



# Oral Tradition and the Blues

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following National Curriculum Standards for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2

Secondary: 9

## Overview

When slavery took Africans from their land, they were separated from the rich musical and oral traditions native to each country and region. While working as slaves, Africans found they had two places they could use these musical traditions freely: the fields where they labored and the churches where they prayed. The field hollers, spirituals, and work songs they invented were designed to lighten the load of the task. They were also a means of telling stories, passing along news, plotting escapes, and releasing frustrations. The early blues carried on the tradition of voicing black aspirations and experiences. This lesson explores both the African American oral tradition and the relationship of this tradition to the blues.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore the African American oral tradition, including its roots, its importance, and its legacy.
- Consider the oral traditions that exist within his/her own family.
- Explain how spirituals, work songs, hollers, and ballads functioned in the everyday lives of slaves and sharecroppers.
- Connect African American oral tradition to both Africa and the blues.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

### Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD  
"Trouble So Hard;" "John Henry;" Mississippi John Hurt, "Stack O' Lee"

### Readings

- W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

### Web Sites

- <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubSoul.html>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>
- <http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/S/stagolee.html>
- [http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press\\_article](http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press_article)

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**FILM TIE-INS**

## African American Folk Music

*Warming by the Devil's Fire* (segment on W.C. Handy discovering the blues; discussion of Joe Turner and black prison work gangs; Mississippi John Hurt's performance of "John Henry")

## Oral Tradition in Africa

*Feel Like Going Home* (segments emphasizing the oral tradition in Africa and its export to the Americas)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

This exercise introduces the idea of oral tradition and examines the importance of that tradition in African American culture. Start by asking students to think about a family story that has been told and retold over the years. Once students have had the opportunity to identify a tale, ask them to answer a few questions about it:

- *What are the roots of this story?*
- *Has the story changed over time as it has been retold? If so, what changes can you note?*
- *Consider the occasions in which the story is told. What purpose does it seem to serve in your family? Why does it continue to be told and retold?*
- *Has the story ever been written down? Why or why not? How do you think the story and its function in your family might change if it were to be recorded?*

When students have finished, discuss the purpose of family stories as a whole class. Explain to the class that such stories are often referred to as **oral-tradition narratives**, passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and song.

Inform the class that oral tradition is extremely important in African American culture.

To highlight the importance of songs in African American oral tradition, assign students to read **Chapter 14**, "Of the Sorrow Songs," from W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. As students read, ask them to answer the following questions:

- *What, according to DuBois, is the history of these songs?*
- *What purpose did these songs serve?*
- *Why are many of these songs religious in nature?*
- *What themes do these songs cover and what themes do they omit?*
- *Why are these songs important to America?*

[An online version of the text can be found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubSoul.html>.]

Once students have read and discussed the reading, inform them that while DuBois focuses largely on spirituals, three types of songs characterize African American folk music: spirituals, ballads, and work songs. Play a sample of each for the class and discuss the purposes each type of song might have played in African American communities. [A wealth of songs can be found in the Library of Congress collection, *The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip* (found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>). Two appropriate selections are "Trouble So Hard" and "John Henry," and the film ***Warming by the Devil's Fire*** contains good references to African American oral tradition. See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed information.]

## Focus Exercise

The African American oral tradition has roots in Africa and a legacy in the blues. This exercise explores the continuum of the oral tradition, asking students ultimately to consider how blues music is a legacy of African tradition. Start the exercise by introducing students to the concept of the *griot*. Associated primarily with West Africa’s Mali Empire, which lasted from 1245 to 1468, and the legend of Sundiata, which arose from this empire, griots were essentially professional historians, praise singers, and musical entertainers. They were educated and used their knowledge of history, which was passed down from griot to griot, to bring wisdom to present situations. Because of their wisdom, they had extremely high standing in society, advising kings and educating princes. Griots also became the official musicians of Malian society. After providing this background, ask students how the griot tradition may have impacted the African American oral tradition.

Suggest that slave songs (spirituals, ballads, and work songs) have not only a rich history but also a rich legacy. The blues is a big part of that legacy. Assign students to read the essay in this guide “*What Is the Blues?*” and discuss how the essay makes the connection between the blues and African American slave songs and oral tradition. Demonstrate this connection by introducing the legend of Stack O’ Lee. Play the Mississippi John Hurt version of “Stack O’ Lee” to the class and after students have listened, ask them what story or incident this song relates. Pass out the lyrics and ask students, in pairs, to write a news story that narrates the incident in the song. Once student stories are written and shared, distribute the actual news story from the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* of December 27, 1895, which many believe was the basis for the song. Discuss, as a class, the following:

- *How did your news stories compare to the actual story on which the song (and the legend of Stack O’ Lee) is likely based?*
- *How might the story of Stack O’ Lee and Mississippi John Hurt’s sung version of it suggest a connection between African American oral tradition and the blues?*
- *Why would the legend of Stack O’ Lee have such lasting power in African American culture and, ultimately, American culture?*
- *Dozens of performers, including Pat Boone, Big Bill Broonzy, Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead, and Beck, have done versions of a Stack O’ Lee song. What does this suggest about oral tradition and legends?*

[The words to “Stack O’ Lee” can be found at <http://www.whiskeyclone.net/ghost/S/stagolee.html> while the news story is replicated at [http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press\\_article](http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/stagroot.htm#press_article).]

Conclude this exercise by connecting blues musicians to the griot tradition. Ask students whether they think musicians such as Mississippi John Hurt, who retold a famous story in song, represent an American version of the African griot. How are blues musicians similar to griots? How do they differ?

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The Library of Congress collection *The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip* (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>) contains a wealth of primary sources—songs, in particular—related to the African American oral tradition. Assign them to explore this Web site, specifically asking them to listen to enough songs on the site to choose four or five selections that have the same theme. These selections can come from one type of music (for example, spirituals or work songs), or they can represent several different types. Once students select their songs, they should find the same number of photographs from the collection that illustrate their chosen theme. Student research should ideally be presented in oral presentations in which students play their songs and show their photographs, pointing out the common theme in all the works. If time does not allow for oral presentations, have students present their assertions in a paper.

## SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

If legendary bluesmen were, in many respects, the griots of their time, it could be argued that rap artists are modern-day griots. Ask students to either agree or disagree with this idea in a written essay. The essay should include references to the griot tradition as well as evidence from rap lyrics and biographical information about rap artists.

## Extensions

### ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

An interesting phenomenon of the blues—given its close ties to African American oral tradition—is the co-optation of this musical form by white performers and fans, both in England and in the United States. To introduce this phenomenon, show a few clips from *The Blues* films. After watching the film clips, ask students to share their opinions on the following:

- *What blues themes do you think would have resonated most with a middle-class white audience?*
- *How do you think the blues changed following the white embrace?*
- *What do you think black bluesmen felt about this embrace?*

*[While many portions of **Red, White and Blues** discuss the adoption of the blues by British performers, the sections “The 1960s Explosion” and “Taking It Back to America” would work particularly well. To illustrate white fans embracing the blues, watch the segment “The White Embrace 1968” from **The Road to Memphis**.]*

Next, further explore how the blues might have changed when adopted by white performers. Do so by playing “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson and “Crossroads” by Cream. Discuss: How are these two songs alike? How do they differ?

Conclude by discussing the following question as a class: Given the blues’ relation to African American oral tradition, does it seem surprising that white America and white Britain embraced this music? Why or why not?

### RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Ballads represent an integral part of the African American oral tradition. One of the most famous African American ballads is “John Henry.” To begin this research project, play the song for students, asking them to generate a list of questions about it.

Assign students to individually research the legend of John Henry, seeking answers to the questions generated by the class. Students’ answers should be recorded and collected at the end of the project. To encourage students to consult a variety of resources in conducting their research, ask them to cite the resource where they found the answer to each question.

In addition to learning more about John Henry, ask students to consider the use of this tale over the ages. As part of their research, ask students to listen to four or five recorded versions of “John Henry.” For each selection, have them to note the how the retelling is unique and what the version reflects about the performer. Finally, ask students to compare and contrast their selected versions of the song.

Conclude by asking student to write a paper in which they describe the importance of the African American ballad using “John Henry” as their case study.

The following Web site represents a good place to start research on “John Henry”:

- *John Henry—The Steel Driving Man* at [http://www.ibiblio.org/john\\_henry/index.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/index.html)

**SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES**

## Film

- *Daughters of the Dust*. New York: Kino International, 1991.

## Readings

- Buehler, Richard E. "Stacker Lee: A Partial Investigation into the Historicity of a Negro Murder Ballad," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly*. Fall 1967: pgs. 187-91.
- Ferris, Dr. William. *Blues From the Delta*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978.
- Floyd, Samuel A. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Lester, Julius. *Black Folktales*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969.
- Oliver, Paul. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*. New York: Stein and Day, 1970.
- Shepperd, Eli. *Eli Sheppard's Plantation Songs*. Sergeant Kirkland's Press, 1997.

## Web Site

- Herman, Hawkeye. *History of the Blues: A More Specific History of the Blues Music Tradition*. The Blues Foundation. <http://www.blues.org/history/essays/hawkeye2.html>.