a pentatonic scale on a piano. Discuss with them how the scales sound different and express different emotions.

## 4. ACTING PRACTICE

Play the “Actors As Gossips” section on the *Blind Lemon Blues* CD for students. Students should choose roles and examine this script and improvise their own until they can find a rhythm and style they like. They might want to use music and percussion. Each actor becomes a different person in Deep Ellum, evoking Leadbelly’s memories of Blind Lemon’s community in Dallas and their relationship to him. Their words are sung in a kind of talking blues with musical accompaniment. The taunting chant of the ensemble underlies the musical dialogue.

(Track 7: *Blind Lemon Blues* CD)

Actors As Gossips

**Ensemble chants:**

*I know something that you don't know.  
I'll tell you later if you really want to know.  
I...I know something that you don't know.  
I'll tell you later if you really want to know.*

Ensemble continues to chant this stanza softly underneath the actors.

**Gossip 2:** *Move from town to town, h'mmmff. Why does a man who's supposedly blind wear glasses?*

**Gossip 1:** *... I don't mean sunglasses, just plain glasses. Ain't that weird?*

**Gossip 2:** *And if he was really blind, how could he tell the difference between a five-dollar bill and a one-dollar bill?*

**Gossip 3:** *Oh, believe me, he's definitely blind.*

**Gossip 4:** *And besides, blind folks have a certain kind of gift.*

**Leadbelly:** *Oh, that's just a whole lot of hogwash. Next thing you'll be talking about is crazy folks have a certain kind of gift.*

They all laugh.

**Gossip 1:** *Now, they say if you put a penny in his cup, he'll take it out and throw it away. And he'd just say. ...*

**Blind Lemon:** *Don't play me cheap.*

**Ensemble:** *Don't play me cheap.*

After a pause the Ensemble repeats the chant:

*I know something that you don't know  
I'll tell you later if you really want to know  
I...I know something that you don't know  
I'll tell you later if you really want to know*

– Script excerpt from *Blind Lemon Blues*

## **CONCLUDING ACTIVITIES**

### **1. WRITE A MUSICAL SCENE**

After performing the script excerpt from *Blind Lemon Blues* a few times, ask students to talk about the similarities and differences between this text and a contemporary rap or hip hop song. Rhythm, the topic, humor, exaggeration, dialect — are these familiar? Assign students to collaborate on writing and performing their own musical scene, using dialogue and song to dramatize a concern in their everyday lives or the life of their community, just as Blind Lemon and other blues musicians did. They can mix blues with rap, hip hop, or other styles of music. After their performance, discuss the value of musical theater as a vehicle for personal expression. Did identifying a topic, writing, and choosing appropriate music for their scene deepen their understanding of a problem? Of collaboration? Of musical theater?

### **2. POP MUSIC TODAY**

No matter what popular music style interests students, the blues lies somewhere in its genealogy. The blues continues to influence almost all pop music, from country to hip hop. Talk with students about their favorite pop music and musicians. Do they listen to radio, watch music videos, play any instruments, or sing? Brainstorm with students to come up with a list of all the places they hear music — for example, radio, elevators, parties, religious services, concerts, passing cars, school, the Internet. Do any street musicians play in your community? If we listen closely, we hear music everywhere. Now ask students to pretend they are in the Deep Ellum district of Dallas, Texas, in 1925 and brainstorm a list of all the places where Blind Lemon Jefferson and his friends would have heard music. Examples include house parties, church, records, vaudeville shows, on the streets. Discuss how technology has changed how much access people have to music today. Younger students can make a “baseball card” of a favorite musician, and older students can choose a blues musician to research and write a biography, which should include some song titles and, if possible, photographs or images that advertise their music.

### **3. POP MUSIC YESTERDAY**

It may be hard for students to believe, but today everyone in our country has lived through popular music fads, and people of all ages have favorite music styles and musicians. After talking with students about their favorite music and musicians, assign them to talk with adults about the importance of popular music, recordings, and radio when they were younger. What was their favorite music when they were the age of your students? Answers will range from big band to jazz, rock and roll to salsa, rhythm and blues to disco. Students can design a survey to collect data on adults’ favorite radio stations when they were teens, best dance tunes, all-time greatest pop musician or band, most romantic song, and so on. They can make a tabletop exhibit by graphing interview data; playing recordings of their interviews; and displaying old music mementos such as recordings, ticket stubs, and photos. Have a class music party and play popular music of the past and of today. Listen for blues influences through different eras. Be sure to include blues. Ask students to mark the rhythm of various styles by clapping or stomping, move to the music, and demonstrate dances they know.

### **4. BYE, BYE, BLUES (lower grades)**

As a final project, plan a class presentation with students to share what they have learned about the roots of American blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson, musical theater, and their own traditions. Talk about how to make these topics come alive for an audience: word play, percussion, music, poetry, skits, and demonstrations of their play traditions such as hand clapping games, jump rope rhymes, or step routines. Invite another class and family members to attend.

### **5. THE END! (upper grades)**

To sum up their exploration of the blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and musical theater, ask students to write a short essay or three stanzas to a blues in response to this quote from the playwright August Wilson: “Blind Lemon Jefferson was the voice of black America at that moment.” They should explore how blues is relevant to the current moment, what the blues means to them now that they have studied *Blind Lemon Blues*, how musical theater tells an audience about history and culture.

## RESOURCES

### Student Readings

This bibliography suggests books for students in Grades 4-12. The titles outline possibilities for making connections to material outlined in the guide. Use this list as a starting point rather than a finite product.

Branch, Muriel Miller. *Juneteenth: Freedom Day*. Photographs by Willis Branch. 1998. 54 p. New York: Cobblehill/Dutton. Slaves in Galveston did not hear of the Emancipation Proclamation until June 19, 1865, and the resulting celebration of that day is now institutionalized. Branch traces the events of this historic day and outlines various ways in which families and communities commemorate it throughout the U. S.

England, Linda. *The Old Cotton Blues*. Illus. by Teresa Flavin. 1998. 32 p. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.

Dexter desperately wants to learn to play a traditional instrument, in his case a harmonica. Elder musician Johnny Cotton becomes his indigenous teacher as he helps Dexter learn this new skill.

Govenar, Alan. *African American Frontiers: Slave Narratives and Oral Histories*. 2000. 551 p. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Drawing on various African American frontiers, from geographical to social, Govenar collects a wide variety of oral histories, starting with slave narratives published at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing with living Americans sharing their stories.

Govenar, Alan, editor. *Osceola: Memories of a Sharecropper's Daughter*. Illus. by Shane W. Evans. 2000. 64 p. New York: Hyperion.

Osceola Mays (1909-2004) remembered her life in Texas ranging from her early fear of white folks to the joy of her baptism to her despair over her mother's death. In telling her stories and sharing her poetry, Osceola paid tribute to the importance of storytelling in her life. Evans's illustrations depict her development from girl to woman.

Landau, Elaine. *Slave Narratives: The Journey to Freedom*. Illus. with archival photographs. 2001. 96 p. New York: Franklin Watts.

Landau edits and gives historical context to four slave narratives written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each account shows a different side of slavery, and each journey to freedom is as individual as the original teller.

Lester, Julius. *The Blues Singers: Ten Who Rocked the World*. Illus. by Lisa Cohen. 2001. 48 p. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion.

In a down-to-earth, conversational tone, Lester outlines the contributions of blues singers from Bessie Smith to Aretha Franklin. He draws on his own experiences with each artist to personalize the accounts.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Blues Journey*. Illus. by Christopher Myers. 48 p. Holiday House. 2003.

This award-winning book uses call and response lyrics as well as mood-provoking illustrations to depict the roots of the blues.

Orgill, Roxane. *Shout, Sister, Shout!: Ten Girl Singers Who Shaped a Century*. 2001. 144 p. New York: Atheneum.

Although only two singers found here (Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith) are really germane to blues, this collective biography puts each into historical context with both their music and the technology available at the time for reproducing that music.

Orgill, Roxane. *Mahalia: A Life in Gospel Music*. 2002. 132 p. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick.

This biography of the legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson traces her life and the growth of her career during different periods of her life, including in-depth discussion of her years in New Orleans and Chicago.

Paker, Josephine. *Beating the Drum*. 1992. 48 p. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press.

Drums are important in many cultures, and Paker discusses several while providing clear directions for making and playing different types of drums.

Tamar, Erika. *Blues for Silk Garcia*. 1983. 155 p. New York: Knopf.

Linda, 15 years old and fatherless most of her life, attempts to carry on her dad's traditions with her own guitar music.

## Teacher Resources

Bowman, Paddy, Alan Govenar, and Betty Carter. *Masters of Traditional Arts Education Guide*. 2002. 72 p. accompanies a DVD-ROM. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc.

The guide and accompanying DVD-ROM produced by Documentary Arts document the lives and artistry of over 200 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellows through extensive video, audio, photography, and text files on the DVD. The guide includes educational rationale, lesson plans for units, shorter classroom activities, and an annotated bibliography of related fiction and non-fiction for Grades 4-12.

Govenar, Alan, and Jay Brakefield. *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged*. 1998. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press.

During the 1920s, some of the greatest blues, jazz, and gospel musicians in America traveled to Dallas hoping to be discovered and recorded. The book chronicles the lives and careers of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie Johnson, Lillian Glinn and other singers and musicians who got their start in Deep Ellum.

Hughes, Langston, and Milton Meltzer. *A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts*. New York: Da Capo Press. 1990.

This book provides an overview of African American theater and musical theater from its earliest years in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s.

Wilson, August. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York: New American Library. 1982

Ma Rainey was a contemporary of Blind Lemon Jefferson who also recorded for the Paramount label in the 1920s. In the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson explores the tensions in a typical recording session that turns dangerous and becomes a metaphor for society at large.

## Web sites

*The Mississippi: River of Song* features blues as well as other traditional music genres in a teaching guide to this documentary and the music, [www.pbs.org/riverofsong](http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong).

*American Roots Music* includes blues, of course, and this Web site supplements the documentary with oral histories and themes such as eternal songs or instruments and innovations, [www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic](http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic).

The blues education outreach accompanies the PBS series with rich teaching resources by the Experience Music Project, [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues).

The *History of Jim Crow* is an extensive interdisciplinary Web site with dozens of lessons and approaches for upper grade levels, [www.jimcrowhistory.org](http://www.jimcrowhistory.org).

## Selected Discography

*Blind Lemon Blues: A Learning Legacy* includes a compilation CD, produced by Documentary Arts with musical examples from Texas country blues singer Alfred "Snuff" Johnson, guitarist Sam Swank, and the *Blind Lemon Blues* cast, featuring Liz Mikel, Walter Fauntleroy, Cavin Yarbrough, Alisa Peoples Yarbrough, Benita Arterberry, and Akin Babatunde. The following recordings are commercially available.

"Blind Lemon Jefferson: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, 1925- 1929,"  
Volume 1, Document DOCD-5017, Volume 2, Document DOCD-5018, Volume 3,  
Document DOCD-5019, Volume 4, Document DOCD-5020.

“Blind Lemon Jefferson: King of Country Blues,” Yazoo 1069.

“Blind Lemon Jefferson: Moanin’ All Over,” Tradition JCD 1011.

“Lillian Glinn: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, 1927-1929,” Document DOCD-5184.

“The Complete Blind Willie Johnson,” Columbia/Legacy C2K 52835.

“Lead Belly’s Last Sessions,” Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40068/71.

“Texas Girls: The Complete Recorded Works of Lillian Miller, Hattie Hudson, Gertrude Perkins, Ida May Mack, Bobbie Cadillac, 1926-1928), Document DOCD-5163.

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