Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

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

Teacher's Guide

Lesson Hub 4: Building the Blues

Lesson Overview

The question to consider in this Lesson Hub is, *how did some of the structural elements we associate with blues music become standardized over time?*

At the core of blues music is its structure, a semi-standardized musical form that set the blueprint for dozens of records that ultimately defined the genre's history itself. While "blues style" developed over time and had a variety of influences, the structural elements we recognize today (structure/form, harmony, pitches/scales) can be traced back to a composition called the "Memphis Blues," written by W. C. Handy in 1912. Although Handy's written publication was successful, it was not until Mamie Smith recorded version of "Crazy Blues" in 1920 that the "blues," as a genre, began to be viewed as marketable. These influential compositions provided the structure for not only blues music, but many other types of American popular music that came later.

The basic structure for blues compositions is often twelve measures/bars, broken into three distinct phrases. At the end of each 12-bar section (called chorus), there is often a turnaround. This is a short musical statement that leads the listener back to the beginning of the chorus. Although other forms of blues exist, the ***12-bar blues*** is by far the most popular. Blues style is also characterized by the use of ***blue notes*** (flattened pitches that create an unexpected sound) and ***blues scales.*** Blues scales usually have 6 pitches–some of which are lowered (often the 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees.)

In Lesson Hub 4, students will engage with recordings from the Smithsonian Folkways collection as they learn more about the semi-standardized sound we now recognize as the "blues." Through attentive listening, they will identify 12-bar phrasing, blue notes, and blues scales. Finally, they will sing along with recordings made by two important performers: Katherine Handy Lewis (daughter of W. C. Handy) and Lizzie Miles.

FOLKWAYS

In This Guide:

Lesson Paths and Student Objectives

1. The World Meets the Blues (20+ minutes)

- Students will explain why W. C. Handy is often called the "Father of the Blues."
- Students will identify the first commercial recording of the blues and who recorded it.
- Students will explain why the blues started to be viewed as marketable in the 1920s.

2. 12-Bar Phrasing and the Blues Scale (30+ minutes)

- Students will identify, explain, and demonstrate 12-bar phrasing.
- Students will identify and explain blue notes.
- Students will identify, explain, and demonstrate blues scales.

3. Interpreting the Blues (20+ minutes)

- Students will identify similarities and differences between two versions of the same song ("Memphis Blues").
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of standardized aspects of the blues (structure, phrasing, blue notes, style) through performance.

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*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Path. Keep in mind that these Paths are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Paths they'd like to use from each Lesson Hub. The time estimate given for each path 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 Paths without specific musical knowledge.

Teaching Plan

1. Path One: The World Meets the Blues

To prepare:

- Read through the path.
- Preview **Path 1** of the **Lesson Hub 4 Slideshow** (slides 4–16).
  - 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.)*
- Optional: Print the lyrics to the "Memphis Blues" (find below; they are also embedded in the slideshow).

Path 1 Introduction (Slide 4)

(Visual art connection) The image shown on this slide is an art form called an "etching," in which lines are cut with acid into a metal plate, which is then printed onto paper. Notice the two musicians in this etching by Joseph Holston: a guitar player and a saxophonist.

1. **Building the Blues: "The Memphis Blues"**

   A. (Slide 5) **Share the embedded historical information about the blues** and the importance of Beale Street in Memphis, TN, which is sometimes called the "home of the blues."
      - Optional: Click the down arrow to Slide 5.2 to watch a short video (approx. 2 minutes) that describes the significance of Beale Street in blues history (and the history of American popular music more broadly.)
      - Optional: Click the down arrow to Slide 5.3 to view an illustration that shows how the Memphis Blues sub-genre is related to other types of blues music.

   B. (Slide 6) **Listen to an excerpt from an instrumental version of "Memphis Blues,"** by composer W. C. Handy (played here by James P. Johnson), which is known as the first written "blues" publication.
      - See Lessons 2 and 3 to further explore the musical and cultural elements that influenced the development of the "blues" sound.
      - Additional Context: "Although he did not invent the blues, Handy became the first to identify and name the blues, then transcribe, publish and popularize the music for the general public" (Alabama Music Hall of Fame). W. C. Handy lived and performed in Memphis from 1909 - 1917. In addition to "Memphis Blues" - he wrote a song called "Beale Street Blues" in 1916. The pianist on this recording, James P. Johnson, is known for bridging "ragtime" and "jazz" styles and composing "The Charleston."

C. (Slide 7) **Listen to an excerpt of a vocal version of the "Memphis Blues,"** recorded by Handy's daughter, Katharine Handy Lewis.
   - Ask students to make some *observations about the musical sounds they hear*. (Although this discussion can be very open-ended at this point, students might notice things like the singer's **vocal timbre/style, "blue notes," syncopation, swung rhythms, a predictable chord pattern.)**
     - Optional: If you'd like to listen to the whole track, the lyrics are provided in the slideshow on slide 7.2. You can also find them at the end of this guide.
     - Note: It is important to take note of the racialized lyrics in the song (e.g. "white folk sway" and "darkie sorrow song.") To discuss with students, find more information here.
   - Additional Context: The singer featured on this recording is W. C. Handy's daughter, Katharine Handy Lewis. For further information about Katharine Handy Lewis and her father, see the liner notes for this album: https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW03540.pdf.

D. (Slide 8) **Share embedded contextual information** about the composer of "The Memphis Blues," W. C. Handy, who is often referred to as the "Father of the Blues."
   - Optional discussion question: *Which African American folk styles do you think W. C. Handy pulled from?* **(Some examples include work songs, field hollers, ragtime, church music, spirituals.)**
   - Note: The distinct characteristics that we now recognize as "the blues" will be unpacked from a musical perspective in Path 3.

2. **Recording and Marketing the Blues: "Crazy Blues"**

A. (Slide 9) **Share embedded contextual information** about the first public recording of a blues song: "Crazy Blues," performed by Mamie Smith and written by Perry Bradford.
   - It was not until this recording was released that the blues, as a genre, began to be seen as "marketable."

B. (Slide 10) **Discuss:** *What are some factors that make music "marketable"?*
   - Lead a short discussion before moving on. (You will have a chance to listen to "Crazy Blues" on the next slide.)
   - Some ideas for discussion:
     - Music is more marketable when it is associated with a genre that is recognizable and familiar (and popular in circles of people who can afford to buy recordings and attend concerts.)

- It is also more marketable when it is promoted effectively (through marketing campaigns). Historically, marketable songs have had **tunes** that are catchy and/or danceable; **lyrics** that are interesting, meaningful, relatable; and performed by **artists** that are relatable, charismatic, talented, interesting, etc.

C. (Slide 11) **Listen to an excerpt from "Crazy Blues,"** recorded by Mamie Smith. **Ask students to consider the embedded questions:**
   - Note: You might want to listen to "Memphis Blues" again for comparison. Remember, what we now know as "blues form" can be traced to the "Memphis Blues," but "Crazy Blues" was the first recording of blues music that was considered "marketable."
   - *Considering the time period, why do you think some assumed that "the blues" was not worth recording and selling?*
     - **Possible answers:** During this time, the cost of phonographs prevented many African Americans from listening to recorded music, so **most commercial marketing efforts were directed towards white audiences**.
   - *Why do you think "Crazy Blues" was the first blues recording that was considered marketable?*
     - **Possible answers:** The **composer (Perry Bradford)** was a classically trained musician, composer, and band leader. Therefore, these musical sounds might have been **considered more "refined" and "sophisticated"** than other more "raw" interpretations of blues music, and thus, more marketable/palatable to audiences who purchased phonographs.
     - The singer (Mamie Smith) was already a popular live performer of many styles of music in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. She performed in many Vaudeville shows (early musical theater.)

D. (Slide 12) **Share additional embedded contextual information** about the commercial success of "Crazy Blues."
   - **(Visual art connection)**: As phonograph prices went down in the early 1900s, more African Americans could afford to listen to recorded music. Okeh was a label that marketed primarily to African American audiences between the 1920s and 1940s with its "Race Records." This development made blues music even more marketable. Learn more about Race Records in Lesson 8.

3. **Discussion: Building the Blues**

A. (Slide 13) **Lead a short discussion based on student responses** to the questions embedded on the slide.

- *How do you think compositions like "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues" affected what consumers thought of as the "blues"?*
  - Hints to guide discussion: These seminal recordings **codified certain elements**: sounds that defined "the blues" as a distinct genre that people could immediately recognize (especially elements related to **form**, **chords & chord progressions**, and **style** [e.g. "blue" notes].)
- *Why would having a standardized form for the blues be important commercially?*
  - Hints to guide discussion: When people like one song that is classified as a particular **genre** (e. g. the blues) they are probably more likely to buy more recordings that are classified in the same way—**they want to listen to a *song* that is different but a *sound* that is familiar.** Genres continue to be very important in the music industry; they help musicians and record labels determine what audiences want to listen to and therefore, affect the songs artists choose to record and release.
- Additional prompts: *What did people expect to hear when they saw the word "blues" is in the title during this time? What do you expect to hear when you see the word "blues" in a song title now?*
  - Hints to guide discussion: At this point historically, people who saw the word "blues" in a song title were probably **expecting similar characteristics to songs like "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues"** (e.g., a certain form/predictable chord structure, a certain style - blue notes and blues scales, expressed in a certain way by the musicians/singers.)

B. (Slide 14) **Consider these additional discussion questions**:
- *How do "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues" compare to other blues songs and musicians you know?*
  - Although answers will vary, students might mention things like **song topics**, **vocal and instrumental style**, **form/structure**, **instrumentation**, or **improvisation.**

(Slide 15) **Lesson 4 / Path 1 Learning Checkpoint**

- *Who is known as the "Father of the Blues" and why?*
  - **W. C. Handy** is known as the "father of the blues" because he **codified a distinct form for the genre through his composition, "Memphis Blues"** (which is recognized as the first published the first written composition that was considered the blues.) Because of this work, **people began to recognize some standardized elements (form, harmonies, scales) as the "blues" sound.**

- *What was the first commercial recording of the blues and who recorded it?*
  - **Mamie Smith** was the first African American to make a public, commercial recording of a blues song **("Crazy Blues" in 1920.**) "Crazy Blues" was written by Perry Bradford, a classically trained African American musician.
- *Why did the blues begin to be viewed as marketable beginning in the 1920s?*
  - **"Crazy Blues" quickly became a hit, selling over 75,000 copies in its first few months of release** (indicating the blues could be a marketable genre.) As **phonograph prices went down** in the early 1900s, **more African Americans could afford to listen to recorded music**. Race Records began to market specifically to African American audiences.

(Slide 16) **<u>Lesson Navigation</u>**

2. Path 2: 12-Bar Phrasing and the Blues Scale

To prepare:

- Read through the path.
- Preview **Path 2** of the **Lesson 4 Slideshow** (slides 17–33).
  - 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.)*
- Optional: Print detailed instructions for the movement activity (find below).

Path 2 Introduction (Slide 17)

Note: You may wish to review this information with your students (especially if students did not complete Path 1):

The musical style we now recognize as the "blues" was created by African Americans in the rural southern United States towards the end of the 19th century. While "blues style" developed over time and had a variety of influences, W. C. Handy is known as the "father of the blues." In 1912, he wrote a song called "Memphis Blues," which is recognized as the first published composition labeled as the blues. Because of this work, people began to recognize some standardized elements (form, harmonies, scales) as the "blues" sound - which is the topic we will explore in Path 2!

1. **Building the Blues: Listening for 12-Bar Phrasing**

   A. (Slide 18) **Play an excerpt from the embedded instrumental recording of "Memphis Blues"** (this will be a review if students completed Path 1). This seminal composition was crucial in the development of the "blues" as a genre.
      - As they listen, prompt students to notice musical characteristics that might have influenced the development of blues music, and ultimately, other forms of American popular music. If time allows, lead a short discussion based on student observations.
        - (Although this discussion can be very open-ended at this point, students might notice things like a general **"bluesy" style**, **blue notes/blues scale**, **syncopation**, **swung rhythmic feel**, a predictable **chord pattern**.)
      - Optional: Students can also actively engage with the recording in a variety of ways (tap the steady beat, pat on beats 2 and 4, tap the swung eighth note feel, count phrases using their fingers, listen for instruments, raise hands to indicate a new section, etc.)
      - Optional: Ask students if they can think of any connections between what they know as the "blues" and other musical styles? (Hint: Prompt them to think about some of today's popular music.) Students might discuss

instrumentation, vocal style, chord structure (use of I, IV, and V chords), four-bar phrases, rhythms, etc.

B. (Slide 19) Next, **play a vocal version of the song**, performed by Katharine Handy Lewis (the composer's daughter). Listen to the entire track. As students listen, they can consider:
   - *Can you determine the meter by tapping along?* **(duple time, encourage them to pat along on beats 2 & 4)**
   - *How long are the phrases?* **(four bars)**
   - *Are there any sections that repeat or change drastically?* **(The composition itself has three distinct sections. At several points, you can hear 12-bar phrasing.)**
     - On this recording, the second section begins about 1:15 and the third at 1:40. In several cases you can hear the form we now call the 12-bar blues (we'll move into that concept on the next slide.)

C. (Slide 20) Share embedded information on this slide, which unpacks **12-bar blues phrasing.**
   - **This common 12-measure chord progression is one feature of blues music that has become standardized over time.**
     - One possibility for a 12-bar blues chord progression is shown on this slide (and below). This is not the only harmonic structure for blues music (e.g., sometimes there is an 8- or 16-bar progression, but 12 is the most popular.) There are many adaptations of this chord progression … from simple to complex.
     - Explain that there are **12 measures in this chord progression (three distinct phrases).** Each box on this chart represents a measure (4 beats.) *Hint: adapt this content to match your students' prior knowledge of and experience with chords and chord progressions.*

I	I or IV	I	I7
IV	IV	I	I7
V	V or IV	I	I or V

   - Students will have a chance to actively experience (listen for and play) this chord progression beginning on the next slide.

D. (Slide 21) **Lead students through a series of active listening exercises** related to 12-bar blues phrasing.

- **Play the changes for students on a piano or guitar as the students complete the tasks listed on the slide.**
  - Note: If you are not comfortable playing the chord progressions yourself, you can return to Lesson Hub 1 of this Pathway and use the recording of Big Mama Thornton's "Session Blues," which clearly demonstrates this standard 12-bar blues form ("Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues" go in and out of the 12-bar form.)
  - Note: We encourage you to tailor these ideas to meet the needs of your students.
- More ideas for engagement listed below:
  - Students can sing the root of each chord using the number that represents (I, IV, V). Sing "one" "four" or "five" with the changes (you may need to flash these numbers on cards or your fingers to help students stay together, but it will help them truly sense the changes.
  - After they demonstrate they can sing the changes, have them play the root notes for the 12-bar blues framework on Orff instruments, resonator bells, or the piano (many other instruments will also work). You can also show a chord chart or guitar tab notation of the piece to help them see the changes.
  - Bonus: Have students sing/play different rhythmic patterns using this framework of chords.

E. (Slide 22) **Listen for chords:** Play the final section of the vocal version of "Memphis Blues" while following along with the chord chart (begins at 1:40.)

- *Does it match the 12-bar blues you just learned?*
  - **Although it does not match the chart chord progression exactly, you can hear the basic structure that influenced the development of the 12-bar blues framework.**
- Optional engaged listening: Encourage students to tap along on beats 2 and 4 (another characteristic of the blues.)

F. (Slide 23) **Listen for phrases:** Play the same excerpt again and ask students to follow along with the lyrics on the slide, identifying three distinct 4-bar phrases.

- Optional: Have students count the phrases on their fingers as they listen.
- Note: Addressing racialized lyrics:
  - It is important to acknowledge that this version of the song does include some racial lyrics ("white folk sway" and "darkie sorrow song".) If we were to perform this song today, we would not sing it this way. (Students will have a chance to discover this through performance in Path 3.)
  - To discuss this issue with students, find more information here.

G. (Slide 24): **Listening for chords in "Crazy Blues"**: Next, play an excerpt (0:42–1:16) from the first commercialized sound recording of blues music, "Crazy Blues," performed by Mamie Smith.
   - *Does it sound like the 12-bar blues?*
     - **Again, it does not match the chart chord progression exactly, but the 12-bar blues structure is evident.** (The V chord is used in the second measure of the first line, instead of I or IV.)
   - Optional engaged listening: Encourage students to tap along on beats 2 and 4 (another characteristic of the blues.)

2. **Moving to the 12-Bar Blues** (Slide 25)
In this activity, students will deepen their understanding of the 12-bar blues framework by listening to excerpts from "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues" while moving to the chord changes.
   - The 12-bar blues excerpts are:
     - 1:41 - end for "Memphis Blues" and
     - 0:42 - 1:16 for "Crazy Blues." (These are cued up on the slide.)
   - Note: More detailed instructions/ideas for facilitating this activity can be found at the end of this guide.
     1. **As a class, choose two (or three) movements.**
        - At least to start, the whole group should use the same movements. Consider asking students for ideas or select the movements in advance.
        - A simple way to start this activity is to sit for the I or tonic chord ("home" chord) and stand for the IV (subdominant) and V (dominant) "away" chords. Once students master that, you can select different movements. Eventually, students can choose their own movements.
     2. **Assign each movement to a chord:**
        - Younger/less experienced students: One for the "home" chord (I) and one for the "away chords (IV, V)
        - Older/more experienced students: One for tonic (I), one for sub-dominant (IV), and one for dominant (V).
        - For more experienced groups, you can use all three chords with three different movements. Consider adding claps on the 2 & 4 beats. More ideas for sequencing this activity can be found in the teacher's guide.
     3. **Listen to the suggested excerpts from the recordings and perform the movements accordingly.**
   - Consider going back to Lesson 1 and using "Session Blues" or going ahead to Lesson 5 and using "Married Woman Blues" or "Low Down Rounder's Blues" for alternative listening examples. When using these selections, consider adding a special movement to mark the turnaround at the end of the form. You (the

teacher) could also simply play the 12-bar blues chord changes on a guitar or piano as the students do the movements.

3. **<u>Optional Research Activity</u>** (Slide 26)
   Remind students that throughout the 20th and 21st century, many popular musicians have used the 12-bar blues framework in their songs. They can:
   - **Do a little research on the songs/musicians they like to listen to**:
     - *Do any of them use the 12-bar blues framework (or a variation)?*
     - Make a list of famous/popular tunes that use this form.

4. **<u>Discovering Blue Notes and Blues Scales</u>**

   A. (Slide 27) Share some basic information about ***blue notes*** and facilitate a related listening exercise.
   - **Blue notes are created by raising or flattening of a pitch to cause an unexpected, dissonant sound.**
     - Dissonance creates tension … a dissonant note disrupts the "stability" of the melody for a moment … it is not exactly what you were expecting to hear.
   - **Play excerpts from the embedded recordings** ("Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues.")
     - Ask students to raise their hands when they hear blue notes.

   B. (Slide 28) Share some basic information about ***blues scales*** and facilitate a related learning experience.
   - Consider having students sing a diatonic major scale (use numbers, solfege, or note names, depending on your preference.)
     - If the students are not familiar with the term "diatonic," you can explain that this word means a scale that does not alter the established pattern of the whole and half steps. In other words: it is like playing the white keys on a piano, in order.
   - <u>Note</u>: They will have an opportunity to sing a blues scale on the next slide.

   C. (Slide 29) Share **additional information about the difference between blues scales and diatonic scales** and facilitate a related learning experience.
   - Unlike diatonic scales (like the major scale) that have 7 pitches (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti), **blues scales usually have 6 pitches**. (The pitch that is omitted varies).
     - **The "blue" notes are usually the lowered 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the scale** (sometimes the fifth degree is not lowered).
     - The most common version of the blues scale is: 1 - ♭3 - 4 - (♭5) - 5 - ♭7
       - However, it is important to remember there's a lot of variation in creating and using blues scales.

- **Consider having the students sing this scale** using a model/imitation strategy. You could also play it for them on an instrument (or they can play it on their instruments if this is an instrumental music class.)

4. <u>Recap and Discussion</u>

A. (Slide 30) Return to the original recording from the beginning of this Path (W. C. Handy's instrumental version of "Memphis Blues,") and ask students to listen for the two major elements of blues music they just learned about: **12-bar phrasing** and **blue notes**.

- Hint: They can count out phrases on their fingers.

B. (Slide 31) Lead a conversation with students based on their responses to this question:

- *Based upon your pre-existing knowledge of the blues, are there any common musical elements missing in the recordings we listened to in this Path?*
  - Depending on their experience level, students might mention **instruments** and **improvisation.** They might also mention the **AAB lyrical form**, which will be covered in-depth in Lesson 10 (I Got Something to Say.) Also – **vocal timbre**, **lyrical content**, and **interaction between musicians (call and response.)**
- <u>Optional extension activity</u>: **Compare and contrast the vocal versions of "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues."**
  - Play these excerpts again, this time asking students to consider any stylistic elements heard in "Crazy Blues" that were not heard in "Memphis Blues."
    - In many ways, "Crazy Blues" was a continuation of many structural elements codified by W. C. Handy in "Memphis Blues." However, *were there any stylistic elements heard in "Crazy Blues" that were not heard in "Memphis Blues"?*
    - Students might notice **the addition of wind instruments** and some **interaction between the singer and the instrumentalists.**

(Slide 32) **<u>Lesson 4 / Path 2 Learning Checkpoint</u>**

- *What is 12-bar phrasing?*
  - **The 12-bar blues is a common chord progression structure/framework that has become standardized over time. It has three, 4-bar phrases in 4/4 time - with an emphasis on beats 2 and 4.**

- *What is a blue note?*
  - **A "blue note" is created by raising or flattening the pitch to cause an unexpected, dissonant sound.** Blue notes create tension … they disrupt what one might expect to hear.
- *What is a blues scale?*
  - **Blues scales are structured using blue notes.** They usually consist of six pitches and feature the lowered 3rd, 5th, and 7th scale degrees.

(Slide 33) **<u>Lesson Navigation</u>**

3. Path 3: Interpreting the Blues

To prepare:

- Read through the path.
- Preview **Path 3** of the **Lesson 4 Slideshow** (Slides 34–41).
  - 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.)*

Path 3 Introduction (Slide 34)

Note: You may wish to review this information with your students (especially if students did not complete Paths 1 or 2):

The musical style we now recognize as the "blues" was created by African Americans in the rural southern United States towards the end of the 19th century. While "blues style" developed over time and had a variety of influences, W. C. Handy is known as the "father of the blues." In 1912, he wrote a song called "Memphis Blues," which is recognized as the first published composition labeled as the blues. Two important features in blues music that were standardized through W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues" were: 1) phrasing (specifically 4-bar phrases … the 12-bar blues is the most common example of this) and 2) the use of blue notes and blues scales.

In Path 3, students will have a chance to compare two versions of the "Memphis Blues" and engage with these recordings through performance.

1. **Opening Attentive Listening Activity: "Memphis Blues"**

   A. (Slide 35) Play the embedded **contrasting versions of the "Memphis Blues"** (recorded by **Katharine Handy Lewis** and **Lizzie Miles**) and ask students to discuss how they differ.
      - Some food for thought: The title of Katharine Handy Lewis's album was *W. C. Handy: Sung by His Daughter in a Traditional Style* (released in 1958). *What do you suppose "traditional style" means in this context?* **(There are no right or wrong answers to this question - it is meant to prompt meaningful discussion.)**
      - Some differences students might notice between these versions: **Vocal timbre** (more raw, less refined in Lizzie's version), **melodic interpretation**, **instrumentation** (more instruments in Lizzie's version), **interaction** (call and response between the vocalist and instruments), **improvisation** present in Lizzie's version, **lyrical content**, more **blue notes** in Lizzie's version.
      - Miles's version of this song is more closely aligned with the "blues" sound we are used to hearing. Remember . . . W. C. Handy composed this song in 1912.

Although his composition helped to establish the **form** and melodic/harmonic norms (**blues scales** and **notes**), **there are many other aspects of the "blues" sound that have evolved over time**.

B. (Slide 36) Play both versions again. This time, ask students to make a **list of things they like and things they would change**.
   - *What musical characteristics would your "ideal" version of this song include?*
     - Provide an opportunity for students to discuss their thoughts (either as a full class or in small groups.)
     - As they listen, ask students to make a list of the things they like and things they would change about each performer's version. Then, they can discuss their thoughts (either as a full class or in small groups).
   - Engaged listening: Encourage students to feel the beat in their bodies and pat on beats 2 and 4 as they listen. You may also wish to have them identify (and count) the 12-bar structure/4 bar phrases.
   - **(Visual arts connection)**: Each of these photographs decorates an album cover. Lizzie Miles is pictured on *Torchy Lullabys*, a Cook Records recording, and a photograph of Katharine Handy Lewis by photographer David Gahr is featured on an album produced by Folkways Records (which later became Smithsonian Folkways Recordings when the Smithsonian acquired it).

2. Engaged Listening: "Memphis Blues"

A. (Slide 37) **Play a 12-bar excerpt from each version of the song (several times, encouraging students to get familiar with the melody)**.
   - In Katharine Handy Lewis's version, listen from 1:40–the end.
   - In Lizzie Miles's version, listen from 0:38–1:12. (These excerpts are cued up on the slide.)
   - Ask students: *As you start to feel comfortable with the melody, can you hum along?* (Students will likely notice that each singer puts her own "spin" on the basic melody. Eventually, students might want to put their own "spin" on this melody.)

B. (Slide 38) Once students are comfortable with the melodies, **encourage them to sing along with Lizzie Miles's version of the song**. (Lyrics are embedded in the slideshow.)
   - Encourage them to think of the following in between repeats:
     - *Can you emulate the vocal style of the singer?*
     - *Can you add your own style?*
     - *Who do you think Lizzie Miles is talking to when she says "blow boy blow"?* (the horn player)

3. <u>Optional: Arrange and Perform "Memphis Blues"</u> (Slide 39)

A. Use the ideas shown below to help your students create and perform their own arrangement of this tune. This activity can be facilitated in a variety of ways depending on age, experience level, and ability. Please tailor it to meet your needs!Practice singing the melody.
B. Add time / rhythm.
C. Learn the chord progression.
D. Add your own style.

- <u>Note</u>: Click the down arrow to slide 39.2 to access a chord diagram and lyrics students can refer to as they arrange this section of the song "Memphis Blues."
- <u>Here are some additional ideas:</u>
  - If your students are younger/less-experienced, simply, play each excerpt again . . . This time, instead of asking students to emulate the style of the singer, encourage them to sing it in their "own" way. When (if) they are ready, they can sing it without the recording (perhaps with you accompanying on a chordal instrument).
  - Review the melody with students one phrase at a time (you sing first/they echo). When they are ready, sing the melody as a class (consider accompanying on piano or guitar). Once the students are very familiar with the melody, prompt them to change one thing (rhythm, tempo, melody, timbre, lyrics, etc…).
  - Consider providing students with a blues backing track to practice with (many are available on YouTube).
  - If the students play a chordal instrument (guitar/ukulele), teach them the basic chord structure for the 12-bar blues (available by clicking the down arrow to slide 39.2). Then, they can accompany themselves as they arrange. They can also form small groups and add a basic swing beat on drums or other percussion on beats 2 and 4.
  - If your students are more advanced, ask them to arrange this verse in a way that incorporates aspects they liked from each version (for example, combining Miles's bluesy vocal timbre with Handy Lewis's simple rhythmic interpretation . . . Or, Handy Lewis's vocal timbre combined with some improvisation and/or bent pitches . . . Or, Miles's version of the lyrics with Handy Lewis's style).

(Slide 40) **<u>Lesson 4 / Path 3 Learning Checkpoint</u>**

- *What were some differences between two interpretations of "Memphis Blues" (Katherine Handy Lewis vs. Lizzie Miles?)*
  - Some differences between these two versions of the same song were: **Vocal timbre, melodic interpretation, instrumentation, interaction (call**

and response between the vocalist and instruments), improvisation, lyrical content, frequency of blue notes.

- *What important elements of "Memphis Blues" (heard in both versions) have remained somewhat standardized over time?*
    - Most notably, Handy's 1912 "Memphis Blues" helped to establish norms related to **structure and form (4-bar phrases, common chord progressions)** and **melody/harmony (blues scales and notes).** However, there are many other aspects of the "blues" sound that have evolved over time - which will be covered in future lessons.

(Slide 41) **Lesson Navigation**

(Slide 42) **Lesson Hub Media Credits**

Information about racialized and out-of-date lyrics

To understand why an African American composer would allow this language for his composition, we can consider the context of the times (early 1900s):

Blues and jazz music were popular for dancing among both Black and white communities. Ensembles and bands would commonly perform for white parties and gatherings. While Handy was the composer of the instrumental music, George A. Norton wrote the lyrics—and they were written to be used in a minstrel show.

During this time, minstrelsy (a form of musical theatre) was popular. The songs performed during minstrel shows—often performed by white performers who put on blackface (charcoal) and parodied the Black experience and musical styles through exaggeration—were sometimes called "darkie songs." Also, during this time period, Black people were sometimes called "darkies" (which we now understand to be an offensive and derogatory term).

In addition to dance tunes performed during minstrel shows, songs that expressed sorrow—such as spirituals—were also considered "darkie songs," as they originated in Black communities. At the time, spirituals were well known throughout the United States due to the publication of arranged spirituals and worldwide touring of HBCU (historically black universities and colleges) choirs.

Connection: You can learn much more about the complex history of minstrel shows in Lesson 2 of the Sounds of the Civil Rights Movement Pathway. To learn more about spirituals, return to Lesson 3 of this pathway.

Back to Path 1
Back to Path 2
Back to Path 3

Integrated Standards Connections

2014 National Core Music Standards:

MU:Cr2.1.7a Select, organize, develop and document personal musical ideas for arrangements, songs, and compositions within AB, ABA, or theme and variation forms that demonstrate unity and variety and convey expressive intent.

- Can I create an arrangement of "Memphis Blues" and discuss my personal reasons for how I chose to interpret the song?

MU:Pr4.2.7a Explain and demonstrate the structure of contrasting pieces of music selected for performance and how elements of music are used.

- Can I demonstrate my understanding of 12-bar blues structure/phrasing, blue notes, and blues scales by performing a chorus from the "Memphis Blues?"
- Can I demonstrate the difference between a blues scale and a diatonic major scale?

MU:Pr4.2.7c Identify how cultural and historical context inform performances and result in different music interpretations.

- Can I explain how the original racialized lyrics in "Memphis Blues" came to be and why they are not appropriate for performance?

MU:Pr4.3.7a Perform contrasting pieces of music demonstrating their interpretations of the elements of music and expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, articulation/style, and phrasing) convey intent.

- Can I explain and demonstrate differences in interpretation between Katharine Handy Lewis and Lizzie Miles ("Memphis Blues")?
- Can I interpret "Memphis Blues" in my own way and provide rationale for my musical choices?

MU:Pr6.1.7a Perform music with technical accuracy and stylistic expression to convey the creator's intent.

- Can I emulate the vocal style of the singers as I perform the "Memphis Blues," singing with expression, accuracy, and appropriate interpretation?
- Can I honor these singers' musical and stylistic choices in my own interpretation of the song?

MU:Re7.2.7a Classify and explain how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.

- Can I identify the elements of blues music that became standardized over time due to compositions like "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues?"

- Can I identify differences in how the elements of music and expressive qualities were applied in "Memphis Blues and Crazy Blues?"
- Can I explain the difference between a blues scale and a diatonic major scale?

MU:Re7.2.7b Identify and compare the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

- Can I identify the historical context and cultural significance of "Memphis Blues" and "Crazy Blues?"
- Can I explain why the "Memphis Blues" originally had racialized lyrics?

MU:Cn10.1.7a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- Can I describe some things I liked about Katharine Handy Lewis and Lizzie Miles' versions of "Memphis Blues" and some things I would change?
- Can I interpret why Handy Lewis and Miles chose to perform "Memphis Blues" in different ways?
- Can I create my own arrangement of a chorus from "Memphis Blues" that is informed by my knowledge of blues form/style and my own personal preferences?

MU:Cn11.1.7a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

- Can I explain how and why blues music became associated with a semi-standardized form in the early 1900s?
- Can I explain why W.C. Handy is sometimes called the "Father of the Blues?"
- Can I explain why blues music started to be viewed as marketable in the 1920s?
- Can I explain why Beale Street in Memphis, TN is an important place in the history of blues music?
- Can I explain why some of the original lyrics to "Memphis Blues" are now widely viewed as problematic?

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Standards:

D2.Eco.3.6-8. Explain the roles of buyers and sellers in product, labor, and financial markets.

- Can I explain why more African Americans could afford to listen to recorded music in the early 1900s?
- Can I explain why blues music started to be viewed as marketable during the 1920s?

D2.Eco.6.6-8. Explain how changes in supply and demand cause changes in prices and quantities of goods and services, labor, credit, and foreign currencies.

- Can I explain how the commercial success of "Crazy Blues" caused changes in the music recording industry, affecting blues musicians and the availability of blues recordings?
- Can I explain why more people wanted to buy blues music beginning in the 1920s?

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

- Can I explain why W.C. Handy's musical works are seen as historically significant?
- Can I explain why Beale Street in Memphis, TN is viewed as an important place in the history of blues music?
- Can I explain why Mamie Smith is considered a significant figure in the history of blues music?

D2.His.5.6-8. Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

- Can I explain why the original lyrics to "Memphis Blues," had racialized lyrics and interpret why Lizzie Miles chose to change them for her version of the song (and why we would no longer sing the original lyrics "as is" today?)

D2.His.14.6-8. Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.

- Can I explain how and why the "Memphis Blues" is considered crucial in the development of the blues as a genre and the development of other types of American music that followed?
- Can I explain the historical significance of "Crazy Blues?"

Common Core State Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- Can I engage in meaningful collaborative discussions about topics like the history, marketability, commercialization, and standardization of blues music.

Additional Reading and Resources

Alabama Music Hall of Fame. n.d. "W.C. Handy, Nov. 16, 1873-March 28, 1958: 1987 Inductee." Tuscumbia, AL: Alabama Music Hall of Fame, Accessed March 08, 2025. https://www.alamhof.org/wchandy.

Jansen, David A. 1957. *The Perry Bradford Story: Pioneer of the Blues*, liner notes. New York City, NY: Folkways Records, FW02863. https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW02863.pdf.

Lyden, Jacki, host. November 11, 2006. "Mamie Smith and the Birth of the Blues Market." *All Things Considered*, Ben Manilla and Media Mechanics, producer: 5:21, podcast. Washington, DC: National Public Radio. https://www.npr.org/2006/11/11/6473116/mamie-smith-and-the-birth-of-the-blues-market.

Smith, Charles Edward. 1964 [1958]. *W.C. Handy Blues: As Sung by His Daughter Katharine Handy Lewis in Traditional Style*, liner notes. New York City, NY: Folkways Records, FW03540. https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW03540.pdf.

Worksheets

Memphis Blues Lyrics (Katharine Handy Lewis Version):

Folks I've just been down, down to Memphis town,
That's where the people smile, smile on you all the while.
Hospitality, they were good to me.
I couldn't spend a dime and had the grandest time.
I went out a dancing with a Tennessee dear,
They had a fellow there named Handy with a band you should hear.
And while the *[white] folks swayed; all the band folks played real harmony.
I never will forget the tune that Handy called the Memphis Blues.
Oh yes, them Blues.

They've got a fiddler there that always slickens his hair,
And folks he sure do pull some bow.
And when the big Bassoon seconds to the Trombones croon.
It moans just like a sinner on Revival Day, on Revival Day.

That melancholy strain, that ever-haunting refrain
Is like a *[darkie] sorrow song.
Here comes the very part that wraps a spell around my heart.
It sets me wild to hear that loving tune a gain, the Memphis Blues.

Moving with the 12-bar Blues: Analyzing Chords with Movement

For younger/less experienced students, try this exercise to familiarize them with chord changes in the blues:

- Introduce I and V chords by playing them on the piano, guitar, or using a recording. You may want to introduce them by using terms like “home” and “away” to describe the feeling one gets as the chords move from I to V and back to I.
- Using measures of four beats, alternate between I and V on a piano or guitar. You may want to emphasize the roots of each chord if students are struggling to hear the changes.
- If seating is available, ask students to sit when they hear the I chord or “home” and to stand when they hear the V chord or “away.” This could be made a bit more complex by asking students to turn around before sitting back down when they hear the V moving to I. If students are feeling confident enough, try also asking them to clap or pat on beats 2 and 4.
- After students begin to feel more comfortable with this exercise, play the sound clip for “Crazy Blues.” Ask students to try to apply what they’ve just learned to this song using the appropriate movements.

For more advanced students or if students are very comfortable with the previous exercise, you can begin to incorporate the IV chord into the exercise and further emphasize the turnaround from V to I.

- Remind students that the standard 12-bar blues progression uses chords that are identified numerically as I, IV, and V.
- Begin by playing through the 12-bar blues on piano or guitar and ask students to try to recognize where the IV chord shows up. Be sure to have students tap or clap on beats 2 and 4 as you do this. When they hear what they think is the IV chord, ask them to raise their hands.

- To continue using the “home” and “away” metaphor, you may want to use “on the way” to describe how the IV chord fits into this progression.
- Finally, ask students to sit when they hear the I chord, stand when they hear the IV chord, and turn around before sitting back down when they hear the movement from V to I.
- After doing this with you playing the guitar or piano, try asking them to practice their movement-based analysis as they listen to “Memphis Blues.”
- You might even consider returning to Lesson 1 and ask students to perform this exercise using Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues” (which repeats the 12-bar blues form throughout the entire recording.)

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