Blues, Culture, and Memory

Grades 6–12 · Social Studies / Music / ELA · Mississippi River Flood of 1927 Centennial

Duration: 60-75 minutes

Module Overview

In this discussion on Blues, Culture, and Memory, we will treat the music as a historical archive, not background. Students listen to a small number of songs closely and ask what blues preserves that government reports, newspapers, and engineering documents do not.

Quick Links

Lesson Plan

Blues Discussion Questions

Listening Sheet

Background on Songs

Standards Addressed

Essential Questions:

- What can a song preserve that an official flood report cannot?
- If official records tell us what the river did, what do blues and gospel tell us about what the flood meant?
- Should music be treated as historical evidence? What kinds of truth can blues preserve that may be absent from government archives or newspapers?
- Why were musicians still recording songs about the 1927 flood two years later? What does that tell us about the difference between an event ending and a disaster becoming part of cultural memory?

Knowledge Checklist:

Students will know…

- Blues and gospel recordings from 1927–1929 responded to the flood era, some immediately and some years later.
- Songs can become attached to larger historical memories over time (for example, “Backwater Blues” and the 1926 Nashville/Cumberland River flood).

- Blues preserves experiences of displacement, labor, race, religion, home, migration, and environmental danger that official records may leave out.

Skills Checklist

Students will be able to…

- Listen closely to a song and record what happened, what experience is preserved, and who is speaking.
- Compare songs around a shared theme.
- Evaluate music as a historical source alongside official records.
- Distinguish between an event and its cultural memory.

Module Sequence

The first duration counts an A/B day schedule with 80–90 minute class periods.

The second duration (in parentheses) counts daily schedules with 45–60 minute class periods.

Part	Focus	Duration
Blues, Culture, and Memory	Opening question, guided listening, small-group theme comparison, whole-class discussion	1 block (1–2 days)

Teacher Notes

- **Playlist:** Consider this sequence: https://tinyurl.com/mr3s5765
- **Use excerpts.** For Spotify, you can listen to excerpts rather than every song in full and skip around in the playlist. Barbecue Bob's "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues," for example, is available in Spotify's Barbecue Bob catalog.
- **Companion materials:** The *Backwater Blues Listening Guide* (based on Richard M. Mizelle Jr.'s *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*) and the *Lyrics Guide* give background, listening prompts, and lyrics for many of these songs.
- **Connections:** Links to the Great Migration lesson ("What did the destination gain?") and the Mizelle evidence used there.

Vocabulary for Focus

Term	Student-friendly definition
Archive	A collection of records kept because they have lasting historical value.

Primary source	A document, recording, or object created during the time being studied.
Blues	An African American musical form rooted in the Deep South that often expresses hardship, loss, and resilience.
Gospel	Religious music rooted in African American church traditions.
Displacement	Being forced to leave home and unable to return, at least for a while.
Levee labor	Work building, repairing, and guarding levees, often forced on Black workers during the 1927 flood.
Cultural memory	The way a community remembers and retells an event over time through stories, music, and traditions.
Counternarrative (9–12)	A story told from a perspective that challenges the official or dominant version of events.

Blues, Culture, and Memory

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Lesson: Music as a Historical Archive

Time: 60–75 minutes

Objectives

SWBAT:

- Analyze blues and gospel songs as historical sources about the 1927 flood.
- Compare songs around a theme such as displacement, labor, race, religion, home, migration, or environmental danger.
- Explain what music preserves that government reports, newspapers, and engineering documents do not.

Teacher Notes

- **Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues"** was recorded in February 1927 and is associated with flooding, although it appears to have been inspired by the December 1926 Nashville/Cumberland River flood rather than the Mississippi flood itself. That distinction is useful because students can discuss how songs become attached to larger historical memories over time.
- End with "When the Levee Breaks" and "High Water Everywhere." Those two make the strongest bridge from immediate experience to remembered disaster, and they fit beautifully with the themes of levee labor, displacement, and whose voices survive in the archive.

Materials

- Playlist: https://tinyurl.com/mr3s5765
- Listening Sheet and Discussion Questions (student handout at the end of this lesson), or a table on the board
- Backwater Blues Listening Guide and Lyrics Guide (optional companions)

Lesson Outline

Warmup (10 minutes): Ask students, "What can a song preserve that an official flood report cannot?" Have them list possibilities before listening.

Intro/Mini Lesson/Activity:

1. **Guided listening (25–30 minutes).** Play 2–3 minutes from four or five songs. Students complete the listening sheet with four columns: What happened? / What

emotion or experience is being preserved? / Who is speaking? / What does this source tell us that another archive might miss?

2. **Small-group comparison (20 minutes).** Small groups compare the songs. Assign each group one theme: displacement, labor, race, religion, home, migration, or environmental danger. Each group chooses the two songs that best illuminate its theme.
3. **Whole-class discussion (15 minutes).** Discuss the three questions on the student handout. End with “When the Levee Breaks” and “High Water Everywhere.”

Exit Ticket: Students answer one discussion question in writing, using at least one song as evidence.

Blues Discussion Questions

Playlist: https://tinyurl.com/mr3s5765

Question 1

If official records tell us what the river did, what do blues and gospel tell us about what the flood meant?

Question 2

Should music be treated as historical evidence? What kinds of truth can blues preserve that may be absent from government archives or newspapers?

Question 3: Memory

Why were musicians still recording songs about the 1927 flood two years later? What does that tell us about the difference between an event ending and a disaster becoming part of cultural memory?

Listening Sheet

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Song Title	What happened?	What emotion or experience is being preserved?	Who is speaking?	What does this source tell us that another archive might miss?

Background Information on Songs

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- **Bessie Smith, "Backwater Blues" (1927)** — recorded in February 1927 and associated with flooding, although it appears to have been inspired by the December 1926 Nashville/Cumberland River flood rather than the Mississippi flood itself. That distinction is useful because students can discuss how songs become attached to larger historical memories over time.
- **Barbecue Bob, "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues" (1927)** — recorded June 15, 1927, making it one of the most immediate musical responses to the flood era.
- **Sippie Wallace, "The Flood Blues" (1927)** — useful as another contemporary flood narrative and for comparing gendered perspectives in blues.
- **Laura Smith, "The Mississippi Blues" (1927)** or **"Lonesome Refugee" (1927)** — good for discussing displacement and refugee identity.
- **Elders McIntorsh & Edwards' Sanctified Singers, "The 1927 Flood" (1927)** — (this one is not on Spotify) especially useful because it gives you a gospel/religious interpretation of the flood alongside the blues tradition. Sunday Blues
- **Memphis Minnie & Kansas Joe McCoy, "When the Levee Breaks" (1929)** — written from memories of the 1927 disaster and explicitly tied to levee labor, displacement, and loss of home.
- **Charley Patton, "High Water Everywhere, Parts 1 & 2" (1929)** — one of the strongest songs for connecting flood memory to race, displacement, and the Mississippi Delta. It was recorded two years after the event but directly reflects the 1927 flood.

For Spotify, you can listen to excerpts rather than every song in full and skip around in the playlist. Barbecue Bob's "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues," for example, is available in Spotify's Barbecue Bob catalog.

Standards Addressed

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Standards are grouped by state and grade band. Descriptions are short summaries; see each state's official document for full wording.

Louisiana: Social Studies (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)
Grade 8	8.12.e	Social and cultural changes of the 1920s and 1930s
Grade 8	8.12.g	Causes of the 1927 flood and how the government response affected Louisianans
Grade 8	8.12.j	Causes and effects of early 20th-century migration, including the Great Migration
Grades 6–8	6.6 / 7.6 / 8.6	Use primary and secondary sources; compare accounts; explain how the availability of sources affects interpretations
U.S. History	US.5	Use sources to evaluate claims, compare accounts, and explain how the availability of sources affects historical interpretations
U.S. History	US.13	Political, social, cultural, and economic effects of events after WWI and in the 1920s

Mississippi: Social Studies (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)
Mississippi Studies	MS.1.4	How Mississippi's geographic features and processes, including the Great Flood of 1927, shaped its development
U.S. History: 1877 to Present	USH.5.6	Impact of 1920s changes on the economy, society, and culture, including the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance

Arkansas: Social Studies (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)

Grade 8 (U.S. History)	H.5.8.8	1920s social, economic, political, and cultural changes
Arkansas History (9–12)	H.5.ARH.5	Responses to natural disasters in Arkansas, including the Flood of 1927
Arkansas History (9–12)	H.5.ARH.12	Effects of social and cultural change on Arkansas's population
African American History (9–12)	H.5.AAH.3	African American actions and achievements in the early 20th century, including the Great Migration

Common Core State Standards and National Core Arts Standards (Music)

Grade band	Code	Focus (summary)
6–8	RH.6-8.1	Cite evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources
6–8	RH.6-8.9	Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic
6–8	SL.6.2 / SL.7.2 / SL.8.2	Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats
6–8	SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1	Engage in collaborative discussions
9–10	RH.9-10.9	Compare how several primary and secondary sources treat the same topic
11–12	RH.11-12.7	Integrate and evaluate multiple sources in diverse formats and media to address a question
9–12	SL.9-10.2 / SL.11-12.2	Integrate multiple sources presented in diverse media or formats
9–12	SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1	Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions
Music 6–12	MU:Re7.2	Analyze how the structure and context of music inform the response
Music 6–12	MU:Cn11.0	Relate music to societal, cultural, and historical contexts