

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

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

Teacher's Guide

*Lesson 4:
Standardizing the Blues*



Lesson Overview

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 "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 music 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, 6th, and 7th degrees).

In this lesson, 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.

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Lesson Components 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.

*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: The World Meets the Blues



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 1** of the **Lesson 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).

Component 1 Introduction (Slide 4)

1. **Standardizing the Blues: “The Memphis Blues”** (Slides 5–8):
 - A. Watch the embedded video (approx. 2 minutes), which reviews some historical information about the “blues” (a genre created by African Americans in the rural southern United States toward the end of the 19th century) (Slide 5).
 - B. Listen to an excerpt from an instrumental version of “Memphis Blues”, by composer W.C. Handy, which is known as the first written “blues” publication (Slide 6).
 - C. Next, listen to an excerpt of a vocal version of the “Memphis Blues”, recorded by Handy’s daughter, Katherine Handy Lewis (Slide 7).
 - Ask students to make some observations about the musical sounds they hear (potential discussion points are provided in the slideshow).
 - Note: If you’d like to like to the whole track, the lyrics are provided in the slideshow (Slide 7.2). You can also find them at the end of this guide.
 - Note: Ideas for how to discuss the racialized lyrics with students can also be found in the slideshow (Slide 7.2).
 - D. 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” (Slide 8).
 - While “blues style” developed over time and had a variety of influences, **the standardized blues elements we recognize today (form, harmony, scales) were not solidified until composer, W.C. Handy, wrote and published the instrumental version of this song in 1912.**

2. **Marketing the Blues: “Crazy Blues”** (Slides 9–12):
- A. Share embedded contextual information about the first public recording of a blues song: “Crazy Blues”, performed by Mamie Smith and written by Perry Bradford (Slide 9).
 - It was not until this recording was released that the blues, as a genre, began to be seen as “marketable”.
 - B. Discuss: *What are some factors that make music “marketable”?* (Slide 10)
 - Lead a short discussion before moving on (**ideas for discussion are embedded in the slideshow**).
 - D. Listen to an excerpt from “Crazy Blues”, recorded by Mamie Smith (Slide 11). Ask students to consider:
 - *Why do you think “Crazy Blues” was the first blues recording that was considered marketable?*
 - *Considering the time period, why do you think some assumed that “the blues” was not worth recording and selling?*
 - Lead a short discussion before moving on (**ideas for discussion are embedded in the slideshow**).
 - Note: You might want to listen to “Memphis Blues” again for comparison.
 - E. Share additional embedded contextual information about the commercial success of “Crazy Blues” (Slide 12). Most importantly:
 - “Crazy Blues” was a huge hit, reportedly selling over 75,000 in its first few months of release.
 - This recording launched the commercial popularity of the blues genre.
 - The success of this recording showed record labels that African Americans were consumers with buying power.
3. **Discussion / Reflection / Connections** (Slides 13–14):
- Consider these discussion questions (Slide 13):
 - *How do you think compositions like “Memphis Blues” and “Crazy Blues” affected what consumers thought of as the “blues?”*
 - *Why would having a standardized form for the blues be important commercially?*
 - **Hints to guide these discussions are available in the slideshow.**
 - Consider these additional discussion questions (Slide 14):
 - *What do people expect to hear when they see the word “blues” is in the title?*
 - *How do “Memphis Blues” and “Crazy Blues” compare to other blues songs and musicians you know?*
 - **Hints to guide these discussions are available in the slideshow.**

Lesson 4 / Component 1 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 15):

- *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.

Lesson Navigation (Slide 16)

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



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 2** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (slides 17–34).
 - 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).

Component 2 Introduction (Slide 17)

1. Discovering 12-Bar Phrasing (Slides 18–25):

A. After leading a short opening discussion about connections between blues music and other musical styles (**ideas for this are embedded in the slideshow**), play an excerpt from the embedded recording of “Memphis Blues” (Slides 18–19).

- As students listen, ask them to consider (Slide 20):
 - *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.)*
 - **Note: More details and discussion points about these questions are provided in the slideshow.**

B. Share embedded information (and the chart) that unpacks 12-bar blues phrasing (Slide 21).

- **A common 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 it is the most popular. There are many adaptations of this chord progression ... from simple to complex.
- At this point, you can explain to students that there are **12 measures of music in this chord progression (three distinct phrases)**. Each box on this chart represents a measure (4 beats).

| | | | |
|----|---------|---|--------|
| I | I or IV | I | I7 |
| IV | IV | I | I7 |
| V | V or IV | I | I or V |

C. Lead students through a series of active listening exercises related to 12-bar blues phrasing (Slide 22).

- Play the changes for students on a piano or guitar as the students complete each task listed below.
 - Note: If you are not comfortable playing the chord progressions yourself, you can return to Lesson 1 of this Pathway and used the recording of Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues”.
 - Note: We encourage you to tailor these ideas to meet the needs of your students. (**More ideas for engagement can be found in the slideshow.**)
 - Each time you hear a new chord (the change), clap your hand.
 - Try to sing the chord changes (sing the root note at the beginning of each measure (“one”, “four”, “five”). Students can hold up fingers to indicate each chord.
 - Play along with the chord changes (root note) on an instrument (e.g., keyboard, Orff instruments, resonator bells, ukulele, band instruments, etc.).

D. Return to the recording of “Memphis Blues” (Slide 23).

- Play the final section of the song (begins at 1:40).
 - *Does it sound like 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.**
- Play this excerpt again and ask students to follow along with the lyrics (Slide 24).
 - Optional: Have students count the phrases on their fingers as they listen. **Phrase 1:** *That melancholy strain, that ever-haunting refrain is like a *[darkie] sorrow song. (4 bars)*

Phrase 2: *Here comes the very part that wraps a spell around my heart.
(4 bars)*

Phrase 3: *It sets me wild to hear that loving tune again, the Memphis Blues. (4 bars)*

- **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 Component 3).
 - To better understand why an African American composer would allow this language to be used in his composition, we can consider context of the times (early 1900s):
 - During this time, blues and jazz music became 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 music; George A. Norton was the writer of the lyrics, and he wrote the lyrics to be used in a minstrel show. During this time Minstrelsy was popular- and the songs performed (many mocked Black tradition) were often called “darkie” songs. Black people were also sometimes referred to with the derogatory term of "darkie".
 - In addition to dance tunes, sorrow songs were also considered “darkie” songs, as they were a form of spirituals. 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.
 - Note: You can learn more about the history of minstrelsy and minstrel songs in the Sounds of Civil Rights Pathway (Lesson 2). To learn more about spirituals, return to Lesson 3 of this pathway.

E. Next, play an excerpt (0:42–1:16) from the first commercialized blues recording, “Crazy Blues”, performed by Mamie Smith (Slide 23).

- Play the final section of the song (begins at 1:40).
 - *Does it sound like the 12-bar blues?*
 - **Again, it does not match the chart chord progression exactly, but the 12-bar blues “sound” is evident.**

2. Moving to the 12-Bar Blues (Slide 26):

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. Consider these ideas:

- As a class, choose two (or three) movements.
- 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).
- Listen to the suggested excerpts from the recordings and perform the movements accordingly.
- Important note: **Detailed instructions for facilitating this activity can be found at the end of this guide.**

3. Optional Research Activity (Slide 27):

Remind students that even today, many popular musicians still use the 12-bar blues framework as they write songs. Ask them to:

- 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)? Or ...*
- Make a list of famous/popular tunes that use this form.

4. Discovering Blue Notes and Blues Scales (Slides 28–30):

A. Share some basic information about **blue notes** and facilitate a related listening exercise (Slide 28).

- **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. Share some basic information about **blues scales** and facilitate a related learning experience (Slide 29).

- **There are scales, called blues scales that are structured using blue notes.**
 - Remind students that a scale is a sequence of notes.

- To illustrate, consider having students sing a diatonic major scale (use numbers, solfege, or note names, depending on your preference).
- C. Share additional information about blues scales and facilitate a related learning experience (Slide 30).
- Unlike diatonic scales (like the major scale) that have 7 pitches (1-2-3-4-5-6-7), **blues scales usually have 6 pitches.**
 - **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 - b3 - 4 - (b5) - 5 - b7
 - 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).

5. Recap and Discussion (Slides 31–32):

- A. Return to the original recording from this Component (W.C. Handy’s instrumental version of “Memphis Blues,” and ask students to listen for **12-bar phrasing** and **blue notes** / blues scales (Slide 31).
- Hint: They can count out phrases on their fingers.
- B. 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 Component?* (Slide 32)
 - Depending on their experience level, students might mention **instruments** and **improvisation**. They might also mention the **AAB lyrical form** (this 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)**).
- C. Optional extension activity: Compare and contrast the vocal versions of “Memphis Blues” and “Crazy Blues”.
- Play these excerpts again, this time asking them 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.**

Lesson 4 / Component 2 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 33):

- *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.

Lesson Navigation (Slide 34)

3. Component 3: Interpreting the Blues



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 3** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (Slides 35–46).
 - 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 3 Introduction (Slide 35)

- 1. Opening Attentive Listening Activity: “Memphis Blues”** (Slides 36–37):
 - A. Play the embedded contrasting versions of the “Memphis Blues” (recorded by Katherine Handy Lewis and Lizzie Miles) and ask students to discuss how they differ (Slide 36).
 - **Discussion points regarding similarities and differences are embedded in the slideshow.**
 - B. Play both versions again. This time, ask students to make a list of things they like and things they would change (Slide 37).
 - *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).
- 2. Engaged Listening: “Memphis Blues”** (Slides 38–39):
 - A. Play a 12-bar excerpt from each version of the song (several times) (Slide 38).
 - *As you start to feel comfortable with the melody, can you hum along?*
 - B. Once students are comfortable with the melodies, encourage them to sing along (Slide 39). (The lyrics shown below are embedded in the slideshow.)
 - *Which version do you find easier to sing along with? Why?*
 - *Can you emulate the vocal style of the singer?*
 - *Can you add your own style?*
 - Prompt students to consider why the term “darkie sorrow song” is not appropriate for performance (Handy Lewis’s version) and why Lizzie Miles chose to change that (and why they should too as they sing along).
 - Note: If students did not complete Components 1 and 2, return to Slide 23 to share some additional context about this topic.

Katherine Handy Lewis

That melancholy strain, that
ever-haunting refrain is (just)
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 again, the Memphis Blues.

Lizzie Miles

That melancholy strain, that
haunting refrain, is just like a
sorrow song.

And, here comes the part that
wraps itself around your heart,
blow boy blow.

Say he drives me wild, when I hear
that loving strain, those old
Memphis Blues.

3. Optional: Arrange and Perform “Memphis Blues” (Slide 40):

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!

See the slideshow for detailed suggestions regarding each step of this process.

- Practice singing the melody.
- Add time / rhythm.
- Learn the chord progression.
- Add your own style.
- Consider using this version of the lyrics for this activity (also in slideshow):

That melancholy strain,
that ever-haunting refrain,
is just like a sorrow song.

Here comes the very part
that wraps a spell around
my heart.

It sets me wild to hear that
loving tune again, the
Memphis Blues.

Lesson 4 / Component 3 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 41):

- *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.

Lesson Navigation (Slide 42)

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Cr2.1.a Select, organize, construct, 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.a Explain how understanding the structure and the elements of music are used in music selected for performance.

- 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.c Identify how cultural and historical context inform performances.

- 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.a Perform a selected piece of music demonstrating how their interpretations of the elements of music and the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, articulation/style, and phrasing) convey intent?

- Can I explain and demonstrate the differences in interpretation between Katherine 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.a 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 stylistic characteristics in my own interpretation of the song?

MU:Re7.2.a Describe 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 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.b Identify 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 racial lyrics?

MU:Cn10.o.a 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 Katherine 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 interpret “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.o.a 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 considered the “Father of the Blues?”
 - Can I explain why blues music started to be viewed as marketable in the 1920s?
 - Can I explain why the original racial lyrics to “Memphis Blues” are inappropriate?
-

Additional Reading and Resources

Jansen, D. A. (1957). *The Perry Bradford story: Pioneer of the blues*. [Liner Notes].

Folkways Records. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW02863.pdf>.

National Public Radio. (2006, November 11). Mamie Smith

and the birth of the blues market: Sounds of American culture [Audio podcast].

In *All things considered*. <https://www.npr.org/2006/11/11/6473116/mamie-smith-and-the-birth-of-the-blues-market>.

Smith, C. E. (1958). *W.C. Handy Blues: As sung by his daughter Katherine Handy*

Lewis in traditional style. [Liner Notes]. Folkways Records. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW03540.pdf>.

Worksheets

Memphis Blues Lyrics (Katherine 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 → V → 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 → 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”.