



# Smithsonian Folkways

## **The Blues – a Gateway into Improvisation A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson**

Designed by: Terry Jones  
North Idaho College

### **Summary:**

Jazz is at the heart of American music. At the heart of the style, and more importantly listening to and appreciating Jazz, is an understanding of improvisation. To those with limited musical experience, an understanding of improvisation is often extremely difficult and even frightening, that music is seemingly ‘made’ in a spontaneous manner. This lesson is design to give students a way into the world of improvisation as it exists in one of the fundamentally most influential styles of American music: the blues.

**Suggested Grade Levels:** (6-8)

**Country:** American Roots

**Region:** South

**Culture Group:** African American

**Genre:** Blues

**Instruments:** Guitars

**Language:** English

**Co-Curricular Areas:** Creative Writing; Social Studies – American History

**National Standards:** Music Education standards 3,4,6

**Prerequisites:** Knowledge of rhythm and melody

### **Objectives**

- Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of the common characteristic of Blues lyrics and the structure of Blues lyrics by composing Blues lyrics.
- Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of how improvisation works by creating Blues lyrics spontaneously.

**Materials:** Paper to write lyrics. The following recordings: Smithsonian Folkways. Son House’s “Country Farmer Blues” from the album *Classic Blues from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40134*

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/classic-blues-from-folkways/african-american-music-folk/album/smithsonian> and

Bill Broonzy’s “Backwater Blues” form his album *Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs SF40023*. <http://www.folkways.si.edu/big-bill-broonzy/sings-folk-songs/american-folk-blues/music/album/smithsonian>

### **Lesson Segments:**

1. Introduction to Blues Lyrics
2. Lyrics by Students and Well-Known Bluesman
3. Pre-Improvisation
4. The Act of Improvising

### **1. Introduction to Blues Lyrics**

#### **A. Blues Lyrics – common characteristics and form**

- a. Discuss common characteristics of blues lyrics
  - i. Personal
  - ii. “In the moment”, spontaneous
  - iii. Emotional
- b. Have students brainstorm examples of blues lyrics they may know.
- c. Introduce a common design for blues lyrics
  - i. For every “chorus” of blues lyrics, there is a
    1. Statement
    2. Re-statement
    3. Conclusion

- B. Encourage students to create three choruses of blues lyrics and to share them with the class (or a small group, or neighbor).

**Assessment:** Students will deliver their individual lyrics in writing to the teacher for review and commentary.

### **2. Lyrics by students and lyrics to Well-Known Bluesmen**

- A. Discussion on the history of the Blues, with these points in mind:
  - a. Bluesmen functioned as troubadour – in that the early Bluesmen traveled the countryside (especially in the rural south), and sang on the street corners.
  - b. Bluesmen often sang on a topic meaningful to them personally including aspects of love and romance, of their jobs and their financial status.
  - c. The 12 Bar Blues form provided bluesmen with a handy template to do their storytelling.
- B. Listen to and discuss the lyrics of:
  - a. Son House’s “Country Farmer Blues”
  - b. Bill Bronzy’s “Backwater Blues”
  - c. For a video example: “The Piedmont Blues” by John Cephas and Phil Wiggins found in the United States of America video section of the Smithsonian Folkways collection  
<http://s.si.edu/united-states-videos>

**Assessment:** Students will write and submit a comparison of their personal lyrics to one of the Bluesmen’s lyrics.

### **3. Pre - Improvisation**

- A.** Review the students' lyrics and discuss how some choruses relate to one another.
- B.** Group the students' lyrics into group of similar subjects
- C.** Encourage the students to read their lyrics to each other
- D.** Invite the students to read the lyrics in a rhythmic fashion
- E.** Define the concept of Improvisation, to create spontaneously in terms of lyrics as well as rhythm and melody
- F.** Ask the students to have a first experience in 'creating' a melody. Melodies need to fit the form of the lyrics they have created, with two phrases that sound similar (the first two sentences of the chorus lyrics) and the third phrase answering the first two.
- G.** After some time working in small groups, provide the class with recorded models of this AAB form of melody-making, featuring various Bluesmen.

**Assessment:** The students will successfully work with the standard blues form, AAB, in the first steps of thinking rhythmically and melodically about how their lyrics fit into a melody.

### **Segment Four – The Act of Improvising**

- A.** Review the Improvisation concepts we discussed in segment three
- B.** Create “the circle of Blues” by leading the students in learning how to play a 12-bar blues progression in D major: D (each chord is played for four counts) – D – D – D – D – G – G – D – D – A – G – D- D (note the G and the A can be played as G7 and A7) see notation.
- C.** Practice the chord progression until it is fluid
- D.** Invite the students to sing their lyrics over the 12-bar blues progression, spontaneously creating melody as they do. To reduce the fear of singing, allow the students to chant or rap their lyrics.
- E.** Listen again to selected blues recording in order to get a sense of the chord progression, the rhythmic flow, and the form of AAB lyrics.
- F.** Return to live performances of the blues, inviting students to sing and play their blues lyrics in groups of three students whose lyrics relate to the same or similar topic.

**Assessment:** Gauge the capacity of students to play the 12-bar blues progression and to sing their lyrics in an AAB melodic form

# 12 Bar Blues Chord Progression

D D D D

G7 D D

A7 G7 D D

5 9