

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

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

Teacher’s Guide

Lesson 3:

Melting Pot: Becoming the Blues



Lesson Overview

From the 16th-19th centuries, millions of people from Africa were forced from their land and families and taken to the “New World.” Blending elements of their African heritage with the sounds learned while in the Americas, like fife and drum bands and hymns, enslaved Africans began to develop revamped and, in some cases, new music traditions.

Spirituals, though sacred in text (modified hymns), served multiple functions for enslaved Africans in the American south. They were performed during Sunday services (the only time when enslaved people were permitted to rest and gather), commonly used as work songs, and similar to field hollers, they were used to communicate to others internally and externally on the plantation. Prior to the Civil War, spirituals often relayed messages of the underground railroad, alerting enslaved Africans when to get ready and when to part.

Enslaved Africans were often recruited to play in military bands, such as fife and drum corps. After the Civil War, some Black American took their knowledge of fife and drum bands and fused it with African-influenced musical characteristics. The interesting combination of musical sounds that emerged became known as the ***Fife and Drum Blues***.

Within this lesson, students will explore the ways in which the blending of African-influenced musical characteristics with performance styles learned in the United States (e.g. hymns; fife and drum) helped to shape the rhythmic and harmonic frameworks within which American blues music has developed. Students will also have opportunities to participate in the music-making process by demonstrating rhythmic and melodic patterns on instruments commonly used in the fife and drum blues.

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Lesson Components and Student Objectives



1. **Before the Blues: Spirituals** (20–30 minutes)

- Through listening, students will identify some common characteristics of spirituals.
- Students will explain how spirituals influenced the development of the blues.



2. **Combining Influences: Fife and Drum** (20-30 minutes)







- Students will describe connections between West African polyrhythmic music, European fife and drum corps music, and the style of country blues (fife and drum blues) that became an important part of African American community life in the Mississippi Delta.



3. **Fife and Drum: A New Generation** (30+ minutes)

- Students will actively participate in the music-making process by demonstrating rhythmic and melodic patterns on instruments commonly used in the fife and drum blues tradition.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of the minor pentatonic scale 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. Before the Blues: Spirituals

To Prepare:

- Preview (and/or download and customize) the **Lesson 3 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. **Attentive Listening:**

- A. Play a short excerpt from the embedded audio track
 - As students listen, they can think about this guiding question:
 - What kind of music is this?
- B. Share embedded contextual information about “spirituals”
- C. Play another short excerpt from this recording.
 - As student listen, they can think about this guiding question:
 - What do you think the typical performance context of a spiritual is?
- D. Share embedded contextual information about the historical and performance context of spirituals.
- E. Play several additional excerpts from this recording.
 - Each time, students should think about a new guiding question. After each question, there is a slide that provides additional contextual information.
 - What do you notice about the rhythm?
 - The emphasis on the off-beat creates a “swing” feel.
 - What do you notice about the form/structure of this song?
 - This song uses call and response form
 - What do you notice about the vocal style?
 - What do you notice about the melody?
 - Share additional contextual information about the ways in which spirituals influenced the development of blues music.

2. Combining Influences: Fife and Drum

To Prepare:

- Preview (and/or download and customize) the **Lesson 3 Slideshow**
- For the optional activity: Print a copy of the compare/contrast worksheet for each student (find below)

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 embedded contextual information about the historical context of another type of music that influenced the development of the blues: Fife and Drum. Topics covered include:
 - Fife as communication
 - Fife and Drum in the military
 - Fife and Drum after the Revolutionary War
 - Fife and Drum during the Civil War
 2. **Attentive Listening**
 - A. Play an excerpt from the embedded audio track (fife and drum blues)
 - Students can listen for musical characteristics that are also found in the blues (improvisation, rhythm, call and response, blue notes, ululations, etc.)
 - B. Play excerpts from two contrasting audio tracks (fife and drum blues vs. more traditional fife and drum)
 - As students listen to these examples, they should try to identify similarities and differences.
 - After this listening experience, use these guiding questions to facilitate a discussion:
 - How are these pieces similar?
 - How are they different?
 - Do you hear any elements of the “blues” in “Shimmy She Wobble”?
 - If you’d like to facilitate a more in-depth listening activity, print out the “Compare and Contrast” Worksheet, which will prompt students to identify musical characteristics related to timbre, structure, texture, meaning, context (find this worksheet below)
- 3. **Optional Activity: Research**
 - A. Encourage students to seek answers to the following questions through independent or small group research:
 - Do we still have fife and drum corps today?
 - What role do they have in the military today?

3. Fife and Drum: A New Generation

To Prepare:

- Preview (and/or download and customize) the **Lesson 3 Slideshow**
- Familiarize yourself with the melody students will learn to play (find the notation below)

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

- A.** Show the embedded SFW video as students think about these questions:
- Who are the performers?
 - What type of music are they playing?
 - Consider leading a short class discussion based on student responses before moving on.
 - Then, share the embedded contextual information about the ways in which Shardé Thomas has carried on the tradition of the fife and drum blues.
- B.** Play the video again (broken into several short excerpts).
- For each segment that you show, students should think about a new guiding question:
 - Which instruments do you hear?
 - What do you notice about Shardé’s singing style?
 - What do you notice about the song structure?
 - What do the lyrics mean?
 - After leading a short discussion based on student responses, share the embedded contextual information provided on the slides that follow.
 - These slides contain important information that will help students better understand this music’s connection to the blues.

2. Engaged and Enactive Listening

- A.** Play the beginning of the video several more times, in order to help students become more familiar with the melody.
- As students get more comfortable, encourage them to hum or pat along.
- B.** Share embedded information about the minor pentatonic scale.

- Encourage students to sing the first five notes of this scale (on a neutral syllable, using solfege, and/or note names in the key of d).
- C. Prompt the students to play the first five notes of the minor pentatonic scale on an instrument (consider keyboard, Orff instruments, ukulele, and/or wind instruments like the recorder).
- If you decide to play on Orff instruments, consider removing the e and b bars.
- D. Next, teach the opening melody by ear
- The notation is embedded in the slideshow and is also provided below. Customize this activity to match the experience and ability levels of the students in your classroom.
 - Consider these suggestions as you facilitate this activity:
 - Teach the melody one phrase at a time
 - Take it slow at first!
 - Spread this activity out over a period of several days (depending on the experience level of your students . . . You might only learn the first phrase on Day 1).
 - Ignore the grace notes in the notation and the g flat in measure 4 (at least for now)
 - Consider returning to the video frequently for reference
- E. Teach the accompanying rhythmic ostinato pattern.
- Notation is provided within the slideshow and below
 - When students can comfortably perform this rhythmic pattern, transfer this to an instrument (a drum if possible).
 - Consider returning to the video and asking students to clap or pat along
 - Use snare drums if they are available . . . If not, many different types of drums will be sufficient for this activity

3. Optional Performance Activities

- A. As you study the notation, you'll notice that the melody does not resolve or seem to end.
- Ask students to improvise and play around on their instruments in order to find the final concluding note.
- B. Put it all together!
- Some students can play the melody while others play the rhythm (you can also add a lower drum sound on the off-beats)
 - Consider adding the grace notes and the accidental in measure 4 (especially if students are playing a wind instrument)
 - Introduce students to the written notation
- C. Improvisation
- Students can use the notes of the d minor pentatonic scale to create their own short riffs and/or improvised solos on their instruments.

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Cr1.1.5b Generate musical ideas (such as rhythms, melodies, and accompaniment patterns) within specific related tonalities, meters, and simple chord changes.

4. Can I create short melodic riffs using the notes of the minor pentatonic scale?

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 Shardé Thomas plays the fife and drum blues?
- Can I explain why enslaved Africans incorporated the characteristics of hymns and fife and drum 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 minor pentatonic scale on an instrument?

MU:Pr4.2.5b When analyzing selected music, read and perform using standard notation.

- Can I read the standard notation for the fife and blues melody and rhythmic pattern I learned?

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

- Can I explain some of the contexts within which spirituals were performed?

MU:Pr6.1.5a Perform music, alone or with others, with expression, technical accuracy, and appropriate interpretation.

- Can I perform the “fife and drums blues” melody and rhythmic pattern with expression, technical accuracy, and appropriate interpretation?

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 spirituals were used and performed?
- Can I explain why enslaved Africans learned about fife and drum music?

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 relate to the structure of the music I heard in this lesson (e.g. call and response form, minor pentatonic scale, swing rhythms, instrumentation, vocal style, etc...)

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

- Can I describe the history and purposes of fife and drum corps?
- Can I explain the context within which spirituals and the fife and drum blues developed and have been performed?

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 explain why Shardé Thomas continues to play the fife and drum blues?
- Can I explain why enslaved Africans incorporated the characteristics of hymns and fife and drum 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 spirituals, fife and drum, and fife and drum blues developed and have been performed?
 - Can I identify how spirituals were used in daily life by enslaved Africans in the American south?
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Bibliography and Additional Reading

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Worksheets
Compare and Contrast Worksheet

Name: _____

			Comparing these songs, how are they similar or different?
Timbre/Texture (what instruments do you hear? Many instruments? Only a few instruments?)			
Tempo/Dynamics (fast, slow, does the tempo change, loud, soft, do the dynamics change, etc....)			
Style (what do you notice about the melody? Rhythms? What are the stylistic influences?)			
Meaning (what does the music mean to the people who enjoy it?)			
Performance Context (Why do people usually perform this music? What is it for? Where is it performed?)			
Historical Connections (where/when/how did this tradition develop?)			

