

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

*A Smithsonian Folkways Learning Pathway for
students in 3rd–5th Grade*

Teacher’s Guide

Lesson 1:

Hear Me Howl! Introduction to the Blues



Lesson Overview

The blues, a music genre that offers commentary on everyday life, became a prominent American musical form at the turn of the 20th century. The style originated in communities of former enslaved Africans, deriving from spirituals, field hollers, shouts, and chants. The use of what we now call “black music aesthetics” (blue notes, ululations, and the prominence of call-and-response patterns in the music and lyrics) can be linked to centuries-old musical styles from West Africa. The blues has been a major influence on American and Western popular music, inspiring ragtime, jazz, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, and country music.

Although the blues is often thought of as “sad” music, it doesn’t have to be. Blues compositions are often autobiographical in nature and encompass a wide variety of emotions. Yes, some are melancholy and deal with personal struggles and difficult social issues (such as poverty). However, others are about more joyous topics (and some are even funny).

Too often, the songs and contributions of men have dominated lessons about blues music. The *Women in the Blues* learning pathway (as a whole) will instead focus on how women have been fundamental to the creation and popularity of the blues. Within Lesson 1 specifically, students will learn about the foundational characteristics of blues music by studying the contributions of a blueswoman by the name of Big Mama Thornton. Students will listen to, analyze, interpret, and compare two distinct examples of the blues and will have an opportunity to sing along with Big Mama!

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Lesson Components and Student Objectives



1. The Blues Isn't Always Blues (15+ minutes)

- Students will identify common song topics and general stylistic characteristics of blues compositions.



2. Listening for the “Blues” (approx. 30 minutes)







- Students will identify similarities and differences between the ways in which music elements and expressive qualities are used in two blues compositions (harmonic structure, lyrical structure, timbre, style, instrumentation, etc.).



3. Sing the Blues with Big Mama Thornton! (20+ minutes)

- Students will expressively sing a song in the blues style and describe how blues music is usually learned (and how it differs from traditional choral singing).

*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 Blues Isn't Always Blue



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 1** of the **Lesson 1 Slideshow** (slides 4–15).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.*)

Component 1 Introduction (Slide 4)

1. Opening Discussion: Introduction to the Blues (Slides 5–7):

- A.** Introduce your students to Sister Rosetta Bark, the blues-loving dog who will guide your students through this Pathway, as they learn all about the blues and the influential women who played it (Slide 5)!
- B.** Lead a short discussion based on this question (Slide 6): *How would you describe blues music?*
- C. Share embedded contextual information about the origin of the term “blues”** (Slide 7).

2. Listening to the Blues (Slides 8–9):

- A.** Play the first two or three verses of Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues”.
 - Ask students to reflect on whether this recording matched how they originally defined blues music (Slide 8).
 - Note: Instrumentation and other musical characteristics of the blues will be addressed in Component 2 and throughout various lessons in this pathway.
- B. Share embedded contextual information about Big Mama Thornton** (Slides 9.1 and 9.2).
 - Consider asking students if they’ve ever heard the song “Hound Dog”.
 - Extension: If time allows, you might want to listen to excerpts from both versions of this song. You can find Elvis Presley’s version on YouTube or Spotify, and Big Mama’s original version of the song can be found in the Smithsonian Folkways catalog!

3. Blues History and Song Topics (Slides 10–12):

- A. Share some embedded contextual information about the history of blues music** (Slide 10).

- Optional discussion question: *Why do you think that one style of music has been able to influence so many other styles and genres of music for so many years after its creation?*
 - **Because the blues was the bedrock for secular music among Black Americans, it then informed all other secular music genres created by Black Americans (of which there were many).**

B. Share the embedded contextual information about typical topics of blues songs and how they are often expressed (Slides 11–12).

4. Listening for Meaning (Slide 13):

A. Ask students to think about the following questions while listening to Big Mama’s “Session Blues” in its entirety (Slide 13.1).

- After discussing the questions with students, you might want to advance to Slide 13.2, so they can follow along with the lyrics while listening:
 - *What is this song about? (Students may notice Big Mama is singing about playing music and touring with the members of her band. A “session” is a term used to describe a group of people who gather to play music together.)*
 - *How does Big Mama interpret the lyrics? How do you think she was feeling? (Big Mama expresses the song's story in an expressive, powerful, and somewhat raw way, and seems to feel upbeat/positive/content).*
 - *How do you know? Are there clues in the lyrics or musical sounds?*
 - Encourage students to write down their thoughts/ideas. Consider asking students to discuss their ideas with a partner or in a small group (or share out to the whole class).
 - **Students might notice the upbeat tempo, interactions between musicians, and lyrical content (she is singing about how much she enjoys playing music with the members of her band).**

Lesson 1 / Component 1 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 14):

- *What are some types of music that have been influenced by the blues?*
 - It has been a major influence on **American popular music, inspiring genres such as jazz, bluegrass, country/western, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and hip hop.**
- *What are some common topics in blues music, and how are these topics expressed?*
 - The topics of blues songs **are often autobiographical** in nature. That means they **often deal with personal relationships and social issues,**

such as poverty. However, they can also be joyous and even funny.
These themes are often expressed in a **powerful, expressive, and somewhat raw manner by the singer.**

Lesson Navigation (Slide 15)

2. Component Two: Listening for the “Blues”



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 2** of the **Lesson 2 Slideshow** (slides 16–26).
 - 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.)*
- Print the “Compare and Contrast worksheet” for each student ([find below](#)).

Component 2 Introduction (Slide 16)

Note: Especially if students did not complete Component 1, share the embedded contextual information about the blues.

1. **Analyzing and Interpreting the Blues** (Slides 17–22):
 - A. **Share embedded contextual information to remind students of the diversity of blues “sounds” and “topics” (the blues isn’t always sad)** (Slide 17).
 - B. Play several short excerpts from Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues” (Slide 18):
 - Each time through, prompt students to think about a new guiding question:
 - *What instruments do you hear? (Voice, drums, guitar, piano, bass, harmonica).*
 - *How does Big Mama (the singer) interpret the lyrics (style)?*
 - As may remember if they completed Component 1, **Big Mama (like many blues musicians) delivers the story of this song in an expressive, powerful, and somewhat raw way.**
 - Especially if students
 - *How does Big Mama engage with the other musicians?*
 - **There is quite a bit of call and response-type interaction between Big Mama and other musicians – especially the musician playing the harmonica.**
 - C. After passing out the “Compare/Contrast” Worksheet ([find below](#)), play the embedded recording of “Session Blues” (Slide 19.1; lyrics embedded on Slide 19.2).
 - As students listen, they will complete the first column of their worksheet.
 - Specifically, they will listen for the ways in which Big Mama Thornton (and members of her band) use **musical elements** and **expressive qualities** (Instruments/timbre, structure/form, style, texture, meaning, and time/rhythm) to express their ideas and emotions.

- Alternatively, you could display the worksheet onscreen (embedded in slideshow on slide 19.3) and discuss the different categories with students as they listen to the track.
- D.** Watch the short, embedded video performance of “Steamboat Whistle”, by John Jackson (Slide 20.1).
- E. Share basic contextual information about John Jackson** (Slide 20.2).
- Optional extension: Read the [short, linked article about John Jackson](#).
- F.** Listen to the audio version of John Jackson’s “Steamboat Whistle” (Slide 21.1) while following along with the lyrics (embedded in the slideshow). This time, ask students to reflect on these questions:
- *What do you think this song is about?*
 - *What do you think John Jackson was feeling as he sang this song?*
 - Note: We recognize these are sensitive topics. If you are unsure about how to discuss the meaning of this song with your students, we encourage you to consult this framework from "Learning for Justice", which has helpful hints for teaching hard histories in the classroom: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/k-5-framework>.
 - Optional: Study the lyrics in a more in-depth way and pose additional questions for students to consider (Slide 21.2):
 - *Is there any significance to the steamboat whistle in this song?*
 - *Why is the performer being chased by hound dogs?*
- G.** Play the embedded audio recording of “Steamboat Whistle” once more (Slide 22.1).
- As students listen, they will complete the second column of their worksheet.
 - As before, they will listen for the ways in which John Jackson used **musical elements** and **expressive qualities** (time/rhythm, form, melody, harmony, instrumental and vocal timbre, texture, tempo, dynamics) to express his ideas and emotions.
 - Alternatively, you could display the worksheet onscreen (embedded in slideshow on slide 22.2) and discuss the different categories with students as they listen to the track.
- 2. Comparing and Contrasting Blues Compositions** (Slides 23–24):
- A.** Students will complete the final column of their “compare/contrast” worksheet.
- Consider asking students to share their ideas about similarities and differences between these two interpretations of the blues (as a full group, in a small group, or with partners).

- B. If you think it is appropriate for the knowledge and experience level of your students, share embedded information about musical characteristics and expressive qualities related to **harmonic structure** (Slide 24.2), **lyrical structure** (Slide 24.3), **blue notes** (Slide 24.4), and **instrumentation** (Slide 24.5).
- Additional context: John Jackson performed a distinct style of country blues called the Piedmont Blues - which is covered more extensively in Lesson 5 (Blues in the Country). Big Mama's style bridged a number of sub-genres, but it is often referred to as urban blues (covered more extensively in Lesson 6, Blues in the City).
 - Note: All the topics listed above will be covered in more detail in future lessons.

Lesson 1 / Component 2 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 25):

- *What are some similarities and differences between Big Mama Thornton and John Jackson's interpretation of the "blues"?*
 - **Similarities included harmonic structure** (standard 12-bar/16-bar chord progression), **lyrical form** (AAB/AAAB), and the use of **blue notes** (these are common characteristics of blues music in general). **Differences included instrumentation** (acoustic vs. electric), **meaning/sentiment**, and **style** (guitar strumming/picking styles; improvisational breaks).

Lesson Navigation (Slide 26)

3. Component Three: Sing the Blues with Big Mama Thornton

To prepare:



- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 3** of the **Lesson 3 Slideshow** (slides 27–37).
 - 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 27)

Note: Especially if students did not complete Component 1 or 2, share the embedded contextual information about the blues.

1. Attentive Listening: Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues” (Slides 29–30):

A. Play the first few verses of “Session Blues” (Slide 28) and ask students to think about the following question:

- *What do you notice about Big Mama Thornton’s singing style?*
 - Solicit student responses before moving on.

B. Share the embedded information about stylistic characteristics (“bent” pitches) in blues music (Slide 29).

- Then, ask students to practice bending pitches with their voice.

2. Engaged Listening: Big Mama Thornton’s “Session Blues” (Slide 30):

Tell students that in blues music, beats 2 and 4 are emphasized. Then, play another excerpt from “Session Blues.”

- Prompt students to pat or clap along on 2 and 4 as they listen.
- Extension: Prompt students to turn their own body into a drum set:
 - Tap your toe on 1 and 3.
 - Pat with one hand on 2 & 4.
 - With your other hand, pat on the steady beat or a basic swing pattern.

3. Aural Transmission (Slides 31–33):

A. Ask students: *How do you think Big Mama Thornton learned to sing and play the blues?* (Slide 31).

B. Read embedded quotes from Big Mama (Slide 32), and ask students: *Is Big Mama Thornton’s musical background/training similar to or different from your own?*

C. Share embedded information about aural transmission (Slide 33).

4. Performing “Session Blues” (Slides 34–35):

A. Consider the suggestions provided on Slide 35 as you help students learn the first verse of “Session Blues” by ear:

- Sing the verse, one line at a time, and ask students to echo/repeat you.
 - Note: If you are not comfortable having the students echo you for this activity (or you are not yet familiar with the nuances of the melody), you can always play/pause the track and have the students echo Big Mama!
- Once students are comfortable, sing the first verse together as a class.
- Next, encourage students to pat or clap on beats 2 and 4 as they sing.
- Finally, play the recording and students will sing the first verse along with Big Mama Thornton.

B. If you have time, use these suggestions to extend this music-making experience (Slide 35.1 and Slide 35.2):

- Sing the whole song with the recording (lyrics embedded on slide 35.2).
 - Note: This recording is in the key of A major (using a blues scale, with the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees frequently flatted).
- Sing the whole song without the recording.
 - Note: If possible (when singing without the recording), sing in the key appropriate to the voices of the students (e.g., C, for young voices, with middle C being the lowest pitch, and the song having a range of an octave).
 - Teachers (or students) can consider adding piano or guitar accompaniment (especially at first, keep it simple!). You could also use a 12-bar blues backing track (find one on YouTube).
- Discuss performance criteria as a class . . . remember to sing expressively!
- Improvise short melodic riffs, using the 1st, 4th, and 5th degrees of the scale.
- Practice, refine, and perhaps even perform for an audience.

Lesson 1 / Component 3 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 36):

- *How is blues music usually learned?*
 - Blues music is often learned “**by ear**”. It is **an oral/aural tradition** that is passed on from one generation to the next.
- *Which beats are emphasized in blues music? (2 and 4)*
- *How does the “style” of singing blues music differ from traditional choral music?*
 - **In blues music, the pitches are not always absolute – they have a “bent” quality. The singer sometimes slides up to pitches, falls off them, or ornaments them.**

Lesson Navigation (Slide 38)

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Pr4.2.4a Demonstrate and explain the structure and how the elements of music (such as rhythm, pitch, form, and harmony) are used in music selected for performance.

- Can I demonstrate how music elements and expressive qualities are commonly used in blues music? (Component 3)

MU:Pr4.3.4a Demonstrate and explain how intent is conveyed through interpretative decisions and expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, and timbre).

- Can I explain how Big Mama Thornton and John Jackson used expressive qualities in order to interpret blues music? (Component 2)
- Can I interpret “Session Blues” in a way that is consistent with stylistic characteristics that are common in blues music (e.g., bent notes, style, expressive singing)? (Component 3)

MU:Pr6.1.4a Perform music, alone and with others, with expression and technical accuracy, and appropriate interpretation.

- Can I interpret and perform “Session Blues” in a way that is consistent with stylistic characteristics that are common in blues music (e.g., bent notes, style, expressive singing)? (Component 3)

MU:Re7.2.4 Demonstrate and explain how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music, and context (such as social and cultural).

- Can I describe how the elements of music are applied in two different examples of blues music? (Component 2)

MU:Re8.1.4 Demonstrate and explain how the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, and timbre) are used in performers’ and personal interpretations to reflect expressive intent.

- Can I explain how Big Mama Thornton and John Jackson used expressive qualities in order to interpret blues music and convey meaning? (Components 1 and 2)

MU:Cn10.1.4 Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- Can I explain how Big Mama Thornton (and many other blues artists) learned how to play the “blues”? (Component 2)
- Can I explain why Big Mama Thornton wrote the song “Session Blues”? (Component 1)

MU:Cn11.1.4 Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

- Can I identify some common topics in blues music and how these topics relate to peoples’ lives? (Component 1)
 - Can I identify other musical genres that have been influenced by the blues? (Component 1)
-

Additional Reading and Resources

- Evans, D. (Ed.). (2008). *Ramblin' on my mind: New perspectives in the blues*. University of Illinois Press.
- Goodkin, D. (2004). *Now's the time: Teaching jazz to all ages*. Pentatonic Press.
- Hayes, E. M., & Williams, L. F. (Eds.). (2007). *Black women and music: More than the blues*. University of Illinois Press.
- Jones, B., & Hawes, B. L. (1972). *Step it down*. University of Georgia Press.
- Pearson, B. L., & Place, J. (2010). *John Jackson Rappahannock blues* [Liner notes]. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/smithsonian_folkways/SFW40181.pdf
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- Strachwitz, C. (1989). *Big Mama Thornton ball n' chain* [Liner notes]. Arhoolie Records. https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/arhoolie/ARH00305.pdf
- Strachwitz, C. (2005). *Big Mama Thornton in Europe* [Liner notes]. Arhoolie Records. https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/arhoolie/ARH09056.pdf
- Titon, J. T. (1977). *Early downhome blues: A musical and cultural analysis*. University of North Carolina Press.

Worksheets
Compare and Contrast Worksheet

	“Session Blues”	“Steamboat Whistle”	Comparing these songs, how are they similar or different?
Instruments / Timbre (which instrumental timbres do you hear? Acoustic instruments? Electric instruments? Vocal timbre, range of singer)			
Structure / Form (chord structure; lyrical structure; overall form of song)			
Style (How do the musicians express the sounds? Do they interact? Is there improvisation? Guitar picking/stumming patterns; blue notes? Yells?)			
Texture (Many instruments? Only a few instruments? Do they play at the same time? Take turns?)			
Meaning (what is the song about? How do you know?)			
Time / Rhythm (beat, are there repeated rhythmic patterns, simple?, complex?, strumming patterns, syncopation)			