



# Vicki and Joe Price

Original Blues, Music Duo

EDUCATIONAL GUIDE

Part One .....	2
Part Two .....	6
Part Three .....	8
Additional Learning .....	10
The Artists .....	11

Through the original blues music of Vicki and Joe Price, one can observe techniques used by this duo to produce the sound of the blues, and then adapt these techniques to their own playing. Note the use of verbal and nonverbal communication as the duo proceeds through their set, keeping the two of them in sync throughout the performance.

*See “Additional Information” for definitions re slide guitar, foot stomping, turnarounds, etc.*

While watching Parts One, Two and Three of the videos, it is clear these musicians love what they do and have fun doing it. Their combined knowledge and experience of blues music is extensive. Vicki and Joe uphold the blues tradition as they create new songs within the genre.

### “Airline” by Joe Price

Part One opens with a blues jam with Vicki on rhythm guitar and Joe on lead. One can see that both guitar players have capos\* at the 3rd fret of their guitars. Note the silver metal tube (called a slide) over Joe’s pinky finger that makes a unique

humming sound as the string is picked when the slide is lightly pressed to the strings of the guitar; Joe plays slide guitar\* with a fast vibrato to create a specific tone throughout the song. Many places throughout the video provide close-up views of slide vibrato (see 1:08 & 2:35 for a sampling).

*See Additional Learning.*

**At 3:29, Vicki relates the part of her history that started her on the path to becoming a blues musician.** In keeping with the tradition of many great blues musicians, Vicki began singing in church, a small country church, where her mother played organ and piano for almost 60 years. Her mother taught Vicki and her sister to sing harmony and bought Vicki her first guitar with “Green Stamps.\*” Odetta was Vicki’s role model. When she met Odetta, she said it was like “meeting my goddess.”

## “Throw Open the Window” by Vicki Price

At 4:13, Vicki sings an original blues song inspired by some of the superstitions and customs surrounding death, found especially in New Orleans. The lyrics are especially rich with a somewhat gospel feel to the content:

### *Verse 1*

I want a big parade and I’m dancin’ all the way,  
I want a big parade and I’m dancin’ all the way,  
And a good brass band to take me to my grave.

### *Chorus*

Throw open the window, throw open the door,  
Throw open the window, throw open the door,  
Ya gotta make a way for my soul to fly home.

### *Verse 2*

Ah, follow my hearse now sing a song for me,  
Ya gotta follow my hearse now sing a song for me,  
Sing some blues and set my spirit free.

### *Repeat Chorus*

### *Verse 3*

When they lay me down  
won’t ya come and say goodbye,  
Ah, when they lay me down  
won’t ya come and say goodbye,  
Stand close to that grave where I can hear you cry.

### *Repeat Chorus*

Note that Vicki plays rhythm guitar to accompany herself as she sings. In the background, you can hear Joe’s contribution to the sound of the song through his subtle playing between vocal phrases and his emphasis of parts of the chorus. Joe’s guitar adds color to the overall sound, but does not make it difficult for the singer to do her job, nor does his guitar on verses or choruses distract from the vocal performance - but rather, adds to it. At 7:29 Joe ends the song with a flair, stomping his feet\* on a surface where the sound can be picked up by a microphone, thus adding some percussion to the performance.

### “Twenty Five Below Zero” by Joe Price

At 7:37, Joe sings an original blues song that is ultimately a song about a strained relationship. In the video, note that playing and singing this song is a “total body” experience, i.e. Joe puts all he has into delivering this song. Blues music is rich with metaphors and this song is no exception. The tune begins with nice slide licks and continues with same between phrases throughout the piece (8:31 & 9:12, to name a few). At 8:52 one of many turnarounds can be heard and seen up close.

At 10:01 Vicki starts and continues with a good rhythm guitar part, up the neck. Concurrently, Joe does slide lead with a good example of how important a strum (10:25) can be to part of a song. At 10:56, during a verse, Vicki and Joe do a particular picking pattern, for emphasis, that is very effective. Joe does a lot of vibrato on his slide to get a certain tone, throughout his playing. See 11:32 for one of many up-close examples of vibrato in this song. Lastly, Joe ends the song with interesting phrasing with the slide.

**At 12:02, Vicki talks more about her history, who helped her grow in her music career.** Besides her mom who taught her how to sing and do harmony singing, her 7th grade teacher, Mrs. Luther, helped her as well as their neighbor, Mrs. Kessel, who taught her the first guitar chord. Then she met Joe, which “changed everything,” as he shared so much knowledge about blues music.



### “La Crosse Fever Blues” by Joe Price

Joe wrote this song under a train trestle, as the train rolled by overhead. Starts at 13:03.

The lyrics are plaintive and the message of loneliness and isolation come across well:

Oh, my rock it don't roll,  
And my stone gathers moss,  
It's around midnight, downtown La Cross.

While there are turnarounds\* throughout, see 13:48 for one example. Lead and slide lead by Joe can be found at 14:17 and 15:55 with a particularly interesting lead at 16:39. Vicki adds a nice lead at 15:06.

Through the verbal and nonverbal clues, the viewer can see that performances are fluid in nature, changing with the emotional content of the songs and the feelings of the players at any given moment in a song. This keeps blues music fresh and interesting.



### “Down the Highway” by Joe Price

Part Two opens with Joe playing slide guitar and foot stomping to the sounds of a blues slide tune done in a very traditional style. As the song progresses, Vicki joins him on some rhythm guitar. Both Vicki and Joe have their capos on the first fret. Note Joe’s dramatic slide work and the increasing intensity of the vocals as the song develops. See that Joe puts his whole self into this song, taking the music he plays to a very physical level. As seen in Part One of this series, the vibrato of the slide adds much to the tone and color of the sound. A searing slide lead at 2:53 provides a close-up of vibrato. At 4:13 the foot stomping pattern becomes more complex and adds to the rhythmic pulse of the song.

**At 4:46, Vicki speaks to her motivation to play blues music.** Vicki loves the sound of finger-style guitar and the lyrics of the music. “The lyrics were very moving or else very fun. I know people think blues are all about sadness, but it’s really about shaking off that sadness,” she said. “So there were

a lot of humorous songs that just grabbed me... Precious Bryant wrote one (that said), ‘If you don’t love me, would you fool me good,’ ...that sort of thing.”

### “COVID Blues” by Vicki Price

At 5:38, Vicki opens this song with some fine finger-picking. Note how throughout the song, Vicki uses her thumb to play an alternating bass to the chords she plays. Here is a sampling of the poignant lyrics to her song:

#### *Verse*

No child to hold, no son to kiss,  
No child to hold, no son to kiss,  
We call out for those we miss,  
No child to hold, no son to kiss.

#### *Chorus*

It’s all gone crazy, all gone mad,  
It’s all gone crazy, all gone mad,  
I’m so tired, I’m so broke, I’m so sad,  
It’s all gone crazy, all gone mad.

**At 8:22, Vicki talks about the effect the COVID pandemic** had on them and all entertainers. She generously shares her story about her health struggles this past year and describes how the blues music community provided them with comfort and support during a difficult time. “Blues people are good people,” she said, as she tries to keep her emotions in check. “They take care of you.”

### “She Cries Out” by Vicki Price

At 9:20, Vicki sings this song in a plaintive voicing, breaking her voice for dramatic effect. This sound is often found in bluegrass and old time music, and could be associated with a yodel. Note how Vicki often reaches up with her fingers at the end of a strum to brush the strings on the fingerboard, to produce a softer sound. You can hear Joe’s subtle playing between phrases and a lead break at 11:14.



### “Iowa Crawl” by Joe Price

Part Three opens with Joe’s acclaimed song, “Iowa Crawl.” Vicki joins Joe in harmony on the chorus, a real treat, somewhat rare in most blues music. At 1:27 there is a nice, though brief, side view of Joe’s technique playing slide, followed by Vicki on lead. In the last half of the song, Joe uses a variety of strums for emphasis and punctuates his rhythm with intermittent foot stomping.

At 3:42, Vicki talks about the importance of blues music. “It (blues music) gives me a voice to speak to women’s place in the world...I see more and more women getting on stage, speaking of women’s view of the world and that’s a good thing.”

### “Freight Train” by Elizabeth Cotton

At 4:19, Vicki opens this song with some nice finger-picking. Joe take a lead at 5:28 and at 6:16 he commences with foot stomps that resemble the clickety-clack of RR tracks, and ends the song with other good train sounds.

At 7:15, Vicki talks about blues music women she admires; Elizabeth Cotton, Memphis Minnie, Precious Bryant. Here is what Vicki told us about these performers:

**Elizabeth Cotton:** One of the first blues women to which Vicki listened, a favorite, was Elizabeth Cotton, who wrote the famous song Freight Train when she was only 13 years old. She earned her GED at 80 and a Grammy at 90.

**Memphis Minnie:** Memphis Minnie was an accomplished guitar player who played clubs before women did that. She played for Barnum and Bailey Circus for four years. Minnie and her husband, Joe McCoy, recorded first for Columbia Records, though she made over 200 recordings in her life.

**Precious Bryant:** Hailing from Georgia, Precious Bryant was never famous and only put out three records. She’s a good guitar player and gifted at taking songs like “Fever” and “Chauffeur” and making them her own. And she writes great songs.



### “Red Dress” by Vicki Price

At 9:41 Vicki plays a song using techniques she learned from Memphis Minnie. At 10:56 Vicki does a nice finger-pickin’ lead with Joe following with a lead at 11:24 and again at 12:46. Joe has his capo on the 7th fret while Vicki is playing guitar open. This song is an example of the humor in blues, with lyrics that are suggestive, in a fun and playful way. Here is a sample:

Well I’ll be walkin’, I’ll be walkin’,  
Gonna swing my hips, roll them from side to side.  
When I be walking’, I can bring a dead man back to  
life.

I gotta red dress, I gotta red dress,  
Gonna make you look, gonna make you look at me.  
In my red dress, I’ll be the only thing you see.



## Additional Learning

### Capo

A device a musician uses on the neck of a stringed (typically fretted) instrument to transpose and shorten the playable length of the strings—hence raising the pitch. Musicians commonly use a capo to raise the pitch of a fretted instrument so they can play in a different key using the same fingerings as playing open (i.e., without a capo). In effect, a capo uses a fret of an instrument to create a new nut at a higher note than the instrument's actual nut.

### Foot Stomping

Body percussion sounds - Percussion instruments produce their sound when a player hits, scrapes, rubs or shakes them to produce vibrations. These techniques can also be applied to the human body. The body also presents several unique possibilities including the use of inhaled or exhaled air and vocal sounds.

Traditionally the four main body percussion sounds (in order from lowest pitch to highest in pitch) are:

1. Stomping: Striking left, right, or both feet against the floor or other resonant surface
2. Patting: Patting either the left, right, or both thighs or cheeks with hands
3. Clapping hands together
4. Snapping fingers

### (S & H) Green Stamps

S&H Green Stamps was a line of trading stamps popular in the United States from the 1930s until the late 1980s. Customers would receive stamps at the checkout counter of supermarkets, department stores, and gasoline stations among other retailers, which could be redeemed for products in the catalog.

### Slide

Slide guitar is a technique for playing the guitar that is often used in blues music. It involves playing a guitar while holding a hard object (a slide) against the strings, creating the opportunity for glissando effects and deep vibratos that reflect characteristics of the human singing voice.

### \*Turnaround

In the language of the blues, the term turnaround refers to a musical figure played over the I and V chords in the last two bars, setting up the form to repeat. Many classic blues turnarounds are built on a simple phrase that descends chromatically (i.e., in half steps) from the minor seventh to the fifth of the I chord. For that matter, many blues tunes open with a turnaround.

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*Definitions from Wikipedia unless otherwise noted*

## Artists Vicki & Joe Price

Joe Price stands as one of the art's legendary practitioners. Armed with a joyous, disarming demeanor and the ability to play the doors off of most anyone else in the room, Price has opened for the likes of Iris Dement and John Lee Hooker, while Iowa's own Greg Brown calls Price "the Buddha." Brown isn't alone in his praise, as a litany of Iowa musicians list Price as one of their influences. Price's reputation was cemented in the 1970's, when he spent the latter half of the decade as part of Mother Blues, one of the greatest and most heavily influential Iowa blues bands of all time.

Vicki and Joe married in 1987, but Vicki had been holding her own in the wilds of small-town Iowa before then. Her guitar playing has more structure than Joe's does, while her voice provides a good deal of their songs fire. Bold and brassy when she wants to be, Vicki's voice has elicited visions of Loretta Lynn or June Carter, but she's able to get far bluesier than any of her most obvious comparisons. The amount of fun Vicki and Joe clearly have performing with one another elevates their performances, transforming them from something that blues purists and guitar fans can

appreciate, into something that everyone with ears and a love of life can understand and tap along to.

Joe and Vicki are both members of the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame. Their 2009 album "Rain or Shine" won the Independent Music Award for best Blues CD of the year. Joe is also a member of the Iowa Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and was a finalist in the International Blues Challenge.



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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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