

teaching

APRIL 2015 VOLUME 22, NUMBER 4

music

APRIL
IS JAZZ
APPRECIATION
MONTH

**The NAFME
CONFERENCE
Returns to
Nashville**

**Teaching
SOCIAL JUSTICE
Through Music**

**POPS 'N JAZZ
in Connecticut**

WHY YOU NEED TO TEACH:

THE BLUES

Billie
Holiday



National Association
for Music Education

April 2015

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Volume 22, Number 4



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National Association for Music Education (NaFME): *Teaching Music* April 2015



STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN

Teacher Jonathan Schwartz and his students got nothing but the blues.

**SINGING
(AND
PLAYING
AND
STUDYING)**

THE BLUES

This culturally rich tradition can serve as a basis for classroom music explorations, interdisciplinary studies, and much more for all grade levels.

BY CATHY APPLEFELD OLSON



BILLIE HOLIDAY



RAY CHARLES



MA RAINY

TEACHERS LOOKING FOR a way to set their students down “the royal road to Americana,” in the words of Jonathan Schwartz, might consider infusing their classroom with the blues. Schwartz is an educator and founder of the Rockademix nonprofit program (rockademix.org) that uses music and technology to help children learn academics.

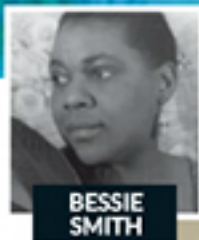
While both jazz and blues are both prominent in higher education, blues can be more accessible to younger students, beginning in the earliest elementary grades. “We need to dip as low as we possibly can in terms of age to get them interested, or at the least provide some stimulation so they can continue to explore not only the blues but other art forms,” says Mark Malone, coordinator of music education for graduate and undergraduate studies at William Carey University in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Malone was the key architect of a six-part, blues-centric curriculum specifically for fourth graders in Mississippi, which he

developed in 2012 after the state received a Folk Arts Infrastructure Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The goal is to teach students how blues music developed and how it continues to impact contemporary culture. Fourth grade is the “sweet spot” because it’s the year social studies classes focus on state history. “It’s about preserving the heritage of arts here in our state. There’s such a large following for blues in Asia, South America, Europe ... but we’re losing the young people here in the States who don’t have any knowledge of it,” says Malone.

But there are many ways to engage students with the blues in classroom general music across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. And once teachers open their ears and minds to the music, they’ll find the blues and its story cross a number of subject areas.

“With blues, there’s something that seems almost to demand we pay attention to African-American cultural origins,” says Adam Gussow, associate professor of English and Southern studies at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, and a blues harmonica artist and instructor. The blues story “begins on the slave ships of Africa, is born in the cotton fields of the deep South, moves up to Chicago, builds like a snowball, and now is a music everyone can play.” So integrated are the blues and African-American history that Scholastic listed “listening to blues music and having students compose their own 12-bar blues music” as the third of 28 ways for teachers to integrate Black History Month into their classrooms in February.

“Blues feeling may be sadness, but blues music has almost a magical way of transforming sadness into energy, into resistance.” —ADAM GUSSOW



BESSIE SMITH

JONATHAN SCHWARTZ WORKS WITH STUDENTS ON “THE CONSTITUTION SONG.”



Indeed, while the art form emerged in the southern Delta, two significant migrations of African-Americans from the South to the Midwest—Chicago in particular—expanded both influences on the music, and its own influence. The first of these Great Migrations took place during World War I, and the second after World War II.

Integrating Blues History into the General Music Classroom

The first step to bringing the blues into the classroom is for teachers to realize that they don’t have to be experts or aficionados to do so. The second step is to disavow any notion that the music is depressing and exists in a vacuum. “The biggest misconception of the blues is somehow blues are sadness,” Gussow says. “Blues feeling may be sadness, but blues music has almost a magical way of transforming sadness into energy, into resistance. It remoral-

izes demoralized people. To me, that’s the power.”

Schwartz notes that, “In my experience, when teachers are thinking about combining music and academics, blues isn’t seen as a fountain of materials from which to launch interesting discussions. It’s usually viewed as a dirge. But start by bringing in some Chuck Berry. It’s unbelievable what you can mine from this music.” After engaging his first- and second-grade classes at Garrison Elementary in Oceanside, California, in music by established blues artists and his own compositions, he developed the Kids Like Blues program (kidslikeblues.org) and formed a blues band with some of the students. The troupe gigged around southern California with their original songs and even landed on stage at Legoland.

For students in middle and high school, deeper conversations about blues history can abound. Gussow suggests a deep dive into the migration of African-Americans to the north and suggests augmenting the discussion



LOUIS ARMSTRONG

PHOTOS: (SMITH) PD 1928 (JOHNSON) PD, US, NO NOTICE (ARMSTRONG) LOC/HERMAHILLER

SCHWARTZ NOTES THAT TEACHERS CAN “START BY BRINGING IN SOME CHUCK BERRY.”



“It’s unbelievable what you can mine from this music.”

—JONATHAN SCHWARTZ

with portions of the James N. Gregory book *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White*

Southerners Transformed America (2005, The University of North Carolina Press) as one launch point for conversation. “If you’re talking about great blues musicians historically,

the great majority of them are African-American. Do you bring in the Stevie Ray Vaughans? And since classrooms are not simply white and black, do you make any effort to talk about blues in an international context? What was it about the music that got so many people’s attention, to get beyond racial dichotomies?” Gussow prompts.

Blues in Interdisciplinary Studies

Music teachers already know that art enhances other academic concentrations. No where is this more apparent than with the blues, which fit perfectly with the Whole School Initiative, Mississippi’s first comprehensive,

statewide arts education program that uses the arts as a vehicle for promoting high-quality instruction across core areas. “The thrust of it is to use arts to teach basic subject matters,” Malone says. “The basic premise of our blues project is using blues music to teach social studies, geography, science, and English.”

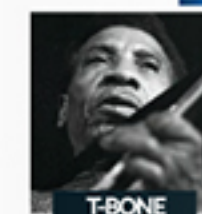
History and social studies are natural places to start interdisciplinary work. “A lot of history has been taken away from the academic curriculum because it’s not on The Test,” remarks Schwartz. “This music is the most amazing way of bringing it back in. The key is to figure out which [state] standards allow teachers to bring in the music, then finding the right song and getting involved in the meaning behind it.”

An entire unit of the Mississippi curriculum is built around transportation.

“The unit talks about water, the railroad, bus, and car,” Malone says. “The water transportation portion is more local, but train transportation and bus stations are more universal and get to the idea of wanting to get away from your troubles quicker. Teachers can get kids brainstorming about the definition of transportation, and it brings blues into a whole new realm.”

Another Mississippi segment focuses entirely on politics and civil rights. “This could spill more into middle school and high school for an in-depth look, and there are [prompts] for discussion about gender roles here too,” Malone adds.

There’s also a treasure trove of teachable blues literature, particularly in the study of poetry for high schoolers. “This is an



T-BONE WALKER

ESSENTIAL RECORDINGS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Rich in musical legacy and cultural heritage, the blues songbook offers something for students of all ages and skill levels. Here are just a few of the best blues and blues-influenced songs that you can incorporate into your lessons.

- “Downhearted Blues” —Bessie Smith
- “Jelly Bean Blues” —Ma Rainey and Louis Armstrong
- “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground” —Blind Willie Johnson
- “Sitting on Top of the World” —Mississippi Sheiks
- “Smokestack Lightning” —Howlin’ Wolf
- “Call It Stormy Monday (But Tuesday Is Just as Bad)” —T-Bone Walker
- “Messin’ with the Kid” —Junior Wells
- “San Francisco Bay Blues” —Jesse Fuller
- “Big River” —Johnny Cash
- “Promised Land” —Chuck Berry
- “Pride and Joy” —Stevie Ray Vaughan
- “Georgia on My Mind” —Ray Charles

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