

The Rhapsody Project & Washington Blues Society Present

Northwest Blues in the Schools

“Understanding blues is crucial to understanding the American experience.”
-Joe Seamons

Electric Blues
1930's

Classic Blues
1920's

Country Blues
early 1900's

Vaudeville
1890-1930's

Minstrelsy
1850's

Black String Band

Work Songs & Spirituals
1619-

Colonialism
1600's-1763

American Revolution
1763-1783

Civil War
1861-1865

Reconstruction
1863-1877

Jim Crow
1877-1964

The roots of most American popular music can be traced back to the music of enslaved Africans and their descendants.

The musical traditions of the African continent were transported to American shores on slave ships. Enslaved people made music during work, play, and worship to ease the hardships of their lives; music was also used as a form of communication between enslaved people.

As the polyrhythms, scoops, bends, slides, “blue notes,” and other musical traditions from Africa mixed with the music of European colonizers and immigrants, what emerged was distinct owing to the multicultural nature of it. This music was then woven into the fabric of the American soundtrack.

White supremacy gave tacit approval for white musicians to incorporate Black American music into their own styles and repertoires, without properly acknowledging their sources. As capitalism in America became more prominent, the music industry controlled whose music was available to whom, resulting in a significant lack of historical record-keeping for non-white musicians. This also obscured the true origins of much of American music today.

Learning and teaching about the origins of Black American music will help illuminate the musical lineage of today’s artists, as well as bring awareness to musicians and music from history that was absorbed into the American musical cannon without the acknowledgement of where that music came from. We understand “blues” as a common thread of musical expression originating in the experience of Black Americans and woven throughout the evolution of American music: from ragtime, stringband dance music, jazz, R&B, country music, rock ‘n roll, and onward throughout funk, hip hop, house music, and beyond.

We can show respect for Black ancestors by learning about and understanding the music they made that has so deeply influenced the music we love today.

Pre-Blues Music

Work Songs

This was rhythmic acapella music, sung on the job by enslaved people. It employed a call and response between a leader who had the freedom to improvise the melody of the call, and the remainder of the team who would respond with the same response each time. Work songs created a dialog between workers, and were used as a tool to keep morale up, in addition to coordinating physical movement. These songs were an oral tradition that were passed around with no definitive versions; they relied on the improvisation of the caller to create a version of the song that was relevant to those who were singing.

Watch: [Prison Worksong](#)

Spirituals

Spirituals developed when enslaved people began converting to Christianity. These songs were a mix of culture and tradition from Africa, Christianity, and the realities of life as an enslaved person. The style incorporates the call and response of work songs, while dealing with themes such as the hope for a better future, a relationship with God, and the hypocrisy of the institution of slavery.

Watch: [John Dee Holeman & Friends | Wade In The Water](#)

Black String Band

This music emerged from the mix of cultures represented in the rural south before radio or records existed. String band music is anchored by the banjo from Africa and the fiddle from Europe, sometimes accompanied by bones, quills, drums, and other instruments. The music itself is a blend of European fiddle and ballad traditions, and African rhythmic, vocal, and instrumental styles. Played purely for entertainment, this music was often heard at dances and frolics.

Watch: [Joe & Odell Thompson at Greenfield Village](#)

Blues in the Schools Programs

Blues in the Schools programming can be appropriately tailored to the age of the students with creative, cross-discipline curriculum. Subjects like music, art, English, and social studies are natural fits, but with some creativity, teachers can develop ways to tie in math, science, and tech ed. For instance, a simple activity like designing a CD package enlists art, English, and music disciplines. Should students be challenged to plan out the touring itinerary for a band, they will utilize math, geography, and language arts skills in their assignments.

The combinations of programs is unlimited and educators can work with tradition bearers to construct a relevant lesson plan using blues as the framework.



Performance Program

Professional musicians, together with youth songsters will perform a concert of American roots music for your school or class. Included in the performance will be engaging stories about the music and musicians, and historical and social context for when and how the music was made.

Residency Program

This program provides the opportunity to dig deeper with musicians, educators, and youth songsters from The Rhapsody Project. We will bring music into the classroom, facilitating activities that will give students a chance to experience blues music in a personal way, while learning from local, multi-generational tradition bearers.

The residency will conclude with an invitation to students and their families to come out and celebrate the music in a social setting with food and dancing — the natural environment of American roots music!

Country Blues

This is the music of emancipation and Jim Crow; the music of sharecroppers and (prison) laborers. Musicians are now making personal statements, telling the stories of contemporary Black life, and moving away from the group music-making that permeated during enslavement. Guitars are becoming more popular among Black musicians (they are affordable and easily available by mail order!), and the call and response now happens between singer and instrument.

Watch: [Mississippi John Hurt Footage](#)

Classic Blues

Classic blues evolved from musicians who toured in minstrel troupes, tent shows, and vaudeville theaters; they picked up songs from different areas, incorporating aspects of country blues and Black folk songs into their acts. Rather than guitar, the classic blues singers are accompanied by piano or small jazz bands, and they perform in fancy costumes. Initial recordings and sheet music from this era were by and for white audiences, but in 1920, Okeh records released Crazy Blues by Mamie Smith and it was very successful. This made record companies realize that there was a market for records by African American musicians, and the “Blues Queen” trend took off, along with the “Race Records” phenomenon.

Watch: [Bessie Smith | St. Louis Blues](#)

Electric Blues

The Great Migration sent African Americans (including southern Black musicians) to major cities, fleeing from the Jim Crow south. The change of scenery prompted yet another evolution of the idiom: playing guitar-based blues in loud bars and parties, which meant switching to electric guitars in order to be heard. The rhythm section now consisted of drums, bass, and sometimes piano; amplifiers were also turned up loud enough that distortion was introduced to the mix.

Watch: [Muddy Waters Live at Newport Folk Festival 1960](#)

Sample Classroom Activities

Analyzing Sound Recordings

This activity encourages students to think critically about what they are hearing. Using any of the embedded recordings in this packet (or examples of your own), listen with your students and analyze what you hear.

- [Library of Congress worksheet](#)
- National Archives worksheet for [younger students](#) or [older students](#)

Comparing Past & Present

Using [this worksheet](#) developed by Ballad of America as a starting point, have students compare and contrast two songs by Black American musicians. You can use historical songs referenced in this packet (or examples of your own), and we encourage you to use this as a chance to explore Black artists you may be less familiar with for your contemporary examples.

(Suggestions include [Yola](#), [Amythyst Kiah](#), [Jake Blount](#), [Keb Mo](#), [Jerron Paxton](#), [Ben Hunter](#), [Jontavious Willis](#), [Rhiannon Giddens](#), [Leyla McCalla](#), [Valerie & Ben Tuner](#), [Phil Wiggins](#), [Lady A](#), [Cedric Watson](#), [Justin Golden](#), and [Briar](#).)

Additional Resources for Educators

[Musicmap.info](#)

Excellent visual representation of how music genres are connected; also includes written descriptions of genres, and playlists.

[Ballad Of America](#)

Articles and playlists about America's musical history; also has educator content.

[The Jazz History Tree](#)

Articles with audio/video examples, chronicling the history of Black American music.

The Rhapsody Project

The Rhapsody Project is a community that explores and celebrates music, heritage, and culture through an anti-racist lens. With the Blues In The Schools program, we are focused on bringing tradition bearers of all ages into schools so that youth can gain knowledge and understanding about important parts of American history, culture, and tradition from those who embody said cultures.



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This resource was created in alignment with the [priorities and values](#) outlined by the Blues Foundation and the Washington Blues Society.