

Mississippi Blues Trail Lesson Plan

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Overview:

“The Mississippi Blues Trail is a museum without walls taking visitors on a musical history journey through Mississippi.”

-Mississippi Development Authority Division of Heritage Tourism

The Mississippi Blues Trail is an important new development in Mississippi’s efforts to develop cultural tourism, but it’s also a visual, historical, geographical and cultural exploration of the people, places and traditions in the state. The blues was likely born in the Delta, but the Mississippi Blues Trail covers the tradition throughout the state. The hundreds of words and multiple images on each of the markers – now numbering over 100 and reproduced online at www.msbluestrail.org (or .com) – provide concrete examples of local history and can be used to help us understand how factors such as the economy, modes of transportation, and the sheer ambition of individuals are reflected in the many expressions of the blues.

This lesson will assist students in understanding how blues music developed and continues to impact contemporary culture, and can be used to examine topics including geography, history, and social studies in the five geographic regions into which the Trail is divided (Delta, Hills, Pines, River/Capital/, Coast) and beyond. More specifically, these lessons can be used to examine particular musicians and institutions (such as radio, record companies, or musical venues).

Curricular Connections:

Mississippi studies Framework: Competencies 1,3,4,5

Teaching Levels:

Grades 4 through 12 (with modifications)

Materials and Equipment:

- Mississippi Blues Trail Website: www.msbluestrail.com
- Highway map of Mississippi
- Mississippi Blues Trail marker map/poster
- Butcher paper/construction paper/markers
- Recordings of Mississippi blues music
- Youtube videos if possible

Objectives:

Students will:

- Identify Mississippi blues artists and venues
- Discover and explore humanities themes within Mississippi blues culture such as, but not limited to: 1. Highways 2. Cotton 3. Railways 4. Radio and Records 5. Women in the Blues

- Indicate geographical locations of the blues;
- Determine connections between artists, humanities themes and blues styles;
- Chart routes between Mississippi Blues Trail Markers based on theme, geography or timelines

Opening the Lesson:

Introduce the lesson topic by asking students the following question, “Has anyone seen a Mississippi Blues Trail marker? If so, where was it and who what was it about?”

Record student responses on the board. If few students know about the Mississippi Blues Trail, ask them the following question, “What do you imagine the Mississippi Blues Trail to be?” Record student answers on the board. You might also consider asking them about the blues, and identify themes in their answers that you might be able to use in exploring the Trail

Developing the Lesson:

1. Ask students if they recognize Mississippi’s heritage as the “birthplace of the blues.” Ask students where they can find the blues in Mississippi. Explain to students that the blues dates back to the early 1900s and was first heard in the Delta region of the state. Tell students that this unique style of music has roots in the field songs of African-American slaves and later spread throughout the world as a popular music style. Tell them about the Mississippi Blues Trail and how it documents over 100 different blues musicians, venues and influences throughout the state—not just the Delta region. Show them the Mississippi Blues Trail map/poster and help them identify markers close to their home/school/community. Have students read the marker information for markers in their area, and ask them to determine the similarities and differences between the markers. Ask students to use the information from the blues marker to:

- Act out a play about a certain musician’s life
- Present an oral presentation on what they learned about the blues
- Write an essay/paragraph exploring something they learned from the blues marker that was unexpected

2. Choose a theme and ask students to read carefully the marker information for that particular theme (examples below). Do not tell students the theme, but ask them to write down the main themes and ideas they discover from the reading. List these themes on the board. Explore these themes, perhaps using examples from contemporary music

Themes:

Highways (3,4,5)

-Highway 61 North

-Highway 61 South

Cotton (1,3,4,5)

-Hopson Plantation

Railways (1,3,4,5)

- Pea Vine

Radio and Records (1,5)

- Broadcasting the Blues

- WROX

- WGRM

- Ace

- Trumpet

- Malaco

Women in Blues (1,3,4)

- Memphis Minnie

- Dorothy Moore//Alamo Theatre

- Cassandra Wilson

- Denise LaSalle

Blues Venues (3,4,5)

- Elks Club (fraternal organizations)

- Blue Front (café/community)

- Club Ebony (chitlin' circuit nightclub)

- Harlem Inn (nightclub)

- Po Monkey's Lounge (rural juke joint)

- Queen of Hearts (urban juke joint)

- Subway Lounge (urban juke joint)

Blues Pioneers

- W.C. Handy

- Charlie Patton

- Tommy Johnson

- Son House

Mississippi to Chicago

- Chicago

- Willie Dixon

- Muddy Waters

- Howlin' Wolf

Legend of Robert Johnson

- Abbay and Leatherman

- Robert Johnson (Hazlehurst)

- Robert Johnson (Greenwood)

- Rosedale

Civil Rights (1,3,4)

- Freedom Village

- Charles Evers

Rock and Roll and the Blues

- Elvis Presley

- Hattiesburg

- Bo Diddley

3. Have the students do the following mapping activity as a way to explore the Mississippi Blues Trail. Lessons can be modified to fit the appropriate performance level of your classroom. (3,5)

- Ask students to create a route between three to five blues markers in their region—from one point to another, or a loop. Have students measure the mileage between each marker and perhaps comment on other sites along the way.
- Ask students to create a route between blues markers that explore the theme of “Women in the Blues.” Students can then write a report on the similarities and differences between the performers. Another option may be to have the students write a paper exploring one artist in particular, including outside research.
- Ask students to create a route between blues markers that explore a particular theme. Have students choose between subjects such as cotton, highways, railways or radio (themes can be expanded depending on ability level).

Closing the Lesson:

Have the students create their own blues marker, in words and images, to demonstrate what they have learned about the blues and its surrounding themes. Students can include images found online, or draw their own images. Students should write original “content” for the markers, even giving the marker an original name/title.

Extending the Lesson:

- Organize an “unveiling” of the blues markers students create in class with a speech/presentation about the artist. Invite other classes, parents, community members to attend.
- Invite a blues musician to visit your classroom. Mini-grants from the Mississippi Arts Commission are available to bring in Roster Artists for school/community performances.
- Take a class trip utilizing one of the blues routes created during the lesson.