

# *Listen What I Gotta Say:* *Women in the Blues*

*A Smithsonian Folkways Learning Pathway for  
students in 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> Grade*



## *Teacher's Guide*

### *Lesson 5:* *Blues in the Country*

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#### **Lesson Overview**

The music that developed in rural areas in the Deep South during the late 1800s is often referred to as “**country blues**.” Country blues, one of the earliest forms of blues music, is characterized by solo vocals with acoustic, fingerstyle guitar accompaniment.

After the Civil War, many Black Americans began to move into the **Mississippi Delta region**, where there were more job opportunities, higher wages, and chances to buy land. However, the freedoms that initially drew many to the Delta region eroded as **Reconstruction** (1865–1877) ended. **Jim Crow laws** were instituted, and racial violence became more common in a sharecropping system designed to replace the system of slavery.

It was in this environment that the genre now known as the “blues” was born and evolved. Black cotton farmers, sharecroppers, and lower-class laborers fused their regional styles and instruments (like the **acoustic guitar**, **didley bow**, **harmonica**, and the “**tub**” [i.e., washtub bass]).

In this lesson, students will engage with a variety of recordings from the Smithsonian Folkways collection as they learn all about the musical characteristics, instruments, and distinct playing styles that shaped the early “country” forms of the American blues (specifically, the **Delta and Piedmont styles**).

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## **Lesson Components and Student Objectives\***



### **1. The Deep South: Mississippi Delta Blues** (30+ minutes)

- Students will describe the environment within which the “country blues” developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
- Students will identify musical and stylistic characteristics of the distinct form of country blues known as the “Delta Blues”.
- Students will identify several important country blues musicians.



### **2. The Tub, the Harmonica, and the Didley Bow**

(25+ minutes)







- Students will identify and describe the sounds and functions of instruments that were important in the development of early country blues styles.
- Students will explain why these instruments were used by blues musicians in rural areas in the early 1900s.



### **3. Pickin’ and Slidin’** (25+ minutes)

- Students will explain defining characteristics of the “Piedmont Blues” style and identify where it originated.
- Students will aurally identify and describe two distinct guitar playing styles associated with the Delta and Piedmont Blues (two types of country blues traditions).

\*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 Deep South: Mississippi Delta Blues

#### **To prepare:**

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 1** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (slides 4–17).
  - 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 Delta Blues characteristics checklist for each student (find below).

#### **Component 1 Introduction** (Slide 4)

##### **1. Opening Attentive Listening Activity** (Slide 5):

Play the embedded example (“Low Down Rounder’s Blues”, by Peg Leg Howell) and ask students to listen for two common characteristics of the “country blues” (one of the earliest forms of blues music that developed in rural areas of the Deep South during the late 1800s):

- **Solo vocals with acoustic fingerstyle guitar accompaniment.**

##### **2. The Mississippi Delta Blues** (Slides 6–13):

A. Share embedded contextual information about the environment with in which the “blues” developed. Most importantly:

- After the Civil War, many Black Americans began to move into the **Mississippi Delta region** (a distinct cultural region in northwest Mississippi – map embedded in slideshow), where there were more job opportunities, higher wages, and opportunities to buy land (Slide 6)
- However, **the freedoms that initially drew many to the Delta region eroded as Reconstruction (1865–1877) ended. Jim Crow laws were instituted**, and racial violence became more common in a sharecropping system designed to replace the system of slavery (Slide 7).
- **Black farmers, sharecroppers, and lower-class laborers in the Mississippi Delta region played and popularized the blues, performing at country barbeques, juke joints, and family gatherings** (Slide 8).
- Many well-known bluesmen and blueswomen were born in or near the delta region. Explore map embedded in slideshow (Slide 9).

- B. **Play the short, embedded video** from *Smithsonian Channel* (approx. 02:30), which provides more information about the birthplace and evolution of the Mississippi Delta Blues (Slide 10).
- After watching the video, **lead a short discussion**, encouraging students to share anything interesting or new they learned (Slide 11).
- C. **Play an excerpt from the embedded example of the Delta Blues** (“Married Woman Blues” by Big Joe Williams) (Slide 12).
- *How does Big Joe Williams use musical elements and expressive qualities?*
    - After leading a short discussion based on student responses, **click to the next slide, which provides a checklist of some common characteristics of the Delta Blues.**
- D. **Listen to the track again** (Slide 13).
- This time, students can “check off” the characteristics they hear.
    - You can either do this as a full group, or you can print off this checklist (find below) and have the students complete it individually.
    - Find additional ideas for facilitating this activity in the slideshow.
    - Consider leading a short discussion based on student responses.
      - Hints: Some common characteristics include **solo voice accompanied by acoustic instruments like guitar, percussive, up-tempo and danceable, sliding and bending of pitches, emotional delivery of lyrics, and 12 bar/AAB structure.**
- E. **Play excerpts from the country blues example (“Low Down Rounder’s Blues”) and the Delta blues example (“Married Woman Blues”)** (Slide 14).
- Note: Remind students that the “Delta” blues is a distinct type of country blues.
  - If time allows, discuss the musical/stylistic similarities and differences between these recordings.
    - Hints: **“Married Women Blues” is distinctly more percussive in style and has a much faster tempo (making it "danceable"). Big Joe Williams incorporates more bending and sliding of pitches into his guitar playing. Both tracks feature a male soloist vocalist, accompanied by a solo acoustic guitar.**

### 3. Women in the Country Blues (Slide 15)

A. **Share embedded contextual information** about two important women who performed the country blues: **Elizabeth Cotton** (Piedmont blues) and **Memphis Minnie** (Memphis blues) (Slide 15.1).

- Although we will hear more from these women throughout the Pathway, take a few moments to listen to samples of their music now (audio tracks embedded).

B. Optional: **Explore a chart that shows relationships between different types of the blues** (Slide 15.2).

- If time allows, navigate to examples of different types of blues music through the buttons provided in the slideshow.

### Lesson 5 / Component 1 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 16):

- *In what type of environment did the country blues develop?*
  - After the Civil War, many Black Americans began to move into the **Mississippi Delta region**, where there were more job opportunities, higher wages, and opportunities to buy land. However, **the freedoms that initially drew many to the Delta region eroded as Reconstruction (1865–1877) ended. Jim Crow laws were instituted**, and racial violence became more common in a sharecropping system designed to replace the system of slavery. It was in this environment that the "blues" developed and evolved.
- *What are some musical and stylistic characteristics of the distinct form of country blues known as the Delta Blues?*
  - Some characteristics include **solo voice** accompanied by **acoustic instruments like guitar, percussive, up-tempo and danceable, sliding and bending of pitches, emotional delivery of lyrics, and 12 bar/AAB structure.**
- *Who were some important country blues musicians?*
  - Musicians introduced in this component were **Peg Leg Howell, Big Joe Williams, Elizabeth Cotten, and Memphis Minnie.**

### Lesson Navigation (Slide 17)

## 2. Component 2: The Tub, Harmonica, and Diddley Bow



### **To prepare:**

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 2** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (slides 18–33).
  - 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.)*

### **Component 2 Introduction** (Slide 18)

#### 1. **Opening Attentive Listening Activity** (Slide 19):

After sharing that musicians in rural America have often made use of household tools to create instruments, play an excerpt from the embedded recording of the “Salty Dog Blues,” by Red Willie Smith.

- Prompt students to listen for the instruments they hear.
  - **IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT THIS TRACK: WE CHOSE THIS TRACK BECAUSE IT PROVIDES AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF THE "TUB" WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE COUNTRY BLUES DURING THIS TIME PERIOD - HOWEVER, THE FIRST VERSE HAS REFERENCES TO ALCOHOL USE/ABUSE. WE ARE THEREFORE EMBEDDING THE YOUTUBE VERSION AND HIGHLY RECOMMEND YOU BEGIN THIS LISTENING EXPERIENCE AT 0:20.**
  - After leading a short discussion based on student responses, **click to the next slide to start learning about the instrumentation.**

#### 2. **The “Tub”** (Slides 20–24):

A. Share the embedded contextual information about an instrument used in country blues called “**tub**” (i.e., washtub bass).

- At one time, the washtub was a common musical instrument in the southern United States. It was often played in combination with a guitar and a washboard, sometimes with drumsticks and/or harmonica (Slide 20).
- The tub is essentially an “Americanized” model of an old African instrument called the earth bow (Slide 21).
- Share the embedded information about how to construct a “tub” (Slide 22).
- Share the embedded contextual information about the similarities between the double bass and the tub (Slide 23).

B. Listen again to an excerpt from the “Salty Dog Blues” (Slide 24).

- This time, ask students to listen specifically for the sound of the tub.
  - Encourage students to tap along with the tub on the steady beat.

### 3. The Harmonica (Slides 25–28):

A. Play an excerpt from the embedded recording of “I’m So Glad that Trouble Don’t Last Always,” by Elder Roma Wilson (Slide 25).

- As students listen, ask them to listen for the instruments they hear.
  - After leading a short discussion based on student responses, click to the next slide for more information about the instrumentation and performer.
    - **There is only one musician** (Elder Roma Wilson) . . . **Singing and playing the harmonica** (Slide 26).

B. Share embedded contextual information about the harmonica and its importance in the blues:

- The harmonica is a **free reed wind instrument** used in music traditions across the world, in many different genres. This instrument is significant in the history of the blues because of its **cost, size for easy mobility, versatility**—ability to play both melodic and harmonic accompaniment, and its ability to bend tones (when modified)—and thereby its **ability to mimic the voice or “talk” as the vocalist** (Slide 27).

C. Play an excerpt from Big Mama Thornton’s recording of “I Need Your Love” (Slide 28.1).

- Ask students to identify any country/Delta blues elements that they hear.
  - Hints: **The use of the harmonica** is a characteristic of country blues. This tune is influenced by the Delta blues sub-genre. It is **percussive and danceable**. Additionally, Big Mama uses **ululations** (howling/wailing vocalizations) and sings with a great deal of **expression**. She also utilizes the **12-bar/AAB structural framework** and **call/response** (interactions between instruments).
    - Note: Click to Slide 28.2 to view a chart that shows common musical and stylistic characteristics of the Delta blues.

### 4. The Diddley Bow (Slides 29–30):

A. Share the embedded contextual information about the **diddley bow** (Slide 29).

- The diddley bow is a **single-stringed instrument** that influenced the development of blues music in the United States.
  - This instrument could be found on the porch of many rural houses in the South, as it was easy to construct, consisting of a **tight rope fixed to a wooden board** or even to the wall of the house. It was **played by**

**pinching or rubbing the string** with a bottleneck, knife, or iron thimble. The variations were many.

- B. Play the embedded video example of Lonnie Pitchford (a country blues musician) playing the diddley bow (Slide 30).

**5. Optional Closing Discussion** (Slide 31):

Ask students to think about the instruments they just learned about (tub, harmonica, and diddley bow) and reflect on this question:

- *Why do you think they were popular among country blues musicians and in some cases continued to be used in urban areas as well?*
  - Note: This question is intended to spark meaningful dialogue (there are no right or wrong answers).

**Lesson 5 / Component 2 Learning Checkpoint** (Slide 32):

- *What are three important instruments that have been associated with early country blues styles?*
  - **The tub/washtub, harmonica, and diddley bow**
- *Why were these instruments used?*
  - **In rural America, musicians often made use of everyday, household tools to make instruments.** The "Americanized" **tub**, which evolved from an African instrument called the earth bow, **was made from a washtub and long broomstick.** Its function was similar to a double bass in a jazz band/orchestra. Country blues musicians began to use the **harmonica because of its cost, portability, and versatility** (ability to play both melodic and harmonic accompaniment and ability to bend tones in order to mimic the voice). The **diddley bow was easy to construct from household materials (rope attached to a board**, manipulated to play melodies with a bottleneck, knife, or thimble).

**Lesson Navigation** (Slide 33)



### **3. Component Three: Pickin' and Slidin'**



#### ***To prepare:***

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 3** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (Slides 34–46).
  - 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.*)
- Optional: Print the “Compare and Contrast worksheet” for each student (find below).

#### **Component 3 Introduction** (Slide 34)

#### **1. The Guitar in the Country Blues: “Slidin’”** (Slides 35–38):

- A. Share the embedded contextual information about the use of the guitar in the country blues (Slide 35).
- B. Play an excerpt from Delta blues musician Son House’s “Sun Goin’ Down” (Slide 36). As students listen, ask them to think about this question:
  - *How would you describe the style that Son House uses to play the guitar?*
    - After leading a short discussion based on student responses, share embedded information about Son House’s unique playing style.
      - **With his right hand, he strummed the strings energetically. With his left hand, he used a “slide” (iron thimble, bottleneck, or pocketknife) to change/bend the pitch of the notes.**
    - Then, play a short excerpt from the recording again and ask students to listen for this sliding technique (Slide 37).

#### **2. Optional Listening Activity Part 1** (Slide 38).

Ask students to conduct an in-depth analysis of “Sun Goin’ Down” (an example of the Delta blues) by listening to the full track and filling out the first column of the compare/contrast worksheet (find below).

- Notes: This activity could be completed in class or assigned as homework. Ultimately, the students will be comparing and contrasting how musicians use musical elements and expressive qualities when they play in the style of the Delta and Piedmont blues (two country blues forms).

#### **3. The Guitar in the Country Blues: “Pickin’”** (Slides 39–42):

- A. Show the embedded short video, which will introduce students to another style of country blues (the Piedmont Blues) (Slide 39).

- B. Share additional embedded contextual information about the Piedmont Blues tradition (Slide 40).
- This style of blues **originated in the Appalachian Mountains.**
  - It is **associated with a thumb and finger-picking approach.**
  - **A bass line is established with the thumb and the melody is picked out on the higher strings.**
- C. Play excerpts from embedded recordings made by two important blueswomen who used the Piedmont Style: **Elizabeth Cotton/”Freight Train” and Etta Baker/“One Dime Blues”** (Slide 41). As students listen, they can think about these questions:
- *How would you describe the style these women use to play the guitar?*
  - *Does this style sound familiar?*
    - Note: Many famous folk and blues musicians have used the Piedmont style and have cited Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker as influences, for example: Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Paul Simon. It is likely that some students will be familiar with these artists and their music.
  - Click to Slides 41.2 and 41.3 to share embedded contextual information about the artists, Elizabeth Cotton and Etta Baker.
  - Play another short excerpt from Etta Baker’s “One Dime Blues”.
    - This time, ask students to listen specifically for the unique Piedmont style finger-picking technique.
- 4. Optional Listening Activity Part 2** (Slide 43):
- A. Ask students to conduct an in-depth analysis of “Freight Train” (an example of the Piedmont blues) by listening to the full track and filling out the first column of the compare/contrast worksheet (find below).
- B. Next, students can fill out the third column of the worksheet (which asks them to identify similarities and differences between these tracks/styles).
- Note: A rubric for this activity can also be found below.
- 5. Closing Reflection Activity** (Slide 44):
- Ask students to reflect on this question:
- *Which style of guitar-playing did you prefer and why (strumming and sliding or finger picking)?*

- Note: If students completed the optional listening activity, they can use their compare/contrast worksheet to guide them in making this decision.
  - Consider providing them with a chance to discuss rationales for their personal preferences.

**Lesson 5 / Component 3 Learning Checkpoint** (Slide 45):

- *What is the Piedmont Blues and where did it originate?*
  - **The label "Piedmont Blues" indicates both technique and the location where it originated. This style of blues originated in the Appalachian Mountains. It is associated with a thumb and fingerpicking approach: A bass line is established with the thumb and the melody is picked out on the higher strings.)**
- *What are two distinct guitar playing styles that are associated with the Delta and Piedmont blues (two types of country blues traditions)?*
  - **Strumming and sliding**, illustrated in this Component through the music of Son House and **fingerpicking**, illustrated in this Component through the music of Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker.

**Lesson Navigation** (Slide 46)

## **2014 National Music Standards Connections**

**MU:Re7.2.a Classify and explain how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.**

- Can I identify the distinguishing musical and stylistic characteristics of the Delta blues?
- Can I explain differences in guitar playing styles between the Delta and Piedmont blues?
- Can I aurally identify and describe the sonic characteristics and functions of several instruments used in country blues styles?

**MU:Re7.2.b Identify the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.**

- Can I identify the historical, cultural, and geographic context within which the Delta and Piedmont blues traditions developed?
- Can I explain why the Mississippi Delta region is considered the birthplace of the blues?

**MU:Re8.1.a Describe a personal interpretation of how creators' and performers' application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres and cultural context, convey expressive intent.**

- Can I describe how Delta and Piedmont blues musicians use the elements of music and expressive qualities to convey expressive intent?

**MU:Cn10.0.a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.**

- Can I explain / provide rationale for my personal preference for one guitar playing style over another (slidin' / Delta or pickin' / Piedmont)?

**MU:Cn11.0.a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.**

- Can I explain the historical, cultural, and geographic context within which the Delta and Piedmont blues styles developed?
- Can I explain why African Americans began to move to the Mississippi Delta region?
- Can I explain why blues musicians in rural areas chose to use instruments like the tub, harmonica, and diddley bow?
- Can I explain how the tub and diddley bow are constructed?

## **Additional Reading and Resources**

- Charter, S. B. (1966). *The country blues* [Liner notes]. RBF Records. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW00RF1.pdf>.
- Courlander, H. (1951). *Negro folk music of Alabama, vol.1: Secular music* [Liner notes]. Folkways Records. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW04417.pdf>.
- Long, W., & Hill, J. (1995). *Elder Roma Wilson and his harmonica: "This train"* [Liner notes]. Arhoolie Records. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH00429.pdf>.
- Pearson, B. L. (2018). *Classic Delta and Deep South blues from Smithsonian Folkways* [Liner notes]. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40222.pdf>.
- Pearson, B. L., & Place, J. (2012). *Classic harmonica blues from Smithsonian Folkways* [Liner notes]. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40204.pdf>.
- Pianotv. (2017, December 5). *Guide to the blues: 1900s–2000s*. <https://www.pianotv.net/2017/12/guide-to-the-blues/>.
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. (n.d.). *Elizabeth Cotton: Master of American folk music*. Explore: Artist spotlight. <https://folkways.si.edu/elizabeth-cotton-master-american-folk/music/article/smithsonian>.
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## Worksheets

**Delta Blues Checklist****Timbre and Texture****Voice:**

- Solo voice
- Dramatic style (emotionality, ululations, yodeling, rawness, etc.)

**Instruments:**

- Acoustic instruments (not amplified electrically)
- Guitar (often open tunings)
- Harmonica

**Form/Structure**

- 12 bars/measures
- AAB rhyming scheme
- Call and response: Instruments talking (dialogue between voice and instruments)

**Pitch/Melody**

- Sliding / bending pitches (voice and guitar)
- “blue” notes / scale

**Rhythm/Beat**

- Solid beat / danceable
- Percussive

**Lyrical Content**

- Autobiographical (e.g., personal struggles, relationships, moving, food, everyday life, etc.)

## Compare and Contrast Worksheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	Delta Blues	Piedmont Blues	Comparing these songs, how are they similar or different?
<b>Timbre/Texture</b> (what instruments/sounds/style of singing do you hear? Language? Many instruments? Only a few instruments?)			
<b>Tempo/Dynamics</b> (fast, slow, does the tempo change, loud, soft, do the dynamics change, etc....)			
<b>Style</b> (what is the style of the vocalist? What is the guitar playing style? Articulation?)			
<b>Meaning and Use</b> (what does the music mean to the people who enjoy it?)			
<b>Performance Context</b> (where is this music performed? What is the role of the audience?)			
<b>Historical Connections</b> (where/when/how did this tradition develop?)			

## Etta Baker “One Dime Blues” and Son House “Sun Goin’ Down” Compare and Contrast Activity: RUBRIC

### National Standards Connections (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade):

MU:Re7.1.a Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts.

MU:Re7.2.a Describe how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.

MU:Re7.2.b Identify and compare the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

MU:Re8.1.a Demonstrate and explain how the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, and articulation) are used in performers’ and personal interpretations to reflect expressive intent.

MU:Cn11.0.a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

### Suggested Rubric for Standards Documentation:

4 = Exceeds Standard	3 = Meets Standard	2 = Approaching Standard	1 = Does Not Meet Standard
Using sophisticated descriptions or terminology, the student accurately identified musical elements and expressive qualities within each selection	The student accurately identified musical elements and expressive qualities within each selection.	The student identified some musical elements and expressive qualities within each selection.	The student identified few or none of the musical elements and expressive qualities within each selection.
Using sophisticated descriptions or terminology, the student accurately identified similarities and differences between ways in which musical elements and expressive qualities are used in blues music guitar styles.	The student accurately identified similarities and differences between ways in which musical elements and expressive qualities are used in blues guitar styles. The student compared the historical and performance context of guitar styles.	The student identified some similarities and differences related to musical elements, expressive qualities, and performance/historical context in blues guitar styles.	The student needed help in order to compare the historical and performance context of blues guitar styles.
The student compared the historical and performance context of blues music guitar styles.			