

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

*A Smithsonian Folkways Learning Pathway for
students in 6th–8th Grade*



Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2:

Before the Blues: From Africa to the United States

Lesson Overview

To trace the roots of blues music in the United States, we must go back several centuries to 1619, when one of the most well-known ships carrying enslaved people as cargo landed in Jamestown. Then a British settlement, this land eventually developed into the United States. For many years, people from Africa were forcefully entrapped and enslaved for their labor in the Americas.

Away from their land and their families, these people began to blend elements of their African heritage with the sounds learned in the “New World”. Over time, new sounds and musical styles emerged. Song forms such as field hollers and ring shouts pulled heavily from African music aesthetics and were tied to the everyday experiences of its creators and performers. **Field hollers** allowed enslaved Africans who were not permitted to communicate with friends and family members across the fields and in neighboring plantations, the ability to communicate with one another.

The actions of those enslaved were heavily policed, meaning that their ability to gather, dance, or use percussive instruments were restricted and prohibited. Therefore, enslaved Africans often relied upon their Sunday worship and holidays to express themselves. **Ring shouts** were one of the sacred song forms which permitted enslaved Africans to “dance,” performing expressively and creating a percussive rhythm with the shuffling of their feet and clapping of their hands.

Within this lesson, students will learn about musical forms that influenced the development and unique performance style of the blues. They will explore connections between the blues and various West African traditions and will actively engage (through attentive/engaged listening and performance) with two early precursors to the blues: *ring shouts* and *field hollers*.

In This Guide:

<i>Lesson Components and Student Objectives</i>	2
<i>Teaching Plan</i>	3
<i>2014 National Music Standards Connections</i>	8
<i>Bibliography and Additional Reading</i>	10

Lesson Components and Student Objectives



1. **West African Connections** (approx. 30 minutes)
 - Students will identify some of the musical practices found in the blues that can be traced to West African music traditions.









2. **Ring Shouts** (approx. 30 minutes)
 - Students will explain some of the main features of ring shouts (a precursor to the blues).
 - Students will describe connections between ring shouts and West African music traditions.



3. **Field Hollers** (approx. 30 minutes)
 - Students will explain some of the main features of field hollers.
 - Students will identify some of the musical practices found in field hollers that are also found in the blues.
 - Students will actively engage with field hollers through performance.

*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Component. Keep in mind that these Components are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Components they'd like to use from each Lesson. The time estimate given for each component indicates "in class" time. The + indicates there are optional extension activities and/or a suggested homework assignment.

While all learning types ( History and Culture,  Music Listening,  Music Making and Creation, and  Creative Connections) fulfill 2014 National Music Standards, non-music teachers will be able to use  History and Culture and  Creative Connections Components without specific musical knowledge.

Teaching Plan

1. Component One: West African Connections

To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 1** of the **Lesson 2 Slideshow** (slides 4–22).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson landing page. *(If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.)*

Component 1 Introduction (Slide 4)

1. Share Information (Slides 5–12):

Share embedded contextual information about the origins of the blues.

- Topics include: **Slavery** (Slide 6), **people** (Slide 7), **time** (Slides 8–9), **location** (Slide 10), **need** (Slide 11), and **musical fusion** (Slide 12).

2. Attentive Listening (Slides 13–20):

A. Play short excerpts from the embedded audio tracks (which illustrate common musical characteristics of the blues).

B. Play four examples of music traditions from several regions of West Africa.

- As students listen, they will try to identify the musical characteristic represented:
 - Call and response
 - Polyrhythm
 - Narrative storytelling
 - Picking styles
- As you complete this activity, share embedded contextual information about each musical characteristic.
- Prompt students to discuss whether they have heard any of these musical characteristics in other popular music styles.

2. Before the Blues: Ring Shouts

To Prepare:

- Preview (and/or download and customize) the **Lesson 2 Slideshow**

Process: Guide student learning while facilitating the student slideshow.

- Place the slideshow in “presenter view”, which will allow you to see more detailed teacher hints and notes as you progress through the slides.

1. Watch Video and Discuss:

A. Watch the embedded SFW video, featuring the *McIntosh County Shouters*

- After watching the video, pose this question for students to consider:
 - What is a ring shout?
 - Consider using a “think/pair/share” strategy to think about this question:
 - Students “think” about the question and write down their ideas.
 - Students “share” their ideas with a partner or small group.
 - One student “shares” the group consensus within the context of a full class discussion.

2. Share Information:

A. Share embedded contextual information about ring shouts, the McIntosh County Singers, and West African influences

3. Watch Video

A. Watch another video of the *McIntosh County Singers* (performing the song “Jubilee”)

- After watching the video, lead a short class discussion based on student responses to these questions:
 - What did you notice about the song structure?
 - What did you notice about the rhythm?
 - What did you notice about the movement?
 - Share the embedded contextual information about “Jubilee”

4. Engaged Listening

A. Play the audio track of “Jubilee,” and prompt students to learn the repeated rhythmic pattern (hand clap) by ear.

- Share embedded contextual information about this rhythmic pattern (3+3+2)

- B. Next, listen to the two main melodic response patterns, and prompt students to learn them by ear.
- When students are ready, ask them to practice singing the response while clapping the rhythmic pattern (along with the recording)

3. Before the Blues: Field Hollers

To Prepare:

- Preview (and/or download and customize) the **Lesson 2 Slideshow**

Process: Guide student learning while facilitating the student slideshow.

- Place the slideshow in “presenter view”, which will allow you to see more detailed teacher hints and notes as you progress through the slides.

1. Share Information

- A. Share the embedded contextual information about field hollers

2. Attentive Listening

- A. Play the embedded example of a field holler
 - As students listen, ask them to think about these questions:
 - Who do you think is singing?
 - What do you think the singer is feeling?
 - What do you notice about the texture?
 - What do you notice about the structure?
 - Share additional embedded contextual information about this recording, the performer, and field hollers in general.
- B. Play another example of a field holler
 - As students listen, ask them to identify similarities and differences between this recording and the previous recording.
 - Then, share embedded contextual information about this recording (Greeting Call)

3. Performance Activity

- A. Use the suggestions provided in the slideshow to customize an active music-making experience that matches the age and experience level of your students.
 - Choose from these options, and find detailed instructions for facilitating each activity within the slideshow:
 - Echo Sing
 - Echo Sing with Call and Response
 - Engaged Listening
 - Perform
 - Use notation
 - Extension Activities

4. Share Information

- A. Share embedded contextual information about the connection between field hollers and the blues.

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Pr4.1.5a Demonstrate and explain how the selection of music to perform is influenced by personal interest, knowledge, and context, as well as their personal and others' technical skill.

- Can I explain why Black Americans incorporated characteristics of West African traditions into their musical practices?

MU:Pr4.2.5a Demonstrate understanding of the structure and the elements of music (such as rhythm, pitch, form, and harmony) in music selected for performance

- Can I demonstrate the common musical characteristics of field hollers through performance?

MU:Pr4.2.5c Explain how context (such as social, cultural, and historical) informs performances.

- Can I explain the historical and cultural significance of field hollers?
- Can I explain the typical performance context of field hollers?

MU:Pr4.3.5a Demonstrate and explain how intent is conveyed through interpretive decisions and expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, and articulation/style).

- After repeated opportunities to listen, can I expressively interpret and perform a field holler?

MU:Re7.1.5a Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts.

- Can I explain the context within which ring shouts and field hollers were/are performed?

MU:Re7.2.6b Identify the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

- Can I explain the context within which ring shouts and field hollers were/are performed?

MU:Re7.2.6a Describe how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.

- Can I identify how elements of music and expressive qualities are usually applied in ring shouts (song structure, rhythm, movement)?
- Can I identify musical characteristics found in the blues that can be traced back to West African traditions?

MU:Re8.1.5a Demonstrate and explain how the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, and articulation) are used in performers' and personal interpretations to reflect expressive intent.

- Can I describe how the McIntosh County Singers and Annie Grace Horn Dodson used certain expressive qualities to convey expressive intent (e.g. ritualistic movements, vocal timbre, tempo, bent pitches, ululations)

MU:Cn10.0.5a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- Can I identify characteristics of the blues that can be traced to West African music traditions?
- Can I identify characteristics of ring shouts that can be traced to West African music traditions?
- Can I identify some of the characteristics of field hollers that are also found in the blues?
- Can I explain why Black Americans incorporated characteristics of West African traditions into their musical practices?

MU:Cn11.0.1a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

- Can I identify the context within which ring shouts and field hollers were/are performed?
-

Bibliography and Additional Reading

- Charters, S. (1972). *Roots of Black Music in America* [[Liner Notes](#)] New York, NY: Folkways Records.
- Courlander, H. (1951). *Negro Folk Music of Africa and America*. [[Liner Notes](#)]. New York, NY: Folkways Records.
- Courlander, Harold. (1956). *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*. [[Liner Notes](#)] New York, NY: Folkways Records.
- Kubik, G. (1999). *Africa and the blues*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi
- Welding, P. (1969). *Mississippi Delta Blues Jam in Memphis Volume 1*. [[Liner Notes](#)]. El Cerrito, CA: Arhoolie Records.
- Ware, A., Allen, W. F., and Garrison, L.M. (1867/1995). (Eds.). *Slave songs of the United States*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Parrish, L. (1942/1992). *Slave songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Rosenbaum, A. (1984). *Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia*. [[Liner Notes](#)] New York, NY: Folkways Records.
- Rosenbaum, A. (2017). *Spirituals and Shout Songs from the Georgia Coast*. [[Liner Notes](#)]. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings