Backwater Blues Listening Guide

A companion for teachers and students to Richard M. Mizelle Jr.'s *Backwater Blues* | Flood MR 100 | Grades 6–12

Overview

Richard M. Mizelle Jr.'s *Backwater Blues* asks us to treat blues music as more than entertainment. Songs can function as an alternative historical archive—preserving experiences of displacement, labor, racial inequality, environmental danger, migration, and memory that may be difficult to find in official records. Mizelle argues that the conventional archive often obscures Black experiences of the 1927 flood and that blues provides an important counternarrative.

How to Use This Guide

Listening Routine (for every song)

1. **Listen first** without reading the description.
2. **Record what you hear:** Who is speaking? What has happened? What emotions are expressed? What environmental or social conditions can you identify?
3. **Read the background** and lyric focus for the song.
4. **Discuss** the "Think About" questions, then use "Make the Connection" for extensions.

What Each Song Section Includes

Section	What it gives you
Recorded / Connection to 1927	When and where the song was recorded, and how closely it ties to the 1927 flood. Use this to talk with students about source timing.
Background	Historical context to share after the first listen.
Lyric focus	A short line or delivery feature to direct attention.
Listen For	Sounds, ideas, and themes for students to track while listening.
Think About	Discussion or written-response questions.
Make the Connection	Archive, mapping, and primary-source extensions that link to other Flood MR 100 lessons.

Songs at a Glance

Section	Song	Year	Connection to 1927
Intro	John Lee Hooker — "Tupelo"	1959	Indirect (1936 tornado)
Ch. 1	Bessie Smith — "Backwater Blues"	1927	Associated; about 1926 Nashville flood
Ch. 1	Alice Pearson — "Greenville Levee Blues"	1927	Strong and contemporary
Ch. 1	Lonnie Johnson — "Broken Levee Blues"	1928	Very strong
Ch. 2	Charley Patton — "High Water Everywhere"	1929	Direct
Ch. 2	Blind Lemon Jefferson — "Rising High Water Blues"	1927	Contemporary
Ch. 3	Walter Davis — "Red Cross Blues"	Early 1930s	Cultural memory (verify recording)
Ch. 3	Lead Belly — "Red Cross Store Blues"	1940	Cultural memory
Ch. 4	Lonnie Johnson — "South Bound Backwater"	1938	Indirect
Ch. 4	Sara Martin — "Goin' Down to the Levee"	1923	Before the flood
Ch. 5	McCoy & Memphis Minnie — "When the Levee Breaks"	1929	Direct; exceptionally strong
Ch. 5	Thomas Dorsey — "Levee Bound Blues"	1930	Levee labor culture
Ch. 5	Gene Campbell — "Levee Camp Man Blues"	1930	Levee labor system
Concl.	Led Zeppelin — "When the Levee Breaks"	1971	Cultural transmission

Introduction: John Lee Hooker's Blues

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

Although written about the devastating 1936 Tupelo tornado rather than the 1927 flood, Mizelle uses John Lee Hooker to introduce an important idea: **blues music serves as an historical archive.**

Flood connection: Students begin thinking about music as another kind of primary source.

Listen Before Reading

1. John Lee Hooker — "Tupelo" (1959)

John Lee Hooker — "Tupelo" (1959)

Recorded: 1959	**Connection to 1927:** Indirect but important

Background

Hooker's song recalls the catastrophic 1936 tornado that struck Tupelo, Mississippi, rather than the 1927 Mississippi River flood. Mizelle's choice is important because Hooker turns environmental catastrophe into oral history: weather, death, destruction, survival, and community memory are preserved through music. The recording demonstrates the larger idea that a blues performer can serve as historian and witness.

Lyric focus: Rather than following a conventional narrative song structure, listen to Hooker's almost spoken delivery and how he makes the disaster sound like remembered testimony.

Listen For:

- Nature as an overwhelming force
- Details that make the disaster feel witnessed rather than summarized
- Repetition and storytelling
- Community memory rather than individual memory
- Relationship between fear and survival
- Storytelling through music

Think About:

- Why would historians use songs as historical evidence?
- What can a song tell us that a government report cannot?
- What can Hooker communicate about a disaster that a weather report cannot?
- Is a song evidence of what physically happened, evidence of how people experienced it, or both?
- Why might memories of environmental disasters remain culturally important decades afterward?

Make the Connection

Archive connection: Think of "Tupelo" as an oral-history document set to music.

Chapter 1: Down the Line

Blues Brilliance, Displacement, and Living under the Shadow of Levees

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

This chapter introduces Bessie Smith's famous *Backwater Blues* and argues that it became one of the defining cultural responses to the 1927 flood. Mizelle also examines Alice Pearson's *Greenville Levee Blues* and Lonnie Johnson's *Broken Levee Blues* as windows into displacement, segregation, and life in Red Cross camps.

Listen Before Reading

1. Bessie Smith — "Backwater Blues"
2. Alice Pearson — "Greenville Levee Blues"
3. Lonnie Johnson — "Broken Levee Blues"

Bessie Smith — "Backwater Blues" (1927)

Recorded: February 17, 1927	**Connection to 1927:** Closely associated with 1927 flood culture, but not written about the Great Mississippi Flood

Background

Smith recorded "Backwater Blues" on February 17, 1927. Although the song became strongly associated with the Great Mississippi Flood, historical research indicates that Smith was responding to flooding around Nashville in late 1926. This distinction makes the song even more interesting: cultural memory can attach a song to a larger disaster even when its original inspiration was different.

Persistent rain produces rising water, isolates people, damages homes, and eventually creates displacement. The speaker experiences flooding not as a statistic but as the destruction of ordinary life.

Lyric focus: "I can't live there no more." That simple statement transforms flooding from a hydrologic event into displacement.

Listen For:

- Rain (beginning)
- Rising water
- Losing one's home (water entering familiar spaces)
- Fear
- Forced movement
- Isolation
- Repetition

- Levees
- Race and citizenship

Think About

- How does Bessie Smith describe the flood?
- Why does Mizelle argue the song is about more than water?
- What makes displacement different from simply moving?
- At what point in the song does flooding become a disaster?
- Why do you think this song became associated with the Great Mississippi Flood even though it was written earlier?

Make the Connection

Field-guide connection: Compare Smith's description with an official flood-damage report. What kind of information exists only in the song?

Alice Pearson — "Greenville Levee Blues" (1927)

Recorded: Chicago, around July 1927	**Connection to 1927:** Strong and contemporary

Background

Pearson recorded the song in Chicago around July 1927, while the flood was still a recent event. Very little is known about Pearson herself, which makes the recording an interesting example of how sometimes the source survives better than the life story of its creator.

The song contributes that the levee becomes more than infrastructure. It represents danger, protection, uncertainty, work, and the geographical boundary between safety and catastrophe.

Listen for:

- References to Greenville
- Levees as physical places
- Movement of people
- Fear of rising water
- The perspective of someone close to events

Think About:

? How does Pearson make a piece of infrastructure—the levee—part of a human story?

? What questions would you want to ask Pearson if she were available for an oral-history interview?

? What does the fact that we know relatively little about Pearson demonstrate about archival preservation?

Make the Connection

Archive connection: Ask students to distinguish between what the recording tells us and what has been lost because information about Pearson herself is sparse.

Lonnie Johnson — "Broken Levee Blues" (1928)

Recorded: San Antonio, March 13, 1928	**Connection to 1927:** Very strong

Background

Johnson recorded this song in San Antonio on March 13, 1928. It directly connects flood danger with Black levee labor and has been interpreted as commentary on coerced recruitment of African Americans during the 1927 disaster.

What happens in the song: The narrator is facing rising water around his own home while simultaneously being expected to work on the levee. The conflict is striking: Who is responsible for protecting the community when the worker's own home and life are endangered?

Lyric focus: "They want me to work on the levee..."

Listen For:

- Labor
- Fear of drowning
- Leaving home
- Authority
- Resistance
- Choice versus coercion

Think About:

? Does the narrator sound like a volunteer?
? How does the song complicate the idea of levee workers as simply heroic volunteers?
? What would you need to corroborate this account using newspapers, NAACP records, or government sources?

Make the Connection:

Connection to Mizelle: This is an excellent musical source for discussing the intersection of environmental vulnerability and second-class citizenship.

Chapter 2: Burning Waters Rise

Richard Wright's Blues Voice and the Double Environmental Burden of Race

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

Mizelle expands beyond blues recordings to examine Richard Wright's writing, showing how environmental disasters and racial oppression created a "double burden" for African Americans.

Listen Before Reading

1. Charley Patton — "High Water Everywhere"
2. Blind Lemon Jefferson — "Rising High Water Blues"

Charley Patton — "High Water Everywhere, Parts 1 & 2" (1929)

Recorded: December 1929	**Connection to 1927:** Direct

Background

Patton recorded the two-part song in December 1929. It explicitly remembers the Great Mississippi Flood and its effects on Delta residents, particularly African Americans.

What makes this song particularly valuable: Patton moves through places and experiences almost as if he is constructing an aural map of the flood. Geography, movement, danger, labor, and racial power appear together.

Listen For

- Fear
- Unequal experiences of disaster
- Escape
- Community resilience
- Place names
- Movement through the landscape
- Height and extent of water
- People seeking safety
- Levee labor

Think About

- Does everyone experience disasters equally?
- What additional challenges did African Americans face?
- Which places does Patton mention?

- What does geographic specificity add to the credibility or power of the song?
- Does Patton describe a "natural disaster," or a social and environmental disaster?

Make The Connection

Mapping extension: Plot every identifiable location in the song onto your 1927 flood map (see *The Great Migration*). Compare Patton's musical geography with the documented flood extent.

Blind Lemon Jefferson — "Rising High Water Blues" (1927)

Recorded: Chicago, around May 1927	**Connection to 1927:** Contemporary flood commentary

Background

Jefferson recorded the song in Chicago around May 1927, at essentially the same time that the Mississippi Valley flood crisis was unfolding. Paramount released it later that summer.

Listen For

- Rising water
- Mobility and escape
- Fear and uncertainty
- First-person versus general observations
- How the guitar reinforces urgency

Think About

- How does Jefferson make rising water feel immediate?
- What evidence suggests that environmental danger is experienced personally rather than abstractly?
- Compare Jefferson with Patton. Which sounds more like testimony? Which sounds more like memory?

Make The Connection

Historical-thinking question: Because Jefferson recorded the song while the flood was still recent, should we treat it differently from Patton's 1929 retrospective account?

Chapter 3: Racialized Charity

Racialized Charity and the Militarization of Flood Relief in Postwar America

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

This chapter explores how flood relief often reinforced racial hierarchies instead of simply providing aid.

What these Red Cross songs reveal: The "Red Cross store" became a cultural symbol for receiving direct relief. Songs from the 1930s portray assistance as potentially humiliating, inadequate, discriminatory, or paternalistic—a cultural memory that resonated with Black experiences of Red Cross relief during the 1927 flood.

Listen Before Reading

1. Walter Davis — "Red Cross Blues"
2. Lead Belly — "Red Cross Store Blues"
3. Anonymous — "The Red Cross Store"

Walter Davis — "Red Cross Blues"

Recorded: Early 1930s	**Connection to 1927:** Useful for understanding the longer cultural memory of relief (use with caution)

Background

A Walter Davis recording titled "Red Cross Blues" appears in his early-1930s catalog. There were several blues songs with similar Red Cross titles during this period. Scholarship also discusses Walter Roland's 1933 "Red Cross Blues," which criticizes the humiliating and inadequate nature of direct relief.

Listen For

- Food and material assistance
- Dependence
- Dignity
- Frustration
- Unequal treatment
- Relief camps
- Government aid
- Hunger
- Fairness
- Irony or sarcasm

Think About

- Why might someone in need resent having to request relief?
- What is the difference between receiving aid as charity and receiving assistance as a right?
- How might the experience of 1927 affect later African American attitudes toward relief organizations?
- Did everyone receive equal help?
- How can disaster relief unintentionally reinforce inequality?

Lead Belly — "The Red Cross Store Blues"

Recorded: 1940 (released 1941)	**Connection to 1927:** Cultural memory rather than a contemporary 1927 recording

Background

Lead Belly recorded the song in 1940; it was released in 1941. The song belongs to a longer tradition of Black commentary about direct relief and the Red Cross store rather than being an eyewitness recording from 1927.

What the song contributes: By the time Lead Belly recorded it, the "Red Cross store" had become shorthand for a particular relationship between people in need and institutions controlling access to assistance.

Listen For

- Pride
- Refusal
- Dependence
- Frustration with institutions
- Who controls resources

Think About

- Why might a person refuse assistance even while needing it?
- What does the song suggest about dignity and citizenship?
- How can negative memories of disaster relief survive for more than a decade?

Make The Connection

Connection to 1927: Use the song alongside Black newspaper reports and NAACP materials about Red Cross policies. Ask whether later musical memory corroborates themes appearing in contemporary sources.

Chapter 4: Where Sixteen Railroads Meet the Sea

Migration and the Making of Houston's Frenchtown

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

The flood accelerated the Great Migration, reshaping cities such as Houston.

Listen Before Reading

1. Lonnie Johnson — "South Bound Backwater"
2. Sara Martin — "Goin' Down to the Levee" (1923), also called "One Man Nan"

Lonnie Johnson — "South Bound Backwater" (1938)

Recorded: 1938	**Connection to 1927:** Indirect

Background

Johnson recorded "South Bound Backwater" in 1938, not during the 1927 flood. The song uses flood and weather imagery to tell a first-person story of isolation, homelessness, and environmental vulnerability.

What makes it useful: Johnson shifts between describing environmental conditions and becoming the victim within the story. Scholars note this movement from general description to firsthand experience as an important blues narrative strategy.

Listen For

- Leaving home
- New opportunities
- Homesickness and hope
- Being trapped
- Loss of shelter
- Movement
- First-person testimony
- The transition from observing disaster to experiencing it

Think About

- Why would people leave forever after a disaster?
- What makes migration different from evacuation?
- How does first-person storytelling change your response to environmental disaster?
- What separates temporary displacement from homelessness?
- How might a song recorded years later preserve recurring memories of flood vulnerability?

Sara Martin — "Goin' Down to the Levee" (1923)

Recorded: 1923	**Connection to 1927:** Levee culture, but not the 1927 flood

Background

This song was recorded in 1923, four years before the Great Mississippi Flood. That actually makes it useful for examining what the levee meant in Black culture before 1927.

Listen For

- The levee as a social space
- Work and mobility
- Everyday life around river infrastructure
- How the levee exists culturally before it becomes associated with catastrophe

Think About

- What did "the levee" mean before the disaster of 1927?
- Why is it useful to examine cultural sources produced before a disaster?
- How might listeners have heard a song about levees differently after 1927?

Make The Connection

Field-guide opportunity: Place this song in the "Before the Flood" section rather than presenting it as a direct response to 1927.

Chapter 5: Every Day Seems Like Murder Here

The Mississippi Flood Control Project in New Deal-Era America

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

This chapter examines the labor used to build flood-control infrastructure and the continuing struggles over levees and river management.

Listen Before Reading

1. Kansas Joe McCoy & Memphis Minnie — "When the Levee Breaks"
2. Thomas Dorsey — "Levee Bound Blues"
3. Gene Campbell — "Levee Camp Man Blues"

Kansas Joe McCoy & Memphis Minnie — "When the Levee Breaks" (1929)

Recorded: June 18, 1929	**Connection to 1927:** Direct and exceptionally strong

Background

Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie recorded the song on June 18, 1929. It directly reflects experiences and memories of the Great Mississippi Flood. McCoy sings lead while Minnie plays guitar.

What happens in the song: The song brings together rain, levee failure, homelessness, labor, separation, and involuntary movement. A central message is brutally simple: when protection fails, people have to move.

Lyric focus: "If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break."

Listen For

- Repetition of rain
- Levee work and levee camps
- Dangerous work and government projects
- Anticipation of failure
- Home and forced movement
- Helplessness despite human labor

Think About

- Why were levees still controversial after 1927?
- Who benefited from flood control? Who paid the cost?
- Why does the narrator continue working on the levee if he doubts it will hold?
- Does the song portray the levee as protection, threat, or both?

- How does this recording challenge the idea that engineering can completely eliminate environmental risk?

Make The Connection

Systems-thinking connection: The levee is simultaneously infrastructure, workplace, boundary, protection system, and source of vulnerability.

Thomas A. Dorsey / Georgia Tom — "Levee Bound Blues" (1930)

Recorded: Richmond, Indiana, February 5, 1930	**Connection to 1927:** Strong for levee labor culture, but not specifically a documentary account of the 1927 flood

Background

Dorsey recorded "Levee Bound Blues" in Richmond, Indiana, on February 5, 1930. The narrative concerns a man returning to levee work after romantic disappointment.

Why it belongs here: The song demonstrates that levee work was not simply an emergency response during floods. It was an established labor world with its own mobility patterns, culture, hardships, and social meanings.

Lyric focus: "Now back to the levee I'm bound."

Listen For

- Returning to labor
- The levee as destination
- Work as refuge or necessity
- Mobility among Black workers

Think About

- Why does "the levee" function almost like a place one can go to?
- What does the song suggest about the employment choices available to Black men?
- How does understanding normal levee labor change your interpretation of emergency levee work during 1927?

Gene Campbell — "Levee Camp Man Blues" (1930)

Recorded: Around 1930	**Connection to 1927:** Extremely valuable for the labor system created and expanded through flood-control construction

Background

Campbell recorded the song around 1930. Historians have treated it as an unusually valuable oral-history-like description of levee-camp labor.

What the song documents: Campbell describes contractors withholding wages, workers becoming indebted to commissaries, extreme work hours, and laborers being treated in ways comparable to work animals. Mizelle himself has used the song when analyzing Black labor in the Mississippi Flood Control Project.

Lyric focus: "They'll pay you half of your money..."

Listen For

- Contractor power
- Withheld wages
- Commissaries and debt
- Work hours
- Mules
- The "walking boss"

Think About

- How could withholding wages make it difficult for workers to leave a camp?
- How is the commissary both a store and a mechanism of labor control?
- Compare Campbell's song with George Schuyler's undercover 1932 letter. What details corroborate one another?

Make The Connection

Primary-source pairing: This is perhaps the strongest music/document combination in the entire field guide: Campbell → Schuyler → Wilkins → NAACP investigation.

Conclusion: When the Levee Breaks

Chapter playlist: Open in Spotify

Mizelle concludes by showing that the memory of the 1927 flood continued to live through music and culture long after the water receded. The title deliberately echoes the famous blues recording that became one of the enduring musical symbols of the disaster.

Listen After Reading

1. Kansas Joe McCoy & Memphis Minnie — "When the Levee Breaks"
2. Led Zeppelin — "When the Levee Breaks" (1971 adaptation)

Return to Kansas Joe McCoy & Memphis Minnie (1929)

Recorded: June 18, 1929	**Connection to 1927:** Memory, legacy, and cultural transmission

Background

This time, ask students to identify everything they can now hear that they might have missed initially:

Listen again for…		
Hydrology	Infrastructure	Labor
Displacement	Migration	Environmental risk
Community	Power	Memory

Final question: Has the song changed—or has your ability to interpret it changed?

Led Zeppelin — "When the Levee Breaks" (1971)

Recorded: 1971 (fourth album)	**Connection to 1927:** Cultural transmission

Background

Led Zeppelin radically reworked the Memphis Minnie/Kansas Joe song for its 1971 fourth album. The later recording borrows from the original lyrics but transforms the sound, structure, scale, and audience.

Lyric focus: Because this recording remains copyrighted, use the Spotify recording rather than reproducing its lyrics.

Listen For

- Which ideas survive from the 1929 version
- What disappears

- What becomes more dramatic
- The enormous sonic representation of water and force
- Whether the historical specificity of 1927 remains visible

Compare The Two Recordings

1929 — McCoy & Memphis Minnie	1971 — Led Zeppelin
Close to living memory of 1927	More than four decades later
Country/Delta blues tradition	British rock
Flood, levee labor, displacement	Catastrophe transformed into rock imagery
Black southern historical context	International mass audience
Relatively intimate performance	Monumental, heavily produced sound

Think About

- What happens when a song moves from one generation and culture to another?
- What historical context survives the adaptation?
- What context disappears?
- Is the Led Zeppelin version still an archive of the 1927 flood—or is it now an archive of the cultural memory of the blues?

Culminating Activity: Can Music Be an Archive?

Choose **three songs** from the listening guide. For each, identify the evidence below.

Environmental evidence	Social evidence	Emotional evidence
Rain, water, flood depth, levees, weather, landscape	Race, labor, housing, mobility, relief, family, government or institutional power	Fear, anger, grief, frustration, hope, resistance

Then Answer

1. What can these songs tell us about the Great Mississippi Flood and its legacy that we would struggle to learn from engineering reports, newspapers, census records, or government documents alone?
2. What can those traditional sources tell us that the songs cannot?

Teacher note: The goal is not to decide whether music or official records are "better" historical sources. The goal is to understand that different sources preserve different kinds of truth.

Final Reflection

If an archive is a collection of evidence preserved so that the past can be interpreted later, in what sense are blues recordings an archive of the 1927 flood? Whose experiences become more visible when we listen to that archive—and how does it change the story of the flood?

Short version: How do songs help preserve history?

Student Organizer: Can Music Be an Archive?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Song & artist	Environmental evidence	Social evidence	Emotional evidence
1.			
2.			
3.			

What can these songs tell us that official records cannot?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What can official records tell us that the songs cannot?

_____

_____

_____

_____