



TEACHER'S GUIDE:

**HEARTBEAT OF AFRICA, THE
ROOTS OF BLUES MUSIC**

WITH KEVIN BURT & HAL REED

A-2; 10:58 MIN

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the video, “Heartbeat of Africa, The Roots of Blues Music,” the students will be able to:

1. A. Describe where the roots (the basis) of blues music come from.

2. Recognize that blues music is about feelings.

4. Explain why and how some blues songs are used to communicate.

B. Determine if blues music changed as time went by.

3. Define field hollers, where and why they were used.



1. A. DESCRIBE WHERE THE ROOTS (THE BASIS) OF BLUES MUSIC COME FROM.

Video:

West Coast of Africa, through the music of the people brought from Africa to America as slaves.

Additional Learning

*"...the deep blues style traveled from Africa and was nurtured in the fields of the South, then served as the roots of the blues boom, of jazz, of soul, indeed of virtually all that is unique and great in American music."
(Wald, p. 72)*

References

Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

1. B. DETERMINE IF BLUES MUSIC CHANGED AS TIME WENT BY.

Video:

Yes. Blues music changed, evolved into other things (other forms of music).

Additional Learning

"...Delta blacks used their African heritage to transform the European music they encountered." (Lomax p. 332)

"...(twelve bar blues) have been played by ragtime orchestras, jazz bands, pop and rock groups, and have formed the bedrock for artists as different as Ma Rainey, Count Basie, Elvis Presley, James Brown, and Mose Allison." (Wald, p. 4)

"...Tupelo (Mississippi) was Elvis Presley's hometown, the place where he learned from the blacks how to perform in black style, his pelvis twisting, his left thigh swinging, his voice swooping into blue notes. This handsome young...(musician)...from Tupelo put black and white singing styles together in a way that won white lovers and singers in the English-speaking world over to the black side." (Lomax, p. 36)

"...Lonnie Johnson had Creolized the blues, reorganized their lyrics so that each one told a story, and set them to book-learned harmonies." (Lomax, p. 16)

"The multicultural roots of this (jazz music) essentially Creole music gave it the international savor needed to capture a world audience. Its blue notes reflected the anomie (lack of usual standards) of an increasingly uprooted population;" "...the blues still pervaded jazz, albeit in subtle and hidden fashions - in hot tone color, in the hundreds of breaks and riffs that are at the basis of jazz improvisation." (Lomax, pp. 439, 440)

"...I mounted a comparative, cross-cultural survey of performance style. One of the clearest findings has been that black African performance scores on velocity and changefulness were the world's highest...;" "... (in the) quick breaks of jazz, in the sizzling tempo of hard rock, in the rapid-fire philosophizing in reggae and rap, ghetto blacks have used their high-velocity African heritage to create art forms suitable to a jet-propelled age. Most recent and speed-possessed is rap." (Lomax, p. 137)

References

Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

2. RECOGNIZE THAT BLUES MUSIC IS ABOUT FEELINGS.

Video:

Blues is about emotions, the music is sometimes happy and sometimes sad. Blues music can be fun, something we can share together.

Additional Learning

"...blues is something that's from the heart...it was expressing his feeling about how he felt to the people." (Lomax, p. 460)

"...black Southerners had sung to ease the burdens of work, sorrow, or boredom, or shared in a group, swaying and breathing together in ceremonial communion that might or might not involve the formality of a church service." (Wald, p. 71)

"...(The song "When You Got a Good Friend" by Robert Johnson), (had) one of the rare blues lyrics that follows the African tradition of expressing social admonishments rather than romance...". (Wald, p. 141)

"(blues music)...a record of problems of love and women in the Delta world. They had located the roots of these miseries in the stringent poverty and... (the fears)...of black rural life." (Lomax, p. 472)

References

Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

3. DEFINE FIELD HOLLERS, WHERE AND WHY THEY WERE USED.

Video:

Field hollers were songs used to help (to make it easier) for people who worked in the fields in the south as they picked crops such as cotton and corn; Why - to make themselves feel better, to help them work, to get through hard, tough times and ease the troubled mind.

Additional Learning

"The hollers were not performance music, in the way that blues or jazz is, nor were they communal music like the work-gang chants or church singing. They were more like a musical way of talking to oneself, and often were sung by people alone in the fields, driving a mule, tending cattle, or doing other isolated work." (Wald, p. 74)

"(people were)...pushed beyond their physical limits, constantly insulted, unable to talk or fight back, and knowing that no one cared whether they lived or died, their hollers voiced the epitome of despair and, sometimes, rage." (Lomax, p.275)

"Field hollers" or "old corn songs" Mostly found in river-bottom country, south and west of Memphis all the way into the river lands of Texas. Delta

hollers: minor solos, recitative-style in free rhythms, long phrases, long-held notes, lots of slides and blue notes, emphasis on shifts of vocal color. (Lomax, pp. 272, 273)

"A visitor to South Carolina in 1777 wrote of the 'plaintive African songs' sung by slaves as they paddled a canoe, and a visitor to North Carolina in 1853 gave an early description of a 'field holler,' writing of a black man who 'raised such a sound as I never heard before: a long, loud, musical shout, rising and falling and breaking into falsetto'." (Wald, p. 72)

"Such hollers (solo singing, filled with melancholy) are particularly interesting to folklorists, because of their clear relationship to African singing. In the 1970's, Lomax demonstrated this affinity by issuing a recording of a Mississippi holler interwoven with a song recorded in Senegal, the two singers sounding so similar that the rest feels like a single, cohesive performance. While African music is associated in many people's minds with a drum-driven, rhythmic dance beat, these songs are part of a quite different tradition, the sort of vocal improvisations that herdsmen use to keep their flocks aware of their comforting presence, to warn off predators, and to while away long days alone with animals and spirits." (Wald, pp. 75-76)

"Histories of blues frequently begin with a discussion of this music, the "work songs," "moans," and "field hollers," and treat the commercial blues compositions (music) as an outgrowth of this folk tradition, the natural extension of a shared cultural heritage." (Wald, p. 71)

"...there is no mistaking the traces of traditional moans and hollers in popular blues songs...often regarded as its most distinctive and emotionally powerful characteristic..." (Wald, p. 71)

"...several bluesmen have demonstrated how they reshaped and streamlined hollers into blues numbers, and the holler style permeates the singing of many of the greatest blues artists." (Wald, p. 76)

References

- Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
- Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

4. EXPLAIN WHY AND HOW SOME BLUES SONGS ARE USED TO COMMUNICATE.

Video:

People couldn't always say what they wanted to say to a person because they would get into trouble, so they made up a song about it. The song let other people know that they felt the same way about something, like a job or a boss.

Additional Learning

"We all have had a hard time in life, and things we couldn't say or do, so we sing it." (Lomax, p.461)

*"I've known guys that wanted to...(get mad at)...the boss and was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him, and I've heard them sing those things - sing words, you know, back to the boss - say things to the mule...and he meant he was talking to the boss."
(Lomax, pp. 460-461)*

References

Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

Answers to Multiple Choice Quiz:

1. A 2. B 3. C 4. C 5. A 6. A

QUIZ – MULTIPLE CHOICE

For a Google Form version of this quiz, go to:
[MVBS.org/Teacher-Resources](https://www.mvbs.org/Teacher-Resources)

1. Where did the roots (the basis) of blues music first come from?

- a. The coast of West Africa
- b. Europe
- c. America, in the South

2. Did blues music change as time went by?

- a. No, blues music is traditional and hasn't changed
- b. Yes, blues music evolved and found its way into other genres of music
- c. Yes, it changed slightly, reflecting the differences in the age groups who played it

3. What is blues music about?

- a. The sad and bad times in a person's life
- b. The problems in the country they live
- c. Feelings, both happy and sad

4. What is a field holler and where was it used?

- a. Workers in the fields in the South would "holler" when they hurt themselves
- b. It was used by women on the farms to yell across the fields when supper was ready
- c. Hollers were type of song used by farm workers in the South to make themselves feel better

5. Why were field hollers used?

- a. Because they didn't have cell phones in the South at the time
- b. Field hollers were a safe way for people to say (sing) and share with others how they felt
- c. People were used to singing to each other as a primary means of communication

6. Why and how are some blues songs used to communicate?

- a. Blues songs are a way to honestly express your feelings about someone or something and not get into trouble
- b. Blues songs were sung at family gatherings to share important things they couldn't say to each other.
- c. Blues songs were written and sung as a way to remember their history

QUIZ – SHORT ANSWER

For a Google Form version of this quiz, go to:
[MVBS.org/Teacher-Resources](https://www.mvbs.org/Teacher-Resources)

1. Where did the roots (the basis) of blues music first come from?

2. Did blues music change as time went by?

3. What is blues music about?

4. What is a field holler and where was it used?

5. Why were field hollers used?

6. Why and how are some blues songs used to communicate

MUSICIANS:



KEVIN BURT

Kevin Burt is recognized as one of the Midwest's top blues heritage educators. This honor was given to him by the Governor of Iowa, Chet Culver in February of 2009. Kevin is a registered artist and artist educator with the state of Iowa Arts Council. He has also written and published a classroom harmonica method book called

“Just Play It: an introduction to blues harmonica.” His approach is simple, education through entertainment.

For more than 25 years Kevin Burt has been electrifying audiences throughout the Midwest, dispelling the myth that true blues has no roots in Iowa. His soul-inspired presentation is unique and consistently gets him compared to a range of artists, including B.B. King. Kevin is a self-taught musician (vocals, harmonica, and guitar) whose smooth, warm vocal presentation has a welcome mixture of music and infectious humor audiences of all ages seem to enjoy. His voice and presence are powerful.

Kevin has won many awards and played many festivals both solo and with his band, the Instigators. His awards include Best Entertainer in Iowa City (three times), Best Band in Iowa City (three times), and Iowa Blues Challenge Champions. He was named as one of the top 25 unsigned blues bands in the world by the International Blues Challenge Competition.



HAL REED

Hal Reed has been playing harmonica with Kevin Burt, as a duo, for over 25 years in classrooms across Iowa. Born in Sardis, Mississippi, Hal held residency in the Quad Cities for over 30 years before returning his home state to live, in the fall of 2020. During that time, Hal performed countless blues shows throughout Iowa and as

a volunteer, taught students across the state about the history of blues music. For over 20 years, Hal has given his time to the annual Winter Blues Camp programs at the River Music Experience in Davenport, Iowa. These classes allowed him to spend one week each year training a group of students from 8-18 years old in the blues music tradition.

Most of Hal's life is dedicated to educating those around him about the original Delta style of blues that he grew up with in Mississippi. He was mostly influenced by his grandfather, a talented southern folk-blues artist. Hal's love for the blues inspired him to pass it on from generation to generation.

Hal is a two-time winner of the Iowa Blues Challenge. In 2004 he won in the band category and in 2019, the solo/duo category. In 2006, Hal won the Outstanding Volunteer of the Year from the Mississippi Valley Blues Society. In 2018, he was inducted into the Quad City Blues Hall of Fame.

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THANK YOU!





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Our mission is to ensure the future of a uniquely American art form by fostering greater public appreciation through performance, education, and preservation of the Blues Heritage.

Mississippi Valley Blues Society, a nonprofit organization

The Education Committee is dedicated to increasing the public's knowledge, understanding and appreciation of blues music through live and remote performances and by providing information about the music and its' history, which includes the musicians (past and present) who play it. Education Committee programs are provided for no cost to the public.

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11-2020

A-2 (Serial Number)