

Knox College - Department of Educational Studies

Teacher: Timmy Connor Grades: 6-12

Lesson Focus: 1930's Blues: Purpose in Melancholy

Objectives:

- Students will listen to and annotate lyrics of the blues song "Mr. Conductor Man" by Big Bill Broonzy.
- Students will identify literary devices in the piece and make connections between the content of the piece and the sociological factors that inform the context of America in the 1930's, particularly to those informed by the impact and utility of railways.
- Students will create their own "blues" in an artistic medium of their choice, focused/set on a railway.

Materials:

- Printout of "Mr. Conductor Man" lyrics
- Computer w/sound speakers
- James Frankel "Blues Lyrics" handout

Duration:

1-2 class periods if time for writing is provided in class.

Lesson Plan:

1. Introduce the topic by asking: What kind of songs put you right into your feelings? What makes them so effective or interesting or entertaining? Do those kinds of feelings recur when you read certain books or watch certain movies, etc.?

2. Explain that the blues represents...“A predominant style of music in the 1930’s was an offshoot of jazz. The blues were much slower than the standards of the era but they spoke with twice the feeling of the pops, and illustrated an honest portrait of life in the Great Depression.”
(Teacher should look to pbs.org article on the genre for more information and may include as much of that piece’s information as need be.)
3. Distribute the “Mr. Conductor Man” handout and model analysis by saying: For this assignment, you will listen to and annotate the lyrics of a blues song by the musician Big Bill Broonzy. For those who are unfamiliar with the process of making an annotation, I have made an example on the board. You have your original text and in the margin of the paper or using the annotation site Genius.com to highlight and select portions of text online, you may write an explanation, idea or inference about the lyric you chose. It’s that easy!
4. Explain the structure of a blues song in preparation by using the guidelines handout. Additionally, the teacher should give context regarding railroad travel in the era and possibly hint at symbolic inferences that might come up during the annotation period of the song.
5. Listen to the song (while annotating; maybe 10 minutes).
6. Discuss lyrics and ideas within the piece as well as relevance of emotions. Ask the following questions:
 - Do you see any similarities between this song and other popular songs today?
 - Why is the sadness of the song so important to our understanding of the singer’s character and situation?
 - What role does the train play in this story?

7. Have students try writing their own version of the blues. Refer to the handout showing blues guidelines and read through the requirements answering any questions.
8. Provide time for practicing blues lyrics creation. Share examples in class.
9. Distribute the rubric for the project and answer any questions.
10. Emphasize that each group project must follow the structure of a standard blues song, no matter the mode of expression.
11. Have students use the remaining time in the class period to brainstorm and start their work. A final assessment can be the exhibition/performance of the blues creations on a later date.

Extensions:

12. Present multiple options for additional assessment as needed. For instance, students might group together (2-3 partners) and compose a blues song of their own, then perform the song in. Students who are artists could create a piece of blues-influenced art or multiple pieces in a mini exhibit. Skits inspired by a blues song would be another option.