

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

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



Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Blues in the Country

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 (25+ minutes)

- Students will explain where and when the “country blues” developed.
- Students will identify important 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

(20+ minutes)







- Students will identify three 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’ (20+ minutes)

- Students will identify where the Piedmont Blues originated.
- Students will aurally identify and describe two distinct guitar playing styles associated with the Delta and Piedmont Blues.

*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 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**.
- Optional discussion question: *How does fingerstyle accompaniment on guitar differ from strumming?*
 - Fingerstyle focuses on playing individual (or a couple) notes at a set rate of time; strumming is when you strike all (sometimes some) strings at once to play a chord. Remind students that a **chord** is when a group of notes sounds together and **acoustic** means you don't plug the instrument into an amplifier.

2. The Mississippi Delta and the 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).
 - Important note to teachers: Ultimately, it is up to you to decide how much context you wish to share with students about historical events / factors such as the Civil War, slavery, the Reconstruction Era, Jim Crow laws,

segregation, etc. Some of this will depend on these events are taught in your local / state curriculum. We recognize that discussing some of these sensitive issues can be difficult and uncomfortable. However, we also believe that students deserve a truthful account of how historical issues affected the development of the blues as a music genre. We will therefore continue to provide relevant contextual information in the teacher notes section. We also encourage you to consult this framework from "Learning for Justice", which has helpful hints for teaching hard histories in grades K-5: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/k-5-framework>.

- **As Reconstruction (1865–1877) ended, the freedoms that initially drew many to the Delta region began to erode. 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 7).
 - Many well-known bluesmen and blueswomen were born in or near the delta region. Explore map embedded in slideshow (Slide 8).
 - Optional activity: Look up one or more of the musicians shown on this map on YouTube or Spotify and listen to their music (perhaps as background music at another time during the school day). You could also listen intentionally for musical stylistic characteristics and/or prompt students to engage with the recording by keeping the beat or moving to the music.
- 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 9).
- After watching the video, **lead a short discussion**, encouraging students to share anything interesting or new they learned (Slide 10).
- C. **Play an excerpt from the embedded example of the Delta Blues** (“Married Woman Blues” by Big Joe Williams) (Slide 11).
- *What musical sounds do you notice? What do you wonder about?*
 - 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.**

- Hint: Consider using a "think", "pair", "share" strategy (students think as they listen, discuss briefly with a partner, and share an idea with the class).
- Hint (for the non-music teacher): Some examples of how musical elements and expressive qualities might be applied by musicians: **timbre** (instrument choices), **structure/form** of composition, vocal/instrumental **style**, **tempo**, **dynamics**, **melody**, **rhythms**, **harmony**/chords and progressions, **beat/time** signature, **articulation** (smooth/short), **texture** (how many performers/instruments).

D. Listen to the track again (Slide 12).

- Encourage students to “check off” the characteristics they hear.
 - Note: You can find a printable version of this checklist that students can use to complete this activity individually by clicking on the image (most appropriate for older students). However, especially with younger students, you might just want to discuss these characteristics and then listen for them. For example, some terminology might be familiar to 5th graders but not to 3rd graders. As always, adjust the activities to meet the unique needs of your students.
 - Hints to guide discussion: Some common characteristics of the Delta Blues 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**.
 - **Almost every characteristic noted on the chart is present in this recording** (no harmonica and the rhyming is not exact).

E. Optional Activity: Compare and Contrast (Slide 13).

- Play excerpts from the country blues example (“Low Down Rounder’s Blues”) and the Delta blues example (“Married Woman Blues”) and discuss the musical/stylistic similarities and differences between these recordings.
 - Note: Remind students that the “Delta” blues is a distinct type of country blues.
 - 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 14)

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).
 - *What do you notice? What do you wonder?*

B. Optional activity: **Explore a chart that shows relationships between different types of the blues** (Slide 14.2).

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

Lesson 5 / Component 1 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 15):

- *Where and when was the country blues “born”?*
 - 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 16)

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



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 2** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (slides 17–31).
 - 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 17)

1. **Opening Attentive Listening Activity** (Slide 18):

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 19–23):

- A. Share the extensive contextual information and images in the slideshow about an instrument used in country blues called “**tub**” (i.e., washtub bass) (Slide 19).
 - 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 and images that show the evolution of the tub (Slide 22).
- 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 (remember to start the track at 0:20).
 - Encourage students to tap along with the tub on the steady beat.
- 3. The Harmonica** (Slides 24–26):
- A. Play an excerpt from the embedded recording of “I’m So Glad that Trouble Don’t Last Always,” by Elder Roma Wilson (Slide 24).
 - 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 to share more information about the instrumentation and performer.
 - **There is only one male musician** (Elder Roma Wilson) . . . **Singing and playing the harmonica** (Slide 25).
 - B. Share embedded contextual information about the harmonica and its importance in blues music (Slide 25):
 - 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**.
 - C. Play an excerpt from Big Mama Thornton’s recording of “I Need Your Love” and share the embedded contextual information about her (Slide 26.1).
 - *What do you notice about her playing style? What other musical characteristics can you identify?*
 - Hints: Although not a performer in the country blues style, Big Mama was raised in Alabama and her use of music elements and expressive qualities clearly indicate she was influenced by the country (specifically Delta) blues. **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).
 - Optional activity: Click to Slide 26.2 to view a chart that shows common musical and stylistic characteristics of the Delta blues and compare and contrast two musical examples.

- Optional activity (especially if it seems like your students need to get up and move): Click to Slide 26.3 for some engaged listening/movement activities related to audio tracks used in this lesson.

4. **The Diddley Bow** (Slides 27–28):

- A. Share the embedded contextual information about and image of an instrument called the **diddley bow** (Slide 27).
 - 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 short, embedded video example of Lonnie Pitchford (a country blues musician) playing the diddley bow (Slide 28).

5. **Optional Closing Discussion** (Slide 29):

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

- *Which was your favorite and why?*
 - Note: This question is intended to spark meaningful dialogue (there are no right or wrong answers).

Lesson 5 / Component 2 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 30):

- *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 31)

3. Component Three: Pickin' and Slidin'



To prepare:

- Read through the component.
- Preview **Component 3** of the **Lesson 5 Slideshow** (Slides 32–42).
 - 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 32)

1. The Guitar in the Country Blues: “Slidin’” (Slides 33–35):

- A. Share the embedded contextual information about the use of the **dobro guitar** in the country blues (Slide 33).
- B. Play an excerpt from Delta blues musician Son House’s “Sun Goin’ Down” (Slide 34). As students listen, ask them to think about this question:
 - *How would you describe the style that Son House uses to play the dobro 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 specifically for this unique sliding technique (Slide 35).
 - Optional: After describing how this sound is produced, let students “air play” along with Son House as they listen.

2. The Guitar in the Country Blues: “Pickin’” (Slides 36–39):

- A. Show the embedded short video, which will introduce students to another style of country blues (the **Piedmont Blues**) (Slide 36).
- B. Share additional embedded contextual information about the Piedmont Blues tradition and locate where it originated on a map (Slide 37).
 - 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 38). 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.
- Optional: Click the down arrow to Slides 38.2 and 38.3 to share embedded contextual information about the artists, Elizabeth Cotton and Etta Baker.
- Play another short excerpt from Etta Baker’s “One Dime Blues” (Slide 39).
 - This time, ask students to listen specifically for the unique Piedmont style finger-picking technique.
 - Optional: Ask students to “air play” as they listen to an excerpt from each recording: “Listen for the lower notes (bass line) and use your thumb to air play along. Listen for the higher notes (melody) and use your fingers to air play along.”

3. Closing Reflection Activity (Slide 40):

Ask students to reflect on this question:

- *Which style of guitar-playing did you prefer and why (strumming and sliding or finger picking)?*
 - Consider providing them with a chance to discuss rationales for their personal preferences, as a full class or in small groups.

Lesson 5 / Component 3 Learning Checkpoint (Slide 41):

- *What type of guitar did Son House use? What does it sound like?*
 - Son House used a **dobro guitar** - a guitar that has a metal (or wood and metal) resonance chamber and is smaller than the traditional guitar. **It produces a distinct, clanking, high-pitched sound.**
- *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 42)

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU: Re7.1.5a Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts.

- Can I explain when, where, and why the Delta Blues tradition originated?
- Can I explain where the Piedmont Blues tradition originated and how it influenced later musicians?

MU:Re7.2.5a Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music, and context (such as social, cultural, and historical).

- Can I explain when, where and why country blues traditions emerged?
- Can I explain why the Mississippi Delta region is consider the birthplace of the blues?
- 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 sound of several instruments used in country blues styles?

MU:Re8.1.5a 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.

- Can I describe the instruments and fingerpicking styles Delta and Piedmont blues guitarists use to convey expressive intent?

MU:Cn10.0.5a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- Can I explain / provide rationale for my personal preference for one instrument over others (tub / harmonica / diddley bow) and/or one guitar playing style over another (slidin' / Delta or pickin' / Piedmont)?

MU:Cn11.0.5a 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 more African Americans began to move to the Mississippi Delta region in the late 1800s?
- 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?
- Can I explain the evolution of the “tub” over time?

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>.
- Learning for Justice. (n.d.). *Teaching hard history: Grades K–5*. Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/k-5-framework>.
- 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>.
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- 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>.
- 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>.

Van Betuw, A. (2017, December 5). *Guide to the blues: 1900s–2000s*. Piano TV.

<https://www.pianotv.net/2017/12/guide-to-the-blues/>.

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.)