A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching the Blues in the Music Classroom

James Balagurchik

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/mus_etds

Recommended Citation
Balagurchik, James. 'A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching the Blues in the Music Classroom.' (2012).
http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/mus_etds/2
James Balagurchik  
Candidate

Department of Music
Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Dr. Bruce Dalby, Chairperson

Dr. Regina Carlow

Professor Glenn Kostur
A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING THE BLUES IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM

BY

JAMES BALAGURCHIK

B.M., Music Education, Bucknell University, 1977

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2012
A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING THE BLUES IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM

by

James Balagurchik

B.M., Music Education, Bucknell University, 1977
M.Mu., Music Education, University of New Mexico, 2012

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide music educators with suggestions of how to make the blues a part of their instruction and present this unique art form as a vibrant and ‘living’ genre critical to the understanding of our own American musical heritage. This thesis explores the music, history and culture, viewing ‘music as culture,’ and the African-American tradition whose contribution defines so much of our American music. It discusses the ways in which the blues can fit into a comprehensive and discipline-based approach to music education that satisfies the goals as set forth by the National Standards for Music Education and, in so doing, broaden educators’ pedagogical approach to teaching the blues. This discussion stresses the importance of creating a classroom culture that parallels the way music is learned and practiced in the blues community, fostering an authentic understanding of the blues through singing, listening, movement, improvisation, composition, and, ultimately, performing. It is shown how a study of the blues can provide our students with new practical possibilities and perspectives for experiencing and generating music.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2 SO WHAT IS THE BLUES? .................................................. 9

   The Blues Feeling ........................................................................... 10
   The Blues Form ............................................................................. 11
   The Blues Harmony ....................................................................... 13
   The Blues Style ............................................................................. 14

CHAPTER 3 THE BLUES: HISTORY AND CULTURE ......................... 18

   Africa and the Blues ....................................................................... 21
   Pre-Blues Genres .......................................................................... 26
   Blues History: Early Blues ............................................................. 30
   Classic Blues: 1920s to early 1930s ............................................. 33
   City Blues ..................................................................................... 35
   Urban Blues ................................................................................... 36

CHAPTER 4 THE BLUES, COMPREHENSIVE MUSICIANSHIP, AND
   THE NATIONAL STANDARDS .......................................................... 38

   Standard 1: Singing, Alone and with Others, a Varied Repertoire of Music ... 39
   Standard 2: Performing on Instruments, Alone and with Others,
      a Varied Repertoire .................................................................... 41
   Standard 3: Improvising Melodies, Variations, and Accompaniments .......... 42
   Standard 4: Composing and Arranging Music within Specified Guidelines ... 44
   Standard 5: Reading and Notating Music ........................................... 44
Chapter 1

Introduction

*If it weren’t for the blues, all we have done here tonight would not be possible.* Harold Mabern

I heard the famed jazz pianist make this statement one December evening in the early 90s after an incredibly inspired performance with saxophonist George Coleman at the Village Vanguard in New York City. I later learned Mr. Mabern would make this same declaration after each and every one of his performances before he would leave the stage. As a student of jazz music, I was intrigued by this statement. I had been playing jazz piano professionally for a number of years and, at least in some structural sense, certainly had an awareness of the music called the blues. It was, however, difficult for me to conceive of what the blues, at least as I understood it, had to do with Mabern’s style which was steeped in quartal harmony and pentatonic-based melodic improvisation. It was obvious that my perception and understanding of the blues was limited.

Intent on learning more about the blues, I enlisted the services of jazz pianist, composer, and educator Mike Longo to teach me the music. The principles he shared in just an hour-long session had an immediate impact, and would change my playing for life. Mr. Longo first presented me with an “African” rudiment, along with its inherent polyrhythmic structure, that we performed together on separate drums. After having achieved some degree of facility with the drumming pattern, I was instructed to perform the rudiment solo, which I did continuously for nearly 20 minutes. Longo then rejoined me, introducing different rhythmic structures over my rudiment. Next, he began singing different melodies from a variety of genres, melodic fragments, and musical idioms while
we drummed. After nearly a half-hour of this drumming and singing, he then provided me a structure on which to base my improvisations. That structure begins with a musical statement (“call”) followed by an answer (“response”). The “statement-and-answer” (call-and-response) structure is followed by a “corroborating” statement which musically comments on the preceding statement and answer. Interestingly, this improvisatory structure parallels the AA’B song form found in the blues. Using idioms and a few modes, I applied Longo’s improvisational structure to the harmonic form of the 12-bar blues. I played the piano while Longo drummed and offered intermittent verbal guidance.

Mike Longo’s lesson was an exploration of and induction into a musical culture and its traditions. Through his rudiment, he presented and established one of the more important stylistic statements, that is, groove (see Feld, 1988), over which we explored and developed a vocabulary of the music through its rhythmic and melodic idioms. In essence, he created a learning environment that replicated the very way music teaching and learning functions in the blues and jazz communities, along with some of the techniques for learning utilized by performers of the music. My induction into the “blues culture” profoundly changed not only my understanding of the blues, but my approach to jazz improvisation, in general. As Palmer (2009) suggests:

Jazz is not unique because it emphasizes improvisation, nor because theme and variation are unified by a common musical syntax. The heart of jazz is the source of its language, and the heart of the language is the blues. (69)

As a twice-yearly resident at Bucknell University, I provided college-level students with an introduction to blues and jazz music and improvisation. Initially, I presented the students with basic blues theory and harmony, i.e., the 12-bar blues form
and the blues scale. While most of the students were able to perform successfully, my concern laid with those few who were unable to grasp the concept of blues improvisation.

It became apparent to me that, in order to successfully teach the blues, and blues and jazz improvisation, I should re-work the context I provided my students for conceptual learning, away from written notation and the introduction of mere chords and scales. I should establish a different learning culture in the music classroom, that is, a “blues culture” environment, along with its traditions, idioms, and grooves. This context for how the materials would be presented and developed conceptually would foster different pedagogical approaches and parallel the way the blues and, in fact, most music is learned in a variety of different cultures, that is, among other things, aurally. (Wade, 2009, 24) In his *Learning Sequences in Music*, Edwin E. Gordon (1997) provides a rote-first, comprehensive approach for teaching musicianship through *audiation* (hearing with understanding) that parallels the way in which we learn language:

> Although music is not a language, the process is the same for audiating and giving meaning to music as for thinking and giving meaning to speech. When you are listening to speech, you are giving meaning to what was just said by recalling and making connections with what you have just heard on earlier occasions. At the same time, you are anticipating or predicting what you will be hearing next, based on your experience and understanding. Similarly, when you are listening to music, you are giving meaning to what you just heard by recalling what you have heard on earlier occasions. At the same time, you are anticipating or predicting what you will be hearing next, based on your music achievement. In other
words, when you are audiating as you are listening to music, you are summarizing and generalizing from the specific music patterns you have just heard as a way to anticipate or predict what will follow. (5)

In his exhaustive scholarship, Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation, Paul Berliner (1994) provides numerous examples of learning techniques used by jazz improvisers, all of which involve some manner of listening. An understanding of and facility with blues idioms, both rhythmic and melodic, is an absolute must for prospective students as listeners, performers, and composers in the blues, jazz, and rock genres.

As educators, we have the opportunity to examine and explore fundamental principles of the blues, culturally, contextually, and conceptually, tracing its origins and roots over musical traditions found on the African continent to the African-American musical traditions found here in the United States. We can introduce the blues as a song and dance form, which has profoundly influenced the development of other American art forms such as jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country, and even hip hop.

Practically, the simple and repetitive structure of the blues provides an ideal vehicle for conceptual learning and reinforcing those concepts through repetition. We can also present the blues as a form for vocal and instrumental composition, improvisation, and individual and group performance, inspiring creativity and self-expression in our students. There are a number of ways music educators, if they so choose, can make the blues a part of their music curriculum. So much of the contemporary music our students listen to and are inundated with has its roots in the blues. It can be argued that the blues holds more relevance to the music students listen to than most “in school” music. It only makes sense to educate our students in their understanding of their own musical heritage.
In *Music Education and Society in the 21st Century*, Purrone (2008) cites the transformative change that music in American society has undergone in the last decades of the 20th century and which will continue into the next few decades of the 21st, specifically, the “declining relevance of Western art music and the rising relevance and classicalization of American vernacular music and world music of the 20th century.” He explains:

The growing irrelevance of some Western European art music is in contrast to the surprising tenacity of American vernacular music over the course of this century, as well as the growing interest in music from non-western cultures. From Ragtime to the Blues, from Boogie-woogie to Rhythm and Blues, from Rock and Roll to Disco, from Punk to Alternative to Hard Core, from Rap to Goth to Dark Wave, the relevance of American music is obvious. Although young by comparison to European art music, American vernacular music has several hundred years of evolution behind it. Its multicultural roots have given it vitality unprecedented in the world of music. We have already seen “classically trained” composers and performers incorporate materials from American vernacular styles and non-western music into their creativity[…] This incorporation is a reflection of what will be a common phenomenon—the seeds of the 21st century’s creativity have already been planted, and those seeds are elements of the American vernacular and non-western musical styles. (Purrone, 2008)
So, why study the blues? There are several reasons for the incorporation of the blues in our music programs. For one, the blues is one of “America’s greatest musical treasures” and is the foundation of virtually every major American vernacular style developed in the 20th century, including jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip hop. (pbs.org) Wynton Marsalis (Fuss, 2009) explains:

The blues runs through anything that’s good in American music. If it’s good, it’s got the blues in it. Okay, the blues is the song, you know. If you can’t play blues, you ain’t playin’ nothin’ […] So jazz, gospel music, rock and roll, what they call country music, bluegrass, western swing, many different names for different genres of our music, all of them have the blues in it.

Music educators owe our students an understanding of their musical heritage and the profound place held by the blues in that heritage. If we accept Purrone’s premise, an education in the blues speaks directly to how our music educational system is to remain vibrant and vital in the 21st century. Secondly, while performance-based organizations, i.e., band, chorus, and orchestra, in our system of education are both essential and vital, they provide opportunities for a limited segment of the student population. Roughly, some 15 to 30 percent of students are engaged in band, chorus, and orchestra. A comprehensive education in the blues may speak to more students who are usually left to their own devices outside of our music programs. An education in the blues and an understanding of its basic structural elements is essential to our jazz and rock programs. On an individual student level, it goes to the heart of what being a musician should be about creatively, i.e., composition, improvisation, and musicianship, and the blues is “a
medium for self-expression in which any musician can realize his or her potential as an artist.” (Palmer, 2009, 67) If students cannot sit down with their instrument and simply generate music, we need to examine the kind of musical experience we are providing them, as well as the kind of musicians we are producing. A comprehensive education in the blues lends itself directly to addressing the issue of how we as educators can keep music vital in the lives of our students and maintaining their interest in music well after schooling.

Yet the blues is conspicuously absent in the majority of our American music classrooms. It remains under-appreciated, under-valued, and, more significantly, under-studied in our schools. As the foundation of so much of the music that transpired here in the United States for over more than a century, and is appreciated and consumed globally, it becomes hard to reconcile the apparent dismissal by our music educational institutions of such a truly American art form.

As profound as the blues has been to the national music experience, it has only occasionally entered the American classroom, mostly through individual teachers who were committed blues fans and who created their own methods to integrate the music into curricula.” (pbs.org)

The goal of this thesis is to provide music educators with suggestions of how to make the blues a part of their instruction, presenting it as a vibrant and ‘living’ art genre, vital to the understanding of our own American musical heritage. In it, the structural components of the blues, i.e., melodic, harmonic, and stylistic elements, that give the blues its unmistakably characteristic sound, are examined. I address the limitations of using a European educational model for blues and jazz instruction whose musical
aesthetic differs substantially from the blues and jazz aesthetic, and whose sole purpose is the perpetuation of a tradition that arguably holds decreasing relevance for our students. I observe how a blues education can fit into comprehensive and discipline-based approaches to music education as well as the National Standards and, in so doing, broaden our pedagogical approach to teaching the blues. I explore the music, its history and culture, viewing ‘music as culture,’ and an African-American heritage whose contributions define so much of our American music. As well, I stress the importance of creating a classroom culture whose pedagogical approach fosters an authentic understanding of the blues and other improvisatory genres through singing, listening, and ultimately performing. A study of the blues can provide our students with new practical possibilities and perspectives for experiencing and generating music.

Harold Mabern’s declaration was a call to understand our musical heritage and the African-American culture that created and inspired so much of the music we call American. If we are to remain vibrant and relative in our students’ lives, music educators would do well to heed Mr. Mabern’s admonition and respond appropriately.
Chapter 2

So What is the Blues?

While most educators have some familiarity with the blues and can recognize its characteristic “bluesy” sound, defining the blues is not as simple as it may appear. The term “blues” carries with it several connotations. It can be used to denote a feeling or mood, a particular musical style, and a musical form with a set harmonic structure. (Reeves, 1997, 115) These distinctions should be clear in the minds of educators to avoid any confusion when teaching students. Further complicating the matter of defining the blues is a century’s worth of development and transformation—from the early rural blues to its more recent manifestations. Walt Weiskopf explains:

There are many different kinds of blues as there are cultures on this planet. There are rock blues, jazz blues, country and western blues, hip-hop blues, funk blues, fusion blues and just plain blues, to name a few. A blues can be in any meter. Blues can be in a major key, a minor key or any other key. A blues can be quiet or loud, happy or sad. (Cited in Aebersold, 1981, v-vi)

So, what is the blues? How do we define this uniquely African-American genre that has had such a profound impact on the world’s music? As witnessed above, any generic definition of the blues may prove problematic to the blues purist. Criteria for classification are clouded by variables in structure, timbre, texture (i.e., vocal quality and orchestration), geography, and time. (Keil, 1966, 51) It will be suggested later in this discourse that adopting a broader and more liberal definition, i.e., flexibility in structure,
meter, and tonality, may better serve the individual expressive needs of our students in their experience of the blues. Yet, there are some general characteristics of this simple form which account for its resiliency and adaptability, and which will serve our purposes to illustrate.

The Blues Feeling

The blues, first and foremost, is a song form; a song style genre that is “rooted in religious songs, field hollers, work songs, and game songs.” (Herman, n.d., blues.org) The vocal style, an expression of individuality, is characterized by shouts, moaning, and the sliding and bending of the notes, vocal techniques drawn from the work song and field holler genres. Blues melodies are pentatonic in nature, and the melismatic articulation of the notes result in the flattened 3rd, 5th, and 7th notes of the major scale, providing that characteristic blues sound and feeling.

The flatted fifth is often referred to as the heart of “funk,” soul, or blues feeling, and it has even been said that blue notes can be found in all the cracks between the keys of the piano. The flatting or bending of thirds, sevenths, and fifths into quarter tones is part of a general defining feature, difficult to specify concretely, that may simply be called blues chromaticism. It is this characteristic more than any other that unites the single-chord drones and the vocal moans of John Lee Hooker and Blind Willie Johnson on the primitive end of the blues spectrum with the modal improvisations of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and other leaders of the jazz avant-garde. (Keil, 1966, 53)
These “concrete qualities of sound” (53), i.e., bends, slides, scoops, and moans are integral to the feeling and texture of the blues, and are a part of the vocabulary utilized by all blues performers. Inducting students into these vocal techniques provide a sound and necessary basis for not only blues improvisation, but jazz and rock improvisation as well. Developing a blues vocabulary, that is, an understanding of the idioms used by performers, speaks directly to ‘singing’ through your instrument and ‘ownership’ of improvisatory materials vital to a successful blues improvisatory musical experience.

*The Blues Form*

In its simplest form, the blues carries an AA’B structure and is usually performed over 12 measures, or bars, in an open-ended and recurring format. While the most common form of the blues is the 12-bar blues, in addition to the 12-bar form, there are blues of 8, 16, 24, and irregular numbers of bars, the latter being found in performances of the early rural blues styles.

Many rural bluesmen habitually drop a beat or a bar or add a half-bar or more to the standard twelve-bar verse, resulting in actual verse lengths of twelve and a half, thirteen, or thirteen and a half bars—often in the same tune…This edge-of-your-seat approach to improvisation is what makes [Blind Lemon] Jefferson classics like “Match Box Blues,” “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” and “That Black Snake Moan” perennially rewarding and surprising.” (Palmer, 2009, 56)

Three major developments had a significant impact on the evolution of these early rural forms: 1) the blues functioning as dance music; 2) the advent of the recording
industry; and 3) the migration of early bluesmen to urban centers. (Kiel, 1966, 50-68, 217-224; see also pbs.org and blues.org for related articles) As dance music, more instrumentalists were added, curbing the liberties and structural deviations utilized by solo performers. It is interesting to note that many of the early blues performers designated musical forms according to the dance steps performed to them, i.e., ‘cakewalk,’ ‘breakdown,’ or ‘slow drag.’ (Keil, 1966, 58) The record industry, with its three-minute versions of “classic” blues, exemplified by the recordings of Mamie Smith, ‘Ma’ Rainey, and Bessie Smith in the 1920s, contributed to the standardization of the blues form. As the blues migrated to the urban North and West, “a broader variety of structures develops… [with] much greater use of tags, codas, breaks, vamps, and other contrastive sections…” (Kiel, 1966, 54)

Most educators will understandably focus on the 12-bar blues, as it is the most common form. It should be noted, however, that the beauty and educational value of alternate forms should not be overlooked. Conceptually, alternate forms of 8-, 16- and 24-bar patterns provide ample opportunity for form and stylistic analysis. As well, alternate forms provide students more structural variety for creative expression in their compositions.

The standard blues begins with a statement (A), followed by a repetition of the statement, usually with some embellishment or alteration (A’), and concludes with a third stanza (B), which “resolves in some way the thought reiterated in the first two stanzas.” (Keil, 1966, 51) Within this 12-bar form, there are three call-and–response structures, each being four bars in length. Keil (1966) explains:
Typically the singer delivers a line or two in iambic pentameter over the first eight or nine beats, filling the remainder of the four-bar melodic phrase with complementary instrumental figures that usually lead to a word-for-word repetition of the first stanza, sometimes punctuated at the beginning or end with an exclamation like “yeah,” “Lord have mercy,” [or] “I said.” (51)

Early blues performers were soloists and provided their own accompaniment, usually on guitar. The call-and-response structures found in work songs and field hollers are reflected in the delivery of a line or two (call) and a complimentary instrumental passage (response), “that often carries as important a message as the preceding words. Following this interaction the blues chorus can be divided into six parts or overlapping calls and instrumental responses.” (Keil, 1966, 52) An understanding of the call-and-response structure, along with the resolving third stanza, provides an ideal model for improvisation that students, from beginners to advanced, can follow.

The Blues Harmony

For the history of the blues, it may be appropriate to think of harmony as being brought to an established vocal style. (Brothers, 1997, 188)

The harmonic structure of the blues utilizes the chords built on the 1\textsuperscript{st}, 4\textsuperscript{th}, and 5\textsuperscript{th} degrees of the scale (be it pentatonic, major, or minor), the so-called “I-IV-V” progression. The chords, each symbol representing one measure, are placed within the 12-bar structure as follows:
Chord substitutions will be addressed in more depth later in this discourse, yet extremely common to this basic 12-bar harmonic structure is the sub-dominant (IV chord) substitution occurring at measures 2 and 10, and the dominant (V chord) is typically introduced as a ‘turn-around’ in measure 12.

While the melodic structure of the blues can be more readily traced to the song forms found on the plantations, the genesis of the blues’ harmonic structure is less apparent. Perhaps, these European chords evolved from the plagal and authentic cadences of the church hymnody. Or, they may have been borrowed from the harmonic structure of the Celtic ballads that were an influence on the blues. It is feasible that the I, IV, and V chords were chosen simply because of the ease with which they harmonize the blues’ melodic structure. Whatever the case, the “ensuing reconciliation between harmony and melody” (Brothers, 1997, 190), in its 12-bar format, is an unmistakable and defining characteristic of the blues genre inspiring generations of jazz, rock, and American pop musicians for over a century.

The Blues Style

“The distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction, or execution in any art” (Webster). Musical style, therefore, means “characteristic language” or “characteristic manner of composition,” particularly with reference to the treatment of melody, harmony, rhythm, etc. (Apel & Daniel, 1972, 287)

Leonard Meyer elaborates on style in more depth when he says:
A musical style is a finite array of interdependent melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, textural, and formal relationships and processes. When these are internalized as learned habits, listeners (including performers and composers) are able to perceive and understand a composition in the style as an intricate network of implicative relationships, or to experience the work as a complex of felt probabilities. (Cited in Feld 1988, 76)

Defining and characterizing the various blues styles that have evolved over the course of a century presents a formidable challenge for music educators. The evolution of the blues in its many manifestations crosses cultural, economic, regional, and musical boundaries. As well, each blues style represents a series of “blendings within itself.” (Keil, 1966, 33) Further complicating any strict classification of the blues is the ‘migratory’ nature of the music. Keil (1966) explains:

The blues has always been a migratory music. First it was carried by men roving from town to town and from job to job; later it was disseminated by medicine shows, circuses, and other touring troupes in the South; in the 1930’s and 1940’s it spread via itinerant Territory bands[…] When these musical migratory patterns are juxtaposed to the population migrations accompanying the two world wars, from the Delta to the North, and from the Territories to the West Coast, the tracing and classification of blues styles become very complex indeed. The constant redistribution of all the more popular styles by the mass media increases this complexity still further. (60)
A study of these styles and their respective transformations over time presents substantial educational material and value for our students in their understanding of just how influential the blues has been to our own culture and musical heritage. Ideally, all forms of the blues and its various styles, or “schools,” would be presented, studied, and appreciated by our students throughout their public school music education. However, when it comes to teaching the various blues styles, it may serve educators to think more simply in terms of exploring the distinctive stylistic feature of *groove*. Feld (1988) writes:

I would[…] contend that all “grooves” and “beats” have ways of drawing a listener’s attention to them, no matter how subtle; moreover, one’s intuitive feelingful sense of a “groove” or “beat” is a recognition of style in motion. (76)

In *An Evening with Willie Nelson and Wynton Marsalis Playing the Blues* (Fuss, 2009), Marsalis demonstrates an approach to presenting a variety of American musical styles utilizing a two-beat groove (i.e., clapping on beats 2 and 4), over which he chants the rhythmic idioms of the respective styles (i.e., jazz, country, etc.), culminating in the distinctive blues shuffle. He states, “All the music is related…That’s what the blues is tellin’ you. It’s all the same thing.”

Defining the blues resists swift classification or definitive categorization. Such resistance is testament to the blues’ vitality as a dynamic and ‘living’ art form. The blues can mean different things to different people. It bears repeating, these distinctions should remain clear in the minds of educators as they endeavor to present and teach the blues in order to avoid confusion among students. Such distinctions offer multiple points of entry to musical knowledge and understanding. While a cursory theoretical analysis, what
Elliot (1995) terms “formal knowledge,” is necessary, the blues in performance and practice, as with all music, transcends such analysis. Keil (1966) suggests:

In speaking of musical style generally, the analyst is usually well advised to concentrate on form, structural regularities, syntactic rules…Structure is a useful concept for making gross distinctions, but it is textural variations—voice qualities, instrumental accompaniments—which most clearly define a specific blues style and which makes any generic definition of the blues extremely difficult to formulate with any precision.

(51)

Immersion into different blues styles and, subsequently, different music cultures, provides a unique opportunity for students to understand how music in the larger sense and the process of music-making function and evolve in a variety of contexts. They learn how one form is adopted and transformed by a number of other cultures in different regions and time periods. Blues styles, then, are understood not solely as fixed systems, with set standards and practices, but, as will be discussed in the next chapter, are also appreciated as fluid and changing, developing over space and time.
Chapter 3
The Blues: History and Culture

_Everybody have the blues...but everybody’s blues aren’t the same, and everybody don’t express it the same way; they express it according to the type of raising and the surroundings that they had been around._

Willie Dixon (2011)

A comprehensive study of the blues that includes its African retentions, pre-blues genres, emergence in the late 19th century, to its more contemporary cultural, socio-cultural and regional manifestations, through processes of “diffusion, acculturation, and syncretism” (Keil, 1966, 31) that took place over centuries, provides music educators and their students an ideal foundation for understanding our American musical tradition.

Tracing the evolution of the blues is to study not only the history of the African-American people and their culture, but also American history and musical culture as well. As Palmer (2009) suggests, “…the history of American music is the history of America, no more and no less,” (12) and the blues lies at the very roots of all American music.

From the plantations of the Mississippi Delta and points west, through the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, to the Great Migration north and westward, the pervasiveness of different blues styles throughout various regions of the country over nearly a century signifies the blues as a cultural phenomenon and blues music “as a diverse human practice.” (Elliott, 1995, 185)

The blues, a mix of African and New World musical influences, spread from its birthplace in the Mississippi Delta through Louisiana and Texas, northward to Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and beyond as freed slaves and their descendants left the South in search of better lives in
northern cities in ‘The Great Migration’ of African Americans in the early to mid 1900s. As the new musical form spread across the country, countless styles of blues emerged. Each region imparted its own flavor and culture as jazz, gospel, country, and ragtime all fused with the blues in various combinations to create an endless variety of blues styles. By the 1950s and 60s the blues had crossed the Atlantic and young audiences and musicians in Great Britain launched a blues revival with their reverent admiration of American blues music. The blues blended into rock, and as rock and roll took center stage the blues faded into the background for many listeners and record buyers. But in the early 1990s, a renewed interest in American roots music spurred a resurgence of the blues and the art form… (pbs.org)

One of the challenges facing our profession is providing our students with an understanding of their rich musical heritage and culture. According to Elliott (1990), the musical macroculture of the United States encompasses a wide range of musical cultures including classical, jazz, and various pop and rock genres (160) and, typically, students’ exposure to their own musical heritage is limited:

[W]hile music is inherently multicultural, and while the United States… [is] musically pluralistic, many music teachers…take the opposite view (knowingly and unknowingly). That is, many school music programs seem to limit students to one or two Western classical practices, or one or two jazz or pop practices. Thus, students not only fail to learn that MUSIC is a
diverse human practice, they fail to understand that MUSIC is a diverse
national, regional, and local practice. (Elliott, 1995, 208)

A comprehensive study of the blues offers at least one solution to this problem.
As a feeling, a style, and a structure, the blues has permeated and influenced nearly every
American musical genre. Its study provides an introduction to a number of musical
cultures found here in the United States, including jazz, country, folk and rock, as well as
a West African tradition from which all American music is ultimately derived. (Palmer,
2009, 3) And, while a study of the blues on its own would not constitute a multicultural
education, it does fit quite readily into a multicultural curriculum. African, Arab,
European, Spanish, and Latin American influences were all transformed by an African-
American culture and an African-American sensibility, in various regions and contexts,
into various blues and blues-based genres over the course of centuries. (Oliver, 1970, 41;
Palmer, 2009, 53)

Presenting multiple blues styles in a historical and cultural context would bring to
light its vibrancy as a ‘living,’ dynamic and fluid art form, challenging any
preconceptions of the blues as ‘stagnant and unchanging,’ relegated to a specific time and
place, or what Keil (1966) refers to as the “moldy-fig mentality.” (34) In addition, a
cultural context would allow music educators to achieve one of the central goals of a
humanist education, namely, “self understanding through ‘other-understanding.’” (Elliott,
1990, 164) A variety of styles and contexts would introduce students to a wide variety of
musical practices.

In this chapter, I explore the development of the blues from a historical and
cultural perspective. This overview is by no means exhaustive, but is intended to provide
educators with an outline of the more significant events in the blues’ complex history by examining its West African vocal and instrumental roots, its development as a song and dance form on the plantations, its emergence in the late 19th century, and subsequent manifestations throughout various regions of the United States well into the 20th century.

Africa and the Blues

In *What Prospective Teachers Need to Know about Black Music* (1996), Rosita M. Sands writes:

> Prospective music teachers need to understand that black music is the music of a variety of cultures, including that of Africa, and any paradigm employed to examine the music must allow it to be understood as a body of musical expressions with fundamental and defining characteristics that are linked to and emanate from the music and culture of Africa. (227)

For most scholars researching African retentions in the blues (see Oliver, 1970; Kubik, 1999; Peretti, 2009), all roads lead to the savannah hinterland of West Africa—from Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Upper Volta, Niger to northern Nigeria. (Oliver, 1970, 88)

The vocal and instrumental traditions of the savannah cultures offer striking parallels to the musical techniques and usages found in the blues. (Nketia, 1973, 9)

Stylistically, the music of the savannah hinterland is characterized by the use of stringed instruments, i.e., long-necked lutes (xalam) and one-stringed fiddles (goge), pentatonic tuning patterns, a relatively simple rhythmic structure using subtle off-beat accents, and a vocal style of Arab/Islamic influence. (Kubik, 1999, 16) Samuel Charters notes that in Africa there was “a strong tradition of guitar-like instruments, and most of
the early accompaniment styles in the blues seem to have grown from the rhythmic finger picking styles that developed in West Africa.” (cited in Oliver, 1970, 26)

Figure 1. Savannah hinterland of West Africa. (Retrieved from Kubik, 2007, *Africa and the Blues*, www.afropop.org)

Tunings of strings in West African instruments, i.e., ‘cross-note’ tunings, and the use of drone strings, find parallels in early blues practice. (96) Similarities in methods of fingering, i.e., “the picking and brushing of the strings by *khalam* players, the sliding of
fingers along the strings; even the maneuver in which the griots bring the thumb over the arm of the goroumi to stop a string; or the manner in which the player of a monochord fiddle, the gnagnour, places the shell of the resonator against his chest, ‘alley-fiddle’ style,” are, likewise, all techniques utilized by early blues players. (96)

“The strongest vocal tradition extending to the very roots of slavery lies in the work-song.” (Oliver, 1970, 57) The “collective” work songs found in the savannah agricultural region exhibit a “leader-and-chorus pattern,” where “the vocal line of the leader is often improvised and changes with every verse sung, while the responses of the chorus vary little” (59) and were similar to those sung on the plantations in the United States. (57) Kubik (1999) cites Paul Oliver who “pointed to the presence in northern Ghana of a declamatory song style, widespread in the savanna culture area… could have given rise to the historical forms of ‘field hollers’ in the southern United States and some vocal techniques in the blues.” (65-66)

The flattened 3rd, 5th, and 7th notes, along with melismatic vocal techniques, are said to be of an Arab/Islamic influence on that region, superimposed on the pentatonic scales found in the “ancient Nigritic” song style traditions. (Kubik, 1999, 95)

A declamatory vocal style with wavy intonation, melisma, raspy voices…[are characteristics] shared with the broader realm of Islamic music and reflect long standing historical contact between the west African savanna and sahel zone through the Sahara with North Africa and even the Near East in view of regular pilgrimages to Mecca. (63)

The Islamic influence also brought dramatic changes to spirituality and sacred music of the inland regions of West Africa in melodic improvisation and frequent melisma.
One additional influence on West African music, perhaps overlooked, was the arrival of Christian missionaries to the area in the 1500s, imposing hymns on the converts. (10)

For many centuries the savannah and grassland peoples have been assailed by Muslims from the north, so that many of them have totally embraced Islam. Others have partially retained their pagan animism, while some tribes are divided between pagan and Muslim groups. To the south on the other hand, along the rain forest, the peoples have been exposed to Christianity and western missionaries, while their tribal religions are strongly animistic and in some cases, the Yoruba for instance, have a pantheon of gods. (Oliver, 1970, 41)

The music of the West African savannah hinterland is characterized by the predominance of pentatonic tuning patterns, and ‘blue’ notes are found in the music of this region, similar to that found in the blues. (Oliver, 1970, 95) Kubik (1999), in discussing the playing of double-bells (called “toŋ ito”) by Kutin musicians, notes that the fundamental four tones constitute a framework of “root,” “fourth,” “fifth,” and “octave” (133), i.e., C-F, G-C. The so-called “flattened” 3rd and 5th are not scalar in conception, but a result of “high,” “medium,” and “low” singing where the “medium” accounts for the partials that result in the flattened sound, hence, F-E-flat-C for the man and C-B-flat-G for the woman. If one merges the notes, we get the pitches found in the C blues pentatonic scale, i.e., C-E-flat-F-G-B-flat-C. (137-138) Interestingly, Kubik goes on to hypothesize that because men and women rarely sang together, it was up to the solo blues singer to “express both scalar ranges reminiscent of the west central Sudanic
dichotomy…” (144) With regard to the flattened 5th, the characteristic note found in the blues scale may be the result of the “memory” of Arab/Islamic modes, or simply a blue note on top of a blue note. (151)

Another tradition from this region, maintained by Africans in the New World, is found in the performance of the griot, a soloist accompanying him/herself on a stringed instrument, singing narratives told to small audiences with the audience participating as a responding chorus. (Kubik, 1999, 27) The griot was an itinerant spokesman and master poet for his society, transmitting oral history and recording current events, through songs of “praise and ridicule.” (Oliver, 1970, 96) The blues singer is often compared to the griot; blues songs reflect black life and thought, documenting the dispositions and sentiments of southern African-Americans living in the face of hostility and repression. (Peretti, 2009, 20) Early blues texts commented liberally on current events and presented the attitudes of black society. (Oliver, 1970, 98) Today, the griot tradition is maintained by rap and hip-hop artists.

Kubik (1999) suggests that the West African string-instrument-accompanied soloist traditions had a good chance for survival and development on the plantations. (99) As well, stringed performance traditions were maintained in the New World as musicians from the savannah regions “found opportunities to profit from their skills.” (Oliver, 1970, 88)

Negro musicians were encouraged to play for plantation dances and halls at the ‘Big House’ and exercising their abilities gave them a chance to escape the drudgery of field work. The bands of fiddles, banjos, tambourines and triangles accompanied by slaves ‘patting Juba’ on thighs...
and knees, meant that Bambara and Wolof, Mandingo and Hausa had the opportunity to play in groups of a kind to which they were accustomed, and on instruments with which they were more or less familiar. (88)

*Pre-Blues Genres*

In Africa, music is an integral part of society and reflects “an approach to the practice of music as a form of social activity in community life…” (Nketia cited in Palmer, 2009, 4) African slaves were torn from family and community and placed in an abhorrent and de-humanizing environment in the New World. It was through their music, primarily singing and dancing, that they sought to maintain their identity and retain and re-establish their sense of community. (Curtis, 1988, 23) As discussed, the strong vocal and string traditions of West Africa with their unique melodic and rhythmic elements were maintained in the musical forms and styles performed by Africans in their New World environment. Jeanette Robinson Murphy, writing in 1899 on African survivals, recalled that “old ex-slaves…again and again assured me the songs they sang came from Africa.” (cited in Oliver, 1970, 66)

Much African music is strictly functional, accompanying work or rituals, and in the New World the most widespread development was the work song, which flourished under the system of forced labor. (Cooke, 1998, 11) Work songs were deliberate in tempo and accompanied by “rhythmic beat provided by clapping, footstamping or the blow of an axe or other heavy implement.” (11) Lyrics were descriptive of the day’s toils and were often fused with “mixed-meaning” or double-entendre. (Werner, 1984, 16)

Related to the work song was the “field holler,” or “shout,” an improvised song in which the song leader creates lines of verse sung to the rest of the work forces who, in
turn, respond in a call-and-response structure. This genre of African-American music, “laced with cries of despair,” provided rhythmic accompaniment to the monotony of labor. (Peretti, 2009, 24) Significant in these song forms are the “bending, sliding, and scooping of notes” and their use of the flattened 3rd, 5th, and 7th notes. (Werner, 1984, 16)

In the wake of slave revolts in the early 1800s, expressions of faith by free and enslaved African-Americans went underground for fear that slave religion was inherently abolitionist. (Peretti, 2009, 24) In hidden places, such as forests and swamps, religious traditions survived in the form of ring shouts, which were a singing and dancing ritual that followed a formal Christian service. (29)

Shouts are one of the main devices that link verbal and musical inflections in African and African American music traditions. Dancing in a circle, in shuffling or in elaborate steps…members of the slave community used ring shouts to situate Biblical stories in African American culture. Since drums were banned by law, slaves used bones, wood, pattin’ Juba (hands on hips and thighs) and the heavy treading of their feet to supply the hypnotic rhythm. (29)

Worshippers, dancing in a counter-clockwise direction, would gradually intensify in tempo and excitement. (Oliver, 1970, 56) The practice is similar to the circular dances performed in West Africa called saut, which is Arabic for ‘shout,’ used by West African Muslims to refer to walking around the Kaaba. (57)

Evolving from the work songs and shouts were spirituals and gospel music. The church, “the only committed community institution,” offered solace and a sense of community for African-Americans in their oppressive environment. (Lomax, 1979)
As slaves — and then freed slaves — became more integrated into American culture, the church became a regular part of their Sundays. While the white churchgoers sang formal hymns, the black Southerners brought their passionate vocals, clapping, stomping, and call-and-response methods of singing into their own churches. By the 1870s the resulting style of song, called the Negro Spiritual, became an integral part of music in the south and was a major influence in the evolution of the blues. (pbs.org)

Spirituals were a distinct genre of sacred music expressing the “emotional and sacred yearnings…” of African-Americans. (Peretti, 2009, 28) They originated when African-American slaves borrowed from Baptist and Methodist hymnody, combining lines and memorable phrases from hymns with their own favorite Biblical parables and folk legends. (28)

Slave preachers often broke into song…repeating key phrases and lessons in a manner that evolved into makeshift call and response lyrics. Scholars have named this genre of sermons homiletic spirituals. (28)

Similar to the work songs, these spirituals were “sorrow songs” and expressed “grief, longing, and supplication.” (28)

Gospel music, in contrast to the spiritual, evolved from European church music and replaced the “hellfire and damnation” message with a more joyous message of freedom and the “wonderment of heaven.” (Werner, 1984, 16) Inspired by traveling evangelists, these songs, also known as “jubilee songs,” were accompanied by clapping
and vocal interjections and celebrated “triumphant tales from scripture…[and] more general feelings of elation.” (Peretti, 2009, 29)

The instruments, materials, and instrumental techniques adapted by slaves in the New World were also derived from West Africa. The fiddle (goge) and banjo (xalam) were the most prominent, “with hand drums, tambourines, bones, rattles made from jawbones of animals, triangles, and fifes, whistles and flutes also often played.” (Oliver, 1970, 25). Among the white European immigrants, the fiddle was in itself a popular instrument. (25) In southern Appalachia, during the Reconstruction Era, Irish and African immigrants shared balladry, dance, instruments, i.e., the banjo and mouth resonated bow, as well as instrumental techniques. (Lomax, 1991) According to Oliver (1970), the music of the West African savannah regions would have accorded well with the Scottish and English folk forms. (81) This blending of cultures would eventually lead to the early developments in blues, country, and bluegrass musics.

Oliver (1970) notes that the ‘home-made instrument’ is almost a cliché in blues history, as many blues singers, including Big Bill Broonzy and Big Joe Williams, “first learned to play music on one-string instruments of their own manufacture.” (84) The diddley bow, found in the backwoods areas of Mississippi, including southern Mississippi, figures most prominently among these instruments and is derived from an old children’s game popular for generations. Palmer (2009) explains:

[It] involved making a toy instrument, a kind of one-string guitar or musical bow, often simply by nailing a length of broom wire to the side of a cabin. A rock is inserted under the string as a moveable bridge, and the wire is played, bottleneck guitar-style, with some sort of slider. (114)
The diddley bow was adapted from the central African monochord zither which is also played with a slider, i.e., a knife or trinkets, and was instrumental in the development of young blues players who would transfer the techniques to blues guitar. (115)

Other instruments utilized during this period were the mouth-resonated bow, a direct descendant of the African chipendani, played by both African-Americans and the whites of Appalachia (Oliver, 1970, 42), the washboard and washtub bass derived from the earth bow (110), and the tambourine found in the small ensembles of Senegal, which utilized a tapped calabash or hollowed squash gourd. (110) It should be noted that, after the Stono Rebellion of 1739, drums were banned for new African arrivals, so percussion instruments were made from wood, bone, and stone to provide rhythm accompaniment for song and dance. (Peretti, 2009, 29) Hand-clapping, i.e., pattin’ Juba, was used in ring shouts and remained a characteristic of Sanctified and Pentecostal church services. (Oliver, 1970, 56)

According to Palmer (2009), one musical tradition awaits integration into American history, that of black fife-and-drum music. (4-5) Documented by folklorist Alan Lomax (1979), this tradition, “replete with wordless vocal moans, ‘hot’ rhythms and cross-accent,” improvisation, and melodic material that is holler-related and primarily pentatonic, may represent “the most West African sounding folk music ever recorded in the United States.” (5) Upon listening, I am struck by similarities to modern day blues and jazz ensembles.

Blues History: Early Blues

During the period in U.S. history following the Reconstruction, the blues developed in an environment characterized by poll taxes, the sharecropper system, and
“Jim Crow.” (Weissman, 2005, 2) It was in this climate of oppression, i.e., a reversion to the conditions of slavery, that the song style of the blues emerged. The expressions of woe, desperation, and ultimate “confrontation” lie at the very heart of the music and its development. (Murray, 2011)

Most musicologists point to the 1890s as the period when the blues originated, but specific areas of origin differ, some claiming that it started in the Mississippi Delta, others contending that it was an “independent and simultaneous invention in various southern African American communities and locales.” (Weissman, 2005, 1)

No matter what you may have heard or read, nobody knows where the blues began—or even if it did begin in a particular place [sic], as opposed to springing up in several places more or less simultaneously. The Mississippi Delta is often credited with being the “cradle of the blues,” but there is evidence that the music was flourishing in Texas at least as early as it was in Mississippi. (Palmer, 2009, 53)

Early rural blues styles are characterized by “unstandardized forms, unamplified guitars, ‘strong beat’ phrasing, and [were] performed with spoken introductions and endings.” (Keil, 1966, 217) Originally performed in a solo context, i.e., playing for one’s own satisfaction (57), these early rural forms would also develop into group settings providing the music for friends and family at barbeques, parties, and dances. (58) Three geographic regions are significant stylistically: the Mississippi Delta, the Territories—Texas and the adjoining sections of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, plus Missouri and points west—and the Southeastern seaboard, specifically Georgia and Florida. (59)
The country blues found in the Mississippi Delta features “drones, moans, the bottleneck guitar techniques, constant repetition of melodic figures, harmonica tremolos,” and “a heavy sound and rough intensity.” (59) Singers from this region include Muddy Waters, J. B. Lenoir, Little Walter, Howlin’ Wolf, Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, and John Lee Hooker. (Keil, 1966, 59; 217; Palmer, 2009, 7)

In contrast to the Delta style, the Texas country blues tradition features a “single-string guitar technique, a relaxed vocal quality, and a lighter texture.” (Keil, 1966, 217) The Texas and Louisiana regions perhaps hold the most significance stylistically in the evolution of the blues. Palmer (2009) explains:

In Texas, a big, big state with a number of immigrant communities and small farmers in addition to its large cotton plantations, early blues musicians were exposed to an unusually broad range of influences: mariachi bands and flamenco-inspired guitarists from Mexico; French-speaking Cajun and zydeco bands; the polkas and other accordion-driven dance music of German and Eastern European settlers; a wide spread jazz scene, with sophisticated music heard not only in the cities but out in the rural “territories” as well; old time hoe down music. To some degree Texas blues absorbed all these influences. And the blues was a prime ingredient in later Texas styles such as Western swing, honky-tonk, and rockabilly. (54)

This area is also responsible for the origins of boogie-woogie, attributed to “black pianists who entertained workers in the isolated, backwoods lumber and turpentine camps of eastern Texas and western Louisiana…around the turn of the century.” (54)
addition, it featured the introduction of the 12-string guitar, imported from Mexico, to the blues as exemplified in the music of Huddie Ledbetter ("Leadbelly"). (55) Representative bluesmen from this region also include Blind Lemmon Jefferson and Lightnin’ Hopkins. (Keil, 1966, 218) Contemporary artists from this region include Texas-based groups like ZZ Top and Stevie Ray Vaughn and Louisiana-based blues artists such Professor Longhair and Dr. John.

Blues styles of the Eastern seaboard and hill country incorporated elements of white folk music and standard 12-bar forms were commonplace. (217) This area produced such blues artists as Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Blind Boy Fuller, and Peg Leg Howell. (217) Country music artists associated with the blues from this region include Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams. (218)

Classic Blues: 1920s to early 1930s

One night in 1903 W. C. Handy got stuck waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi, fell asleep, only to be awakened by a ragged black man sitting next to him singing about “goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog” while sliding a knife across the strings his guitar. (pbs.org) Handy would go on to standardize the musician’s improvisations, and, in 1912, transcribed and published sheet music for “Memphis Blues,” popularizing the genre that came to be known as the “blues.” (pbs.org)

The advent of recording technology during this time led to the first stars of the Classic blues style. In the 1920s, Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” on the Okeh label sold over a million copies. (Herman, n.d., blues.org) This success prompted the creation of “race records,” which were performed by African-American musicians and targeted to an exclusively African-American audience. Record companies, e.g.,
Paramount, began recording *rural* singers when they discovered that record sales were rising in the South. (Keil, 1966, 55) The subsequent recording careers of legendary artists including Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Alberta Hunter, all African-American women, were also established at this time. (pbs.org; Keil, 1966, 56) LeRoi Jones (aka Amari Baraka) comments on this phenomenon:

> There were several reasons why women became the best classic blues singers. Most of the best known country singers were wanderers, migratory farm workers, or men who went from place to place seeking employment. In those times unless she traveled with her family it was almost impossible for women to move about like a man. (cited in Keil, 1966, 56)

Male artists, including King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Earl Hines, were also recorded during this period.

The classic blues would bridge the gap between rural Southern styles typically associated with men and the Northern style that was sung by women and geared toward gospel and religious music. (Herman, n.d., blues.org) These Classic female performers were accompanied by “stride” piano and jazz musicians who provided instrumental responses in relatively standard forms with regular beginnings and endings. (Keil, 1966, 218) Male singers from the 1920s and 30s who utilized “blues,” “boogie-woogie,” and “rolling-bass” piano styles were Fats Waller, Tampa Red, Lonnie Johnson, Carr and Blackwell, Bill Broonzy, and Memphis Slim. (220)

As mentioned, the blues has always been a migratory music, first disseminated via bluesmen traveling from town to town, and later by “medicine shows, circuses and other
touring troupes in the South.” (Keil, 1966, 60) It was in Texas and the Territories, during the mid-1920s through the early 1940s, that perhaps the most significant developments in blues, jazz, and American music as a whole took place, when eight-piece bands, known as Jump Bands, toured the southwest. (Keil, 1966, 61-66; see also Palmer, 2009, 53-59, 72-76) Kansas City became the mecca for blues and jazz musicians from surrounding states who viewed the blues and jazz as one entity. (Keil, 1966, 61-62) Characterized by shouting vocals, big band accompaniments replete with riffs, shout choruses, and a heavy four-to-the-bar swing time flow, the music from this period set the stage for urban blues and the more commercial offshoots of rhythm and blues (R&B) and rock and roll. (61) A list of the musicians and artists from this era reads as a veritable “who’s who” in the worlds of swing, the golden age of jazz, and be bop. It includes Hot Lips Page, Jimmy Rushing, Joe Turner, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian, Walter Brown, Louis Jordan, and Count Basie, to name a few. (61) The documentary The Last of the Blue Devils-The Kansas City Jazz Story (Ricker, 1979) is a wonderful resource for students and fans of this era. Jazz musicians would go on to embrace the blues, making it a permanent fixture in the jazz repertoire.

City Blues

In the 1940s, Memphis and St. Louis became important centers in the evolution of the blues, synthesizing rural traditions and citified blues. (pbs.org) As African-Americans continually migrated north, traditional instruments such as the piano, guitar, and banjo were mixed with the flavor of Memphis jug bands, prominent in the 1920s and 1930s, that included clay jugs, kazoos, and wash boards. Influenced by touring bands during this period that featured electric guitar and tenor saxophone, this new hybrid of music, the
“Memphis synthesis,” evoked a “good-time” feel versus the more dramatic and melancholy expressions found in the Delta blues. It is a blend of gospel with the added accompaniment of electric guitar and bass, along with a discretionary use of saxophone and trumpets, and would also influence the development of rock and roll and R&B. After World War II, Memphis and Beale Street would become a blues center, second only to Chicago, featuring such artists as Roscoe Gordon, B. B. King, Memphis Minnie, Albert King, and John Lee Hooker.

Urban Blues

During the 1920s, lured by the promise of more plentiful jobs and opportunities, more than half a million African-Americans migrated from the Mississippi Delta to northern cities like Chicago and Detroit, where, in turn, the rich musical traditions of the South would be transformed by the urban experience.

The Great Migration continued through the mid-1900s, establishing Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, and Memphis as major blues centers. It is in Memphis and, perhaps more significantly, Chicago and Detroit during the late 1940s through the 1950s that one of the more critical stylistic developments in blues evolution occurs, namely, urban blues. The advent of technology and amplification, found in the Memphis synthesis, would influence the development of a blues style that would “take the country blues sound, add more musicians, and amplify it all for a city audience.” According to Palmer (2009), the music of legendary Delta blues singer Robert Johnson represents the crucial transition from rural to urban blues styles. Johnson’s artistry had a direct influence on the post-war electric blues styles of Elmore James, Wolf, Waters, and other Chicago based performers. This new electric blues style would feature a half-sung, half-spoken
vocal, ‘lead’ electric guitar, amplified harmonica, piano, electric bass, and drums, with sax solos and horn sections added to the guitar and piano of earlier blues styles, and was performed in the standard blues band format commonly used today. (pbs.org; Keil, 1966, 61)

Exemplified in the music of Muddy Waters, the urban style represented a change in ideology, from the often disparaged ‘country’ culture of the rural South in favor of the more aggressive and relevant northern urban attitude. (Palmer, 2009, 114) In addition, the creation of Chess records in 1950s Chicago would establish the careers of such legendary artists as Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, and Willie Dixon. Other Chicago based artists include Big Bill Broonzy, Buddy Guy, Paul Butterfield, J.B. Lenoir, and Koko Taylor. (pbs.org; see also Palmer, 2009, 44)

The blues began to make its way in the 1940s and early ’50s across the Atlantic to England, where it influenced blues disciples and devotees such as John Mayall, Brian Jones, Robert Plant, and Eric Clapton. Legendary blues performers including Robert Johnson, Elmore James, Muddy Waters, and Howlin’ Wolf would significantly influence the music of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Cream, and Led Zeppelin, garnering world-wide attention to this simple African-American folk genre. (pbs.org)

The rest, as they say, is rock and roll history.
Chapter 4

The Blues, Comprehensive Musicianship, and the National Standards

Because music is a basic expression of human culture, every student should have access to a balanced, comprehensive, and sequential program of study in music. Music Educators National Conference (1994), 13.

Since the mid-20th century, music education has witnessed a number of significant developments and changes in music education philosophy and methodology (Mark, 1996). The adoption of the National Standards for Music Education, drafted in 1994 as part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, represents the culmination of these developments in approaches to music education including conceptual learning, Comprehensive Musicianship, Disciplined Based Arts Education, and the inclusion of world and multicultural studies into the music education curriculum. Organized into nine music content areas (Music Educators National Conference, 1994), the National Standards recommend that children be proficient in not only performing, but also improvising, composing, and understanding relationships between music and the other arts and disciplines. (Madura Ward-Steinman, 2007, 25) What follows is a look into how a blues study can fit into this comprehensive set of educational goals for music instruction and suggestions for implementing the Standards in a comprehensive blues education.

It should be noted that, while the focus here is obviously the blues and blues education, references to jazz are inevitable. The two styles are inextricably linked throughout their respective evolutionary histories. The blues influenced the development of jazz and, later, jazz influenced developments in the blues. (Gridley, 1994, 32-34; Keil,
At one point during the 1930s and early 1940s, “jazz and blues became so tightly fused that the musicians themselves usually made no distinction between the two fields.” (Keil, 1966, 62) Educators will no doubt include a discussion of one style in the teaching of the other. Accordingly, for those jazz educators who value and appreciate the need for a comprehensive approach, the issues and topics addressed below with regard to the blues involve similar consideration as would apply to teaching jazz.

**Standard 1: Singing, Alone and with Others, a Varied Repertoire of Music**

Represented in a variety of styles, tempos, and grooves, the blues offers an extensive library of songs from which to choose (see Appendix A: Selected Blues Titles). It is a form that avails itself in a number of different cultural contexts and musical settings. Rural, urban, jazz, country, folk, and rock blues are among the many styles that can be introduced to students as they learn about their American musical culture and heritage. Though a steady diet of blues songs would hardly constitute a “varied repertoire,” adding songs found in various blues styles would provide diversity to the existing selection of songs already found in a typical school music repertoire. In addition to blues songs, educators should consider the inclusion of game songs, work songs, spirituals, and even some R&B and popular tunes to the repertoire. While these songs may not necessarily fit the standard criteria for the blues, they would enhance a blues education through their use of the idiomatic language found in the blues.

One of the challenges teachers face in implementing this standard is requiring performances that are authentic to a particular blues style and practice. As mentioned in
Chapter 2, stylistic elements of texture and groove distinguish one blues practice from another. Helping students acquire a vocabulary of the rhythmic and melodic idioms utilized in various blues styles will assist teachers in creating authentic musical experiences for their students. Used in conjunction with the teaching and singing of songs, idioms would be presented in the second stage of the Whole/Part/Whole learning process. (Gordon, 1997, 260-261) Understanding the ‘language’ of the music, along with an expectation for students to perform pitched responses that are rhythmically “in the groove,” provides an effective strategy for teaching blues and jazz performance.

The singing of a varied repertoire in and of itself, however, would not constitute sound educational practice unless that varied repertoire reflects the concepts being presented in the music classroom. The selection of pieces for a repertoire should always correlate to conceptual and skills-based learning whereby the repertoire is used to reinforce those concepts. In blues music education, the repertoire, then, should be chosen to reinforce concepts fundamental to blues music and students would be required to sing with some understanding of authentic blues musical practice.

Another challenge facing teachers is finding authentic blues songs with texts that are appropriate for students to sing. Many blues lyrics involve blatant sexual references, a lifestyle of drinking and gambling, and a misogynistic view toward women. While these lyrics pale in comparison to some rap and hip-hop lyrics, we are still obligated as educators to be judicious in our song selection.

One obvious solution to this problem is to do some homework and search the internet for songs that are authentic and also contain suitable lyrics. Blues songs that have crossed over cultural lines usually contain less offensive lyrics. However, the key here is
to present the original version by the original artist to preserve authenticity. One may also find suitable lyrics in alternate verses of a song. Another alternative, though not generally recommended, would be to replace inappropriate lyrics where needed with different words or lines that would fit the general mood and rhyme scheme of the song. An excellent source for finding blues melodies and lyrics is The Blues Fakebook. (Mann, 1999) Examples of blues songs that would be considered appropriate are Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee’s *Cornbread and Peas*, Chuck Berry’s *Roll Over Beethoven*, and Muddy Waters’ *The Blues Had a Baby and They Called It Rock N’ Roll*, to name a few.

**Standard 2: Performing on Instruments, Alone and with Others, a Varied Repertoire**

There is an old adage espoused by many jazz musicians: “If you can’t sing it, you won’t be able to play it.” Essentially, what these musicians are saying is that, if you can’t hear and feel the music with understanding, or audiate, you won’t be able to respond and perform the music effectively and accurately. Gordon (1997) explains:

To audiate a melody, students must be able to sing, because when they engage in tonal audiation they unconsciously sing silently. To audiate rhythm, students must be able to move rhythmically, because when they engage in rhythm audiation they move unconsciously. (37-38)

Developing the ability to audiate melody and rhythm is fundamental to playing the blues and jazz. The ability to hear away from one’s instrument is then transferred to one’s instrument during performance. This approach is not only an invaluable tool utilized by all blues and jazz musicians, but it also provides teachers with an effective teaching strategy for solo and ensemble performance.
Conway (2008) expresses her concern for educators not providing enough opportunities for solo performances. (36) In the music classroom, settings for solo performances could be patterned after the way they exist in actual blues and jazz ensemble performances. That is, while a student solos, the other students could provide accompaniment through hand-clapping, rhythmic chanting, or through the singing or playing of harmonies and ‘shout choruses.’ Monson (1996) stresses the activity of music-making as something that creates community. (13) In certain jazz and blues settings, for example, audience participation is encouraged and can become quite animated, as the spirit moves, inspiring movement and dance, and even exaltations from audience members. (Berliner, 1994, 468-470) Classroom settings, as described above, maintain music-making as a communal activity while allowing for individual expression. Soloists would perform while having the support of their classmates. As audience members, listeners, and performers, fellow students would participate in and be a part of a musical community. In this light, everyone is involved. This would also enable teachers to observe individual performances while engaging the whole class in an authentic music-making experience.

*Standard 3: Improvising Melodies, Variations, and Accompaniments*

Conway (2008) suggests that “the standards intend for students to improvise within specific structures.” (36) The blues offers a simple and repetitive structure over which students can hone their improvisational skills. Its use of the three primary chords, I, IV, and V, in both major and minor, lends itself to improvising over other song and instrumental structures that utilize similar harmonic forms and structures. Through singing tonal patterns and chanting rhythm patterns with and without syllables and
learning root melodies by ear, students are able to comprehend where they are in the form and respond aurally. (Azzara, 1999, 22-23; Gordon, 1997, 55-83)

Yet, harmonic orientation is only half the battle for budding blues improvisers. Again, the use of idioms, rhythmic and melodic, plays an essential role with regard to issues of authenticity and ownership in blues performances. Idioms speak to culture and the traditions found in a variety of musical practices. In most improvisational settings, performers are obligated to express an understanding of the traditions that preceded them, not necessarily to re-create, but to transcend with understanding. (Berliner, 1994, 122-124; 273-276) Walter Bishop explains:

> It all goes from imitation to assimilation to innovation. You move from the imitation stage to the assimilation stage when you take little bits of things from different people and weld them into an identifiable style—creating your own style. Once you’ve created your own sound and have a good history of the music, then you think of where the music hasn’t gone and where it can go—and that’s innovation. (cited in Berliner, 1994, 120)

Learning rhythmic and melodic idioms specific to various blues practices places the music in a specific contextual setting. Students learn the *language* of the music while expanding their musical vocabularies. Too often, scales, specifically the blues scale, are introduced as the primary way for students to negotiate the harmonic changes of the blues with little or no regard to rhythm, phrasing, expression, or improvisational structure. Placing idioms in a call-and-response structure provides an efficient strategy for teaching blues improvisation and develops musicianship through comprehension. As Ornette Coleman suggests, “If you play a phrase that asks a question or makes a statement, and
then in your next phrase you answer that first phrase, then that’s a form of the blues.”
(cited in Palmer, 2009, 70)

**Standard 4: Composing and Arranging Music within Specified Guidelines**

Elliot (1995) suggests, “Composition and improvisation are not mutually exclusive but interdependent…What distinguishes an improvisation from a performance is the human effort to compose in real time.” (169) As such, similar considerations as apply to improvisation, i.e., listening with understanding, issues of cultural practice, traditions, idioms, and conceptual lessons involving the elements of music, also apply to arranging and composing. Here again, the blues provides a simple, specified structure within which to compose. As well, alternate blues structures, in major and minor tonalities or in different meters, present a more varied choice for providing structure and guidelines for composition instruction and activities.

One type of music-making activity that deserves considerably more attention in our music programs is song-writing. The blues as primarily a song form, utilizing an AA’B melodic form in iambic pentameter and a simple chord structure, provides a perfect model for introducing students to the art and process of writing songs. And, since the blues is found in a variety of styles and genres, students are again afforded a number of choices on which to pattern their compositions.

**Standard 5: Reading and Notating Music**

All of the well known approaches to music education, including Orff, Kodály, Suzuki, and Gordon’s Music Learning Theory, support the concept of “rote-before-note.”
Teaching music literacy, then, should be undertaken in a way that promotes audiation before the introduction of notation and presented in proper sequence, i.e., audiation, notation, and music theory. (Gordon, 1997, 37) Gordon (1997) explains:

Music literacy involves more than being able to read and write music notation. Just as language literacy includes the ability to listen, speak, read, and write language with comprehension, so music literacy includes the ability to listen to and perform music and to read and write music notation with comprehension. (38)

One concern regarding conventional notation is its inadequacy in representing blues and jazz practices accurately. Keil (Keil & Feld, 2005) points out, “in African and African-derived genres, illumination of syntactic relationships or of form will not go far in accounting for expression.” (54) Musical elements such as articulation, inflection, timbre, dynamics, and rhythmic feel, what Keil categorizes as “processural” (54), are but some of the elements that cannot be rendered in conventional notation nor gleaned from transcriptions. Transcriptions, as skeletal representations, provide little information about the fundamental stylistic features and idiomatic conventions of blues and jazz. Educators need to be aware of these limitations when introducing Western analytical tools into the blues classroom.

When teaching the blues and jazz, educators are, therefore, encouraged to develop strong music vocabularies in our students through listening, singing, and movement prior to introducing notation. Notation and theory would not be emphasized until a full understanding, specifically an aural understanding, of idioms and grooves are appreciated.
by the students. Through audiation, students develop an understanding of the flow of music. Gordon (1997) states: “There is value in being able to audiate the flow of music whether or not one understands notation or music theory, and jazz and folk artists demonstrate this every day.” (8)

*Standard 6: Listening to, Analyzing, and Describing Music*

The successful immersion of students into a number of blues cultures and their respective styles and practices requires continuous listening and a developed ability to analyze music. Guided listening activities in conjunction with sequential instruction and skills-based learning helps develop audiation and provides the foundation for cultivating the ability in our students to analyze music. (Conway, 2008, 37) Students are taught *how* and *what* to listen for, while developing the necessary vocabulary to discuss the elements of music intelligently. Through active and involved listening, students are introduced to a variety of musical cultures, discussing stylistic variations in texture, form, harmony, rhythm, and melody.

Whether listening privately or performing on stage, as musicians, we are in a constant ‘state of analysis,’ simultaneously engaged in listening and analyzing music. It is fundamental to how we learn and develop as musicians. Expanding the listening capacities of our students, including their ability to analyze, is integral to developing good musicianship. An increased understanding and awareness of blues and jazz music not only enhances enjoyment but is readily transferred to performance.
Standard 7: Evaluating Music and Music Performances

This standard suggests teachers should not only provide instruction in how and what to listen for but also the opportunity for analysis and, subsequently, evaluations which are to be articulated by the students. Conway (2008) states, “For children to evaluate music, they must have enough experience with a variety of music to make informed decisions about quality.” (38) In order for our students to make informed decisions about blues performances, they require exposure to a variety of blues cultures, traditions and music-making practices. Listening experiences in a variety of blues contexts provide an ideal setting for comparative analysis and discussion.

Guided classroom discussions which analyze blues works in their respective contexts would foster deeper understanding of the music and help students develop their own evaluative capabilities. Through evaluation, “the general music class becomes a forum for investigating music as a body of knowledge through inquiry and discourse…” (Sibbald, 1993, 33) The key here is for teachers to allow ample time for students to crystallize and articulate their ideas. As Brophy (1994) suggests, “If children are to come to believe their musical decisions are valuable, they must be given the time to formulate and express them.” (31) Evaluating music lends to the development of a discriminating ear. As performers, we are constantly engaged in the processes of digesting and evaluating music. Knowing why we like or dislike something is critical to self-assessment and musical development. It is one of the essential ways we, as performers, learn and forge a direction for our own musical development. Analysis, coupled with soundly articulated evaluations, i.e., informed musical judgments, lends to developing and creating a community of “musical thinkers.” (Pogonowski, 2001, 26)
Standard 8: Understanding Relationships between Music, the Other Arts, and Disciplines Outside the Arts

A comprehensive study of the blues lends itself readily to an interdisciplinary approach to music education. For example, tracing the developments of the blues including its African roots, pre-blues genres, and subsequent developments in many regions over nearly a century, provides lessons correlating to studies in History, Social Studies, and Geography. Studies of the unorthodox instrumental techniques utilized by blues performers—the use of foreign objects such as bottle-necks, rubber, metal, and glass mutes, the hand covering the bell or sounding board of traditional instruments to alter their sounds (Yasalaam, 1995, 357), Charlie Christian’s invention of the resonated guitar, a prototype of the electric guitar (Palmer, 2009, 11, 57), electronic amplification (Keil, 1966, 54), not to mention the advent of recording—all relate the blues to the subjects of science, acoustics, and technology. (see Rodgers, 2004; Kiel, 1966; and Palmer, 2009, 11) In a more superficial sense, theoretical analysis, i.e., the study of rhythm, harmony, and melodic intervals, finds a kinship with math studies. The study and composing of blues texts in AA’B form, using iambic pentameter and metaphor, correlate to poetry and creative writing activities found in English classes. Exploring the dance styles associated with blues music as well as certain African dance forms, which had a direct influence on the development of the blues, specifically, the ring shout and pattin’ Juba (Peretti, 2009, 29), associates blues music with the art of dance and movement.

The Standards specify that students should “identify ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with those of music.” (MENC, 1994, 16) As evidenced, history, geography, culture, technology (science), and dance, have all had a significant impact on the development of blues
music. An interdisciplinary approach can positively affect music teaching strategies by broadening our own perspectives as music educators. (Rodgers, 2004, 30) Some students will be drawn to the music through its relation to math and science while others will be stimulated by cultural and historical correlations. Still others will be moved to the blues through dance. Simply put, the more ways we can find to present music, the more effective we will be in engaging and reaching more students.

By bringing other disciplines into the music classroom, our students will be able to recognize the relatedness of music to other disciplines while enriching their own musical understanding. Providing students the opportunity to understand these relationships speaks to a balanced education that develops the “whole” child. (Elliot, 1995, 298) We, as music educators, are in a unique position to provide a holistic approach to education.

Standard 9: Understanding Music in Relation to History and Culture

The study of our American musical culture and heritage deserves considerable attention in our music classrooms. A comprehensive study of the blues from its African roots through its pre-blues genres, its subsequent manifestations since the late 19th century over regions from the Delta to points North and West, through two world wars, the industrial age, the Great Migration, and the social revolutions of the 1960s to the present satisfies the intention of this standard—one simple musical structure for introducing students to a variety of cultural styles, traditions, and music practices, i.e., “microcultures.” (Elliot, 1995, 208) As well, understanding the blues’ considerable influence on nearly every American genre provides students with a deeper appreciation of our American culture, both vernacular and cultivated, i.e., “macroculture.” (208) Students
begin to appreciate the inter-relatedness of music and culture. History influences culture,
culture influences music, music influences culture, and, in turn, culture influences
history. It is all related and should be presented thusly.

As with the previous standard, the study of history and culture are not isolated but
presented along with conceptual and skill-based learning to effect a broad-based
understanding of blues music. In this light, cultural study should not be taught separately
from music study, but should be presented simultaneously. The blues renditions of
Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams are worlds, or more accurately, cultures apart from
those of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. Presented in a cultural context, differences
in style become more easily discernable and, equally important, different styles are
validated in their respective contexts. Students’ induction into various cultures and
respective traditions and practices holds the key to musical understanding and cultivating
authentic blues musical performances.

The study of the blues also offers a unique perspective to American history as
experienced by Africans displaced from their homeland and brought into a foreign and
hostile environment. The music they created in the face of racial persecution and
oppression offers rare insight into the true power of music, as they sought to maintain
their African traditions and preserve their individual integrity and identity. (Curtis, 1988,
23; see also Keil, 1966, 13-18) The study of history and culture provides not only a time
and place but also places a “face” to the music. Elliot (1995) explains, “Culture is not
what people have, but something that people make.” (185) An understanding of blues
music through the lens of history and culture provides students the opportunity to
appreciate the music as a truly “diverse human practice (43).”
Summary

Armed with the guidance of the National Standards, we are finally in a position to expand our mission to better meet the needs of those we are pledged to serve. Bennett Reimer (1997), 38.

The blues holds a prominent and unique position in our American musical history and culture. Students are deserving of an understanding of their own musical heritage and the profound influence the blues has had on nearly every American musical genre and style. A comprehensive education in the blues provides students with such an understanding while offering a number of ways in which to engage students as they develop musically.

The purpose here was two-fold: 1) to substantiate and, thereby, validate a place for the blues in the music curriculum utilizing the National Standards as a benchmark for what every student should know and be able to do in music; and 2) to show how the Standards, in turn, can guide educators in providing a broad-based, comprehensive blues education. Through such discussions, it is hoped that more music teachers will come to appreciate the blues for its educational value and find a place for it in their music classrooms.

The Standards attempt to address the needs of “every” student, while calling for a broader scope of instruction in order to reach a wider student population. (MENC, 1994) Accordingly, a comprehensive blues education provides a venue for self-expression through such creative endeavors as writing songs, composing pieces, and improvising. As a major influence in the evolution of jazz, teaching the blues provides a solid foundation for students interested in a jazz education. Moreover, through appreciating the blues, students will develop a deeper understanding of the contemporary genres they listen to.
As music educators, we continually strive to keep music relevant in the lives of our students. Yet, in spite of all its worth, this truly American art form remains segregated from the mainstream music curriculum. In the next chapter, we examine several approaches to incorporating the blues in the music classroom.
Chapter 5

The Blues Classroom

The approach set forth in this chapter for teaching the blues in the music classroom is to create a micro-culture that replicates the way the blues is learned by musicians in the “real” world. Informed study sessions, apprenticeships, jam sessions, and, above all, listening to performances and recordings, all serve as educational venues for the development of performers in the blues and jazz community. (Berliner, 1994, 36-59) As we present the blues in various contexts and settings, through ‘guided’ listening, singing, and movement, we immerse our students in a number of blues cultures, traditions, and practices, while actively engaging them in authentic music-making experiences.

The issue of authenticity is critical to this discussion. Providing students with a broad-based understanding of blues music and its evolution speaks to history, tradition, and the basic stylistic conventions found in the blues. Cultivating such understandings are necessary in developing authentic blues performances where students “create” rather than merely “re-create” the music. The concept of the “blues classroom” offers teachers a way to integrate the types of learning that occur in the “outside” world into their music classrooms, providing students with a communal environment where authentic learning and practice can take place. In this educational setting, students develop “ownership” of blues materials, and their performances would ultimately reflect an understanding of blues musical practice, its roots, and its history.

The focus here is the blues and blues education; yet, ownership and authenticity are of equal concern to jazz educators. While the blues still struggles for its rightful place
in the music classroom, jazz, “America’s classical music,” on the other hand, has established a well deserved position of prominence in our institutions of higher learning, high school, and middle and elementary school music education. However, the institutionalized pedagogy of jazz does come with some consequence for a jazz community that reifies individuality while insisting on some link with tradition. There are critics, from within and outside the educational system, who express concern over authenticity in the particular type of jazz education being afforded our students. (Prouty, 2008) Typically, students are presented with a “scale-chord” approach to jazz study with little, if any, regard to individual expression, culture, tradition, or the “comprehensive base of aural musical knowledge that enables them to transform theoretical models effectively.” (Berliner, 1994, 28) James Lincoln Collier states, “With students all over the United States being taught more or less the same harmonic principles, it is hardly surprising that their solos tend to sound the same.” (cited in Prouty, 2008) Lou Donaldson expresses his concern for the development of young jazz musicians:

…all the players are sounding alike. They’re all working out of Oliver Nelson’s book. They play mechanical sequences of changes that will fit anything…they just improvise on the harmony in ways that have nothing to do with the song. (cited in Berliner, 1994, 280)

Melba Liston, speaking about graduates from programs that emphasize a theoretical approach to improvisation, remarks:

They don’t know a thing about jazz really…any style in the traditional way. You don’t feel the jazz thing, you feel the mechanical thing. Jazz is feeling, and I worry about this. I really advise them to study as much of
the history of jazz as possible—not by book or by transcription—but by ear...If they listened back to Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, the swing days, the forties, early Trane and Miles, and loved it, it would influence the way they play. (280)

Both blues and jazz educators should be discouraged from teaching improvisation solely through the scale-chord approach, as it supplies virtually no information with regard to the processural dynamic critical to blues and jazz performance. Even the use of lead sheets or printed scores, i.e., “fake books,” should be used only after students develop a facility for the idiomatic language contained in the musics. Howard Levy explains, “Fake books can really stultify your development if you have the wrong attitude toward them. Really, the best way to learn is to take tunes off records, because you’re utilizing your ear.” (93)

These theoretical models, mere skeletal representations, comprise “raw compositional materials” (181) that in and of themselves provide little toward developing creative expression and authenticity. The blues classroom culture discussed below and addressed throughout the body of this paper speaks directly to the development of authentic blues performance through a variety of educational activities critical to good musicianship that is also adaptable to jazz pedagogy. Cited in Berliner (1994), Lou Donaldson recommends aspiring jazz musicians to “concentrate on the blues” in order to absorb its special “feeling” and be able to project it in their playing. Without cultivating “that type of sound...you can never play jazz.” (68)

The blues classroom, represented here as a microcosm of blues culture and community, offers teachers and students a number of unique ways to explore, understand,
appreciate, and create blues music. Through ‘guided’ listening, students explore various blues styles and cultures that exist as a result of “geography and climate.” (M. Longo, personal communication, 2012) Through culture and history, students are exposed not only to different cultures and their music practices, but also the underlying “spirit” from which these styles derive and are created. Understanding stylistic conventions found in a variety of cultural contexts will lead students to discover the larger tradition of the blues that evolved from the delta to jazz to R&B to rock-and-roll. As Elliott (1995) suggests, “The educational process is one of inducting students in the way of life of a musical culture…” (206) He continues:

An effective way to increase students’ attention to and awareness of the cultural-ideological dimension of musical works is to confront students with musically productive problems of performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and/or conducting. Such active, artistic-cultural problem finding and solving obliges students to “live” a music culture’s ways of thinking, believing, and valuing; immerse themselves in the meanings of a music culture’s sounds as tones-for-them; and reflect critically on their personal responses to a music culture. (207)

In the micro-culture of the blues classroom, a sense of community is established through group music-making activities and musical fluency is developed through a combination of learning a large repertoire of blues songs and melodies, critical listening, singing, and movement. Students are constantly involved in creative music-making activities such as in-class arrangements, composing, and improvising, thereby becoming involved in active problem-solving, critical to any musician’s development. (Elliott,
Call-and-response structures and activities underlie all conceptual learning and assists in developing blues vocabularies while, in turn, serving to reinforce call-and-response as a structural imperative, integral to blues performance, improvisation, and composition. In this chapter, while references are made to “playing,” the focus primarily revolves around singing, listening, and movement activities. Encouraging good habits in these areas through audiation is critical to developing strong musicianship and is readily transferred to instrumental performance, improvisation, and composition. (Gordon, 1997, 11) Developing these habits early on will accompany students throughout their years of schooling as both instrumentalists and singers. Learning to ‘embody’ the music will provide students a foundation for authentic music-making experiences.

The Role of the Teacher

In establishing the ‘blues classroom,’ the music teacher is required to serve in a variety of roles, specifically, as master in the ‘master-apprentice’ model, enabler, and fellow discoverer. Lillian Baldwin writes, “Forget the teacher-pupil relationship and be the child’s companion on a splendid adventure. You have been over the road before, which should make you a desirable fellow traveler.” (cited in Reimer, 1997, 38)

Understandably, however, some teachers shy away from teaching the blues in the classroom since many have little or no previous experience with the improvised nature of blues music, or improvised music in general. (Barron, 2007, 19) To many, “improvisatory expression seems threatening, unfamiliar, or undeserving of interest.” (Moore, 1992, 63) I suggest that the blues is an ideal vehicle for instructors to become involved with improvisation. As musicians and teachers, we are accustomed to discovery and exploration, having experienced more than a few “ah-ha” moments in our musical
journeys. Sharing our personal revelations about learning the blues with students as they occur helps students identify with their own learning process while demonstrating respect for the musical ‘learning process’ in general. The role of teacher in the blues classroom, therefore, becomes that of one actively engaged in the whole learning experience, as opposed to that of the traditional “dispenser of knowledge.” (Barron, 2007, 21) Through guiding questions, such as “What could we do here?” and “Which option sounds better and why?”, teachers would assist students in the problem-solving process, in effect, teaching students how to teach themselves. In this setting, learning becomes more ‘process-’ than ‘product-oriented,’ providing a comfortable atmosphere for creative self-expression and “taking risks.” (Azzara, 1999, 24; Gordon, 1997, 85)

Establishing an Aural/Oral Culture through Call-and-Response

In aural/oral learning, listening to music involves the aural process and performing music involves the oral process. (Gordon, 1997, 89)

The unifying and defining structural imperative found in all blues styles is that of ‘call-and-response,’ which operates on a number of different levels in any blues performance. Also referred to as ‘statement-and-answer’ or ‘question-and-answer,’ this structure is most apparent in the instrumental interjections, or ‘responses,’ played after every sung or spoken phrase. (Keil, 1966, 4) Call-and-response can be extended to blues texts that commonly feature two short melodic phrases in both the A and A’ sections of the blues’ AA’B song form, as found in Muddy Waters’ The Blues Had a Baby and Billie Holiday’s Lady Sings the Blues. On the bandstand, call-and-response patterns are emulated through negotiated, reciprocal relationships between the soloist and supporting players providing antiphonal phrases and “simultaneous commentary.” (Berliner, 1994,
Instrumental or vocal interjections known as ‘shout choruses’ commonly provide “answers” to blues melodies. And, as Coleman suggested (see Chapter 4), ‘statement-and-answer’ is a defining characteristic of authentic blues improvisation.

In the blues classroom, therefore, educators are encouraged to use the call-and-response structure for all conceptual lessons, including rhythm, harmony, and perhaps most importantly, developing a blues vocabulary through idioms. Call-and-response games are both fun and engaging, and an effective method of developing good listening habits, powers of retention, and authenticity. (Baker, 1980, 50)

Baker (1980) suggests a number of ways call-and-response structures can be implemented in the music classroom:

In a group situation a number of options exist for call-and-response games: one to one (teacher to student, student to student, and so on), student to group, teacher to student to group, and round robin (teacher or group leader plays/sings a new phrase, then student two answers, then student three plays/sings a new phrase, then student four answers, and so on; a phrase incorrectly answered is attempted by the next student and then others until it is accurately reproduced. (48)

A conceptual lesson in itself, call-and-response is also an effective structure for introducing rhythmic and melodic idioms, vocal inflections, ornamentation, and improvisation, and can be used at any level. As students become comfortable with call-and-response techniques, teachers would naturally increase the musical challenges made on students as they develop musically. The key here is to keep call-and-response activities moving along in various combinations, challenging students in small
increments, teaching one concept and moving on to the next phrase or pattern as soon as correct responses are performed.

As we present the blues in various contexts and settings, it is important to note not only structural differences but rhythmic and melodic variances as well. Perhaps the one most significant element critical in defining and delineating different blues styles is the use of rhythm in establishing “groove,” e.g., two-beat, swing, and shuffle grooves.

Conceptual lessons exploring the rhythms and grooves contained in a variety of blues pieces should always be accompanied by movement. In fact, all singing, chanting, and performance activities should involve body movement. As Gordon (1997) explains, “…the only way rhythm can truly be understood musically is through body movement and the audiation of body movement.” (69) Having students march in time to the music while clapping on beats ‘two’ and ‘four,’ for example, develops appropriate and authentic movement for the blues and its related genres including gospel, jazz, rock-and-roll, and hip-hop. For younger students, where coordination may be a factor in accenting ‘two’ and ‘four,’ i.e., performing ‘back beat’ rhythmic phrasing, teachers might encourage patsching on beats ‘one’ and ‘three’ and clapping on beats ‘two’ and ‘four,’ thus maintaining an authentic sense of movement and feel.

**Using Rhythmic and Melodic Idioms**

As stated in Chapter 4, learning the blues requires an understanding and utilization of the idiomatic language found in a variety of blues styles. Through the study of idioms, teachers and students will discover, for example, why what works, say, in a ‘be-bop’ context would hardly work in a ‘country’ or ‘rock’ context. By chanting and singing simple rhythmic and melodic idioms in a call-and-response format, students learn...
about context and style while developing good listening habits critical to their appreciation and performance. Idioms can be easily extracted from any two- or four-measure phrases contained in the music being learned, and can also be found in ostinato patterns common in most blues.

In the blues classroom, teachers can begin by chanting a simple idiomatic rhythm:

Example 1.

As students become adept at responding accurately, slight variations on the simple rhythm are introduced:

Example 2.

Using the notes contained in the C blues scale as a tonal palette, we add melody to the existing rhythm patterns to develop variations on a simple blues idiom. Teachers could begin with:

Example 3.

In similar fashion, melodic idioms are then presented utilizing the call-and-response format. Variations could include:

Example 4.
Presenting simple rhythmic and melodic idioms in such a manner speaks to both context and style and also to developing a larger blues vocabulary.

As earlier noted, the call-and-response format can be adapted in a variety of different ways. Initially, teachers perform as the “caller.” As students become comfortable with call-and-response activities, individuals then perform as the caller while the class responds. As well, teachers could go around the room having individual students offer responses. In such settings, teachers are able to easily assess a student’s individual progress.

At first, call-and-response activities take the form of imitation utilizing one-measure phrases. As the level of musicianship increases, teachers would offer simple rhythmic or melodic variations as responses to the students’ call:

\[ \text{Student Call} \]

\[ \text{Teacher Response} \]

\textbf{Example 5.}

After modeling several examples of variations, students would then be invited to provide their own simple variations as responses in a “one-to-one” or “round-robin” format.

Modeling and providing a number of examples of blues variations will assist in creating a comfortable learning environment for these activities. Eventually, students will become at ease providing short and simple improvised responses that keep with authentic practice, as all activities are based on material extracted from actual pieces. Materials chosen for call-and-response activities should always be suited to the learning levels of
the students. Usually, simple phrases and patterns work best. The legendary blues artists were capable of generating great music through the use of simple melodic and rhythmic structures. The A’ section of most AA’B blues verses provide teachers an excellent source for examples of blues ornamentation and variation.

Used as a warm-up or tool for conceptual learning, the use of rhythmic and melodic idioms in a call-and-response format would be a constant feature in the blues classroom, accompanying students throughout their years of music schooling. Performing calls and responses over one-chord grooves and, eventually, other formal blues structures, including the standard 12-bar blues, provides students with an immediate opportunity to engage in an actual and authentic music-making experience.

*Understanding Blues Harmony*

The blues is a simple structure utilizing, in most cases, the three primary chords I, IV, and V. Understanding how these chords are set in a variety of structures, e.g., 8-, 12-, and 16-bars, is integral to appreciating, improvising, and composing blues pieces. Facilitating students’ capabilities as blues musicians requires cultivating their ability to sing and play the bass line by ear, which in turn develops an understanding of how the primary chords are placed in a variety of contexts. (Azzara, 1999, 22)

Singing tonal patterns with and without syllables reinforces students’ understanding of the three primary triads utilized in most blues songs. (Gordon, 1997, 94; Azzara, 1999, 23) The teacher may introduce the harmonic progression using simple triads. The symmetric structure of the 12-bar blues provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce blues harmony through call-and-response:
Example 6.

As students become adept at singing and performing triads, extensions to these chords, e.g., the flat 7 and 9, could be added, dictated by the learning level of the students and the style of music being presented.

Example 7.

As blues recordings are presented, active listening activities, including singing and playing bass lines, enumerating the I-IV-V progression as it occurs in the music by holding up the corresponding number of fingers, and singing the primary triads, either as block chords (chorus style) or in arpeggiated fashion, all provide ideal activities for learning and reinforcing harmonic structures found in the blues.

Teachers are also encouraged to create ‘impromptu’ arrangements in class, actively engaging students in the music-making experience. For example, utilizing the standard 12-bar blues, some students could sing the bass line, while others sing the harmony, while still others provide a ‘shout chorus’ to the melody as it is performed.
Grooves and rhythm accompaniment would be provided through clapping, patsching, and the marching of feet. Class ensemble performances would engage active music-making and problem-solving, as teachers would not simply orchestrate but involve the students in the arranging process. Initially, teachers would provide arrangement options from which the students choose and, later, the students would be encouraged to come up with their own suggestions for arrangements. Breaking the class into smaller groups would provide further opportunity to develop arrangement skills.

The ‘shout chorus’ is a useful educational tool that provides several benefits in the blues classroom. It is usually a simple and relatively short melodic phrase or pattern with a strong rhythmic element played and repeated throughout the whole form, or sections of the form. Berliner (1994) explains, “Such figures were once associated with particular soloists or repertory genres like the blues…Although many originated in solos, others originated in a band’s musical arrangements—their introductory figures, musical interludes, and background lines that accompany singers and instrumental soloists.” (102) Shout choruses provide an ideal setting for conceptual learning of rhythm, melody, articulation, dynamics, and phrasing, and can be implemented immediately with little effort in a ‘live’ classroom ensemble performance. Played, or sung with neutral or scat syllables, shout choruses can also provide melodic and rhythmic accompaniment for individual solo performances, engaging students who would otherwise be ‘passive’ observers. For example:

Example 8.
Blues Rhythm

As with all conceptual lessons in the blues, developing a sense of blues rhythm is most efficiently approached through listening. As students are presented with a number of different styles, their awareness and vocabulary of rhythmic language will increase. Through guided listening, teachers can ensure conceptual lessons in rhythm, i.e., phrasing, articulation, touch, and feel, which all emanate from a rhythmic sensibility, are being appreciated by the students. Following are a few suggestions for developing an appropriate rhythm feel.

First, teachers should approach conceptual lessons in blues study with a ‘rhythm first, melody second’ perspective. By presenting rhythm lessons before tonal lessons, teachers establish a sense of priority for rhythm. Movement, such as simply marching in time while clapping on ‘two’ and ‘four’ for all singing and in-class performances, assists in establishing a communal aural rhythmic culture.

The call-and-response structure is again useful in introducing new rhythms and variations. Short rhythmic ideas appropriate to the student’s learning level would be introduced as rhythmic units. Simple structures are presented first, in the call-and-response format, as follows:

Example 9.

Then, as students acquire facility with these structures, rhythm patterns are introduced in a statement-and-answer structure, as shown in Examples 10 through 13. These structures are useful for developing a basic approach to improvisation. Students would chant, clap, and move while engaging in all rhythmic exercises. Here, modeling
plays a significant role when teaching, as does plenty of repetition. It may be necessary for a teacher to remain with one pattern before moving on to the next, until all students provide accurate responses. The time spent is well worth it. Developing an understanding of very basic structures and being able to perform them authentically is more critical to developing good habits than is presenting too much vocabulary.

As stated, simple rhythmic structures can be extracted from the piece being taught or found in simple jazz melodies such as Duke Ellington’s *Duke’s Place*, which offers the following as rhythmic units:

Example 10.

For statement-and-answer patterns, teachers might use the following examples:

Example 11.

Example 12.

Combinations of statement-and-answer patterns could then be combined to form larger statement-and-answer structures such as:
When teaching beginning improvisation, it is important to maintain these simple statement-and-answer rhythmic structures for the development of authentic blues and jazz performances.

It is suggested that neutral syllables be used for rhythmic chanting, for example, “bah.” (Gordon, 1997, 94) In a blues setting, utilizing the same syllable gives equal importance to each beat and helps maintain rhythmic flow. In the blues, as with other African-American genres, rhythm is derived from the African rhythmic sensibility, where performers play on a continuum and syncopation is the product of combinations of small rhythmic units. (Wade, 2009, 78-9) Mike Longo (personal communication, 2012) maintains that “syncopation is a classical term.” In his view, “it is best to think in terms of additive rhythm, where the ‘ands’ or ‘up-beats’ are simply another beat, not a division of ‘strong beats,’ but what Dizzy called, ‘the perfect off-beat.’” Students, therefore, could tap straight beats with no accents when singing rhythm patterns. This would establish equality among beats, enhancing the sensation of ‘flow’ in time and space and is useful for developing rhythm in improvisation.

Improvisation

_Improvise_

_I think of a rhythm and then put notes to it._ Dizzy Gillespie
(M. Longo, personal communication, 2012)

When presented with blues improvisation, students are typically given just the blues scale and a cursory introduction to the 12-bar form with little regard to rhythm,
inflection, vocabulary, phrase structure, or the dramatic shape of a solo, and are then left to their own devices in negotiating the harmonic changes contained in a particular piece. (Tomassetti, 2003, 18) Introducing the statement-and-answer structure will help students in their critical listening and increase their appreciation for the way improvisations are performed, while providing a solid foundation for performing their own improvisations. Learning simple melodic and rhythmic patterns in this format will also enhance their understanding of context and style, reinforce the basic structure found in all blues and jazz improvisations, and contribute to the development of a wider music vocabulary.

Just as children learn to speak their native language by imitating older competent speakers, so young musicians learn to speak jazz by imitating seasoned improvisers. In part, this involves acquiring a complex vocabulary of conventional phrases and phrase components, which improvisers draw upon in formulating the melody of a jazz solo. (Berliner, 1994, 95)

At first, teachers are encouraged to introduce various blues forms, i.e., 8-, 12-, and 16-bar forms, rhythmically. Through call-and-response rhythmic activities, students will develop a rhythmic sense and begin to feel the 12-bar form rhythmically, unencumbered by melody or harmony. Teachers would begin by introducing a simple one-measure rhythmic pattern (see Example 1). After students achieve facility with the pattern, teachers would provide a simple one-measure variation of the pattern that, when combined, would form a two-measure statement-and-answer phrase (see Example 13). At this stage, students would begin to feel the 12-bar form rhythmically as a combination of six two-measure rhythm patterns. Later, two-measure phrases would be combined to
form four-measure statement-and-answer phrases, allowing students to perceive the blues form, then, as three four-measure phrases, paralleling the blues’ AA´B form.

Only after embodying a blues form rhythmically in increments of two- and four-measure rhythmic phrases should melodic and harmonic concepts be introduced. Again, developing a rhythmic sense of the form will establish flow and provide a solid foundation for introducing melody and harmony while assisting students in keeping their place in the form as they listen and improvise.

As previously discussed, idioms derived from blues songs used in call-and-response class activities will provide the necessary vocabulary for beginning improvisational experiences. As with rhythm exercises, ‘statement’ and ‘answer’ phrases should initially be kept to two measures each:

Example 14.

Later, the two-measure phrases could be combined to form four-measure phrases:

Example 15.
These four-measure phrases could then be inserted into the 12-bar format as a ‘statement’ followed by another ‘statement,’ in turn followed by an ‘answer,’ paralleling the same phrase structure found in the AA’B blues form. (Tomassetti, 2003, 19) For example:

Example 16.

For beginning improvisers, the statement-and-answer structures could be utilized over one-chord grooves until a rhythmic and melodic sense is developed.

The theoretical constructs of scales, i.e., the blues scale and various pentatonic scales and modes, may provide a quick fix solution to improvising but do little by themselves to help students perform authentically.

Figure 2. The C Blues Scale

Teachers should be aware that theoretical constructs such as the blues scale were derived from the idiomatic language found in the blues as a way to articulate blues performance practices using Western analytical tools. (Monson, 1996, 74) While the blues scale and other such analytical tools can be useful, educators and their students are best served approaching their blues improvisations through rhythmic and melodic idioms, variations on existing blues melodies through ornamentation and embellishment, and creating new
melodies, as exemplified in the A’ section of the AA’B form. Such an approach helps maintain an authentic understanding of blues practice and assists students in their own improvisatory endeavors. Only after students develop a command of the blues language should scales be introduced as a reference tool and for providing a tonal palette for improvisations.

Examples of idioms utilizing blues scale notes follow:

Certainly, the most useful strategy in developing improvisatory skills is to listen to blues musicians improvise. The improvisations of the masters will provide a substantial source for referents, licks, and idiomatic language. Listening to and analyzing numerous solos is the most efficient method of developing improvisatory skill. Students will observe the overall dramatic shape of successful improvisations and how they develop and maintain the character of a piece. Teachers can guide their students as they listen, pointing to certain features that make a particular improvisation successful.

**Composing Blues Songs**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, song-writing is one activity that deserves considerably more attention in the music classroom and the blues provides a simple
structure with which to introduce song-writing activities. All too often, composition is viewed solely as an *individual* undertaking. As with all musical activities in the blues classroom, writing a blues song should initially be presented as a collaborative effort that engages all students in the compositional process. Students should come to realize that music is not created in a vacuum, and that seeking advice from or bouncing ideas off their fellow students does not diminish their abilities as composers. To this end, teachers should make students’ first involvement with composition a collaborative effort involving the entire class, where everyone has a hand in the decision-making process. Such activities not only involve learning that is fundamental to the creative process, but are fun and engaging. A collaborative experience also serves to de-mystify the creative process and alleviate any undo pressure on students for individual creations.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the blues song structure is AA’B, with A’ functioning as some type of embellished repetition of A, and B functioning as an anecdotal response of the first two As. The easiest way to begin writing a blues lyric is to utilize the old blues cliché, “I woke up this mornin’…” as the opening statement. Teachers would invite suggestions from students on how to complete, or “answer,” the phrase, writing options on the board and having the class pick the one they liked best. For this exercise, two-measure phrases are most easily managed. For the B section, the last word has to rhyme with the last word of phrase A. So, for example, if the A statement-and-answer reads, “Woke up this mornin’ with a pillow on my head,” A’ would repeat the phrase, perhaps with an exclamation, “I said, woke up this mornin’ with a pillow on my head,” and B could read, “I was so tired I couldn’t get out of bed.” Voilà, instant blues lyrics!
Subsequent verses could be composed in similar fashion by asking students, “What happened next?”

With two or three verses written, the teacher would then set the verses to music, playing the standard 12-bar blues form and making in-class arrangements. Melodies could be provided by the simple idioms used in rhythmic and melodic warm-ups. All that is left is creating a “hook” verse, which is derived from the general tenor of the verses and sung after each verse. Coming up with a title, again as a collaborative effort, for example, in this case, *The Late-for-School Blues*, would facilitate composing a hook utilizing the same compositional techniques for creating the verses.

After several collaborative experiences, teachers would encourage students to compose their own original blues songs, either individually or in small groups. Barron (2007) suggests, “For the individual student, the opportunity to initiate and carry out original ideas is more likely to occur in smaller ensembles.” (21) Setting boundaries for original compositions, e.g., limiting compositions to a particular style or suggesting an 8- or 12-bar form, would provide a necessary structure for some students. Yet, within suggested boundaries, teachers are reminded to allow for individual creative expression. A motivated student, for example, may decide to perform his blues texts in rap style. When appropriate, individual compositions could be arranged and played by the blues classroom ensemble, providing a unique experience for both composers and classmates.

*The Use of Technology in the Blues Classroom*

In the blues classroom, it is strongly recommended that teachers make use of the substantial and readily available multi-media resources in conjunction with all lessons, cultural and conceptual, introduced in the blues classroom. Documentaries, histographies,
DVDs, and audio and video recordings of blues artists will provide students with authentic listening experiences, enabling them to witness some of the great blues performances (see Appendix B: Selected Video Resources). Viewing blues masters as they engage in the act of music-making teaches students how the music is to be performed and, perhaps more importantly, puts a “face” to the generators of the blues and their music.

Audio recordings and video clips can be utilized when introducing new material or addressing specific conceptual lessons, i.e., articulation and phrasing, harmony, rhythm, and grooves. Presenting audio or video clips at the outset of class establishes a genuine blues atmosphere, preparing students for an authentic learning experience.

In addition, play-along materials such as Jamey Aebersold’s *Nothin’ But Blues: Jazz and Rock, GarageBand, Band-in-a-Box*, and a number of backing-tracks found on youtube.com should be a staple in the blues classroom. These resources will aid teachers in establishing a variety of different grooves for in-class activities and could be adapted for students’ individual practice time outside the classroom.

**Summary**

The blues classroom offers unique opportunities for teachers and students to interact musically as they discover their musical history and culture and learn about the music that played such a vital role in our musical heritage. The approaches suggested in this chapter represent just a few ways to establish an environment where teachers and students can explore, discover, and perform in a safe and supportive environment. Through collaboration with their teachers and other students, the blues classroom is a platform for music-making that fosters appreciation, comprehension, and enjoyment of
music through self-expression, an experience that will remain with them throughout their lives.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

*The blues is the roots; everything else is the fruits.*
Willie Dixon (pbs.org)

The blues is one of America’s greatest treasures. It holds a unique and prominent place in American culture and musical heritage, yet its study remains at the periphery of mainstream music education. As the foundation of nearly every American musical genre, it is difficult to understand why blues study has been treated so superficially, if acknowledged at all, in our music classrooms.

As discussed, a comprehensive blues education satisfies the criteria for the educational goals set forth by the National Standards for Music Education. A historical and cultural approach to blues study, from its African roots to its emergence in the late 19th century, through to its subsequent manifestations in the 20th century, including jazz, country, R&B, and rock-and-roll, provides students the opportunity to explore the African-American musical heritage through a variety of cultural styles, traditions, and music practices found here in the United States. It also offers music teachers a unique opportunity to engage their students in diverse music studies in addition to learning a ‘world’ music whose influence is continually manifested and resonates in all contemporary African-American genres. Through such an approach, students would come to understand the essence of music-making as a dynamic and fluid cultural activity, while gaining an appreciation for the creators of blues music, their journey, and their profound influence on the development of American music. Most importantly, students in
the blues classroom will learn the tools and techniques used in blues performance that they can, in turn, utilize in their own musical development.

Conceptually, a blues study offers unique perspectives for understanding rhythm, melody, and harmony through call-and-response structures, blues vocal and instrumental techniques, and movement. Performance opportunities in the classroom engage students in a musical and cultural tradition that holds considerable relevance to the music they listen to every day. Its study also provides students a medium for creative self-expression through singing, composition, improvisation, and performance. Lastly, the culture established in the blues classroom would engage students in authentic and communal music-making activities, replicating the way music is learned, developed, and performed in the “real” world.

So why has the blues and its place as the foundation of so much American music, our musical culture, been marginalized in our music classrooms? There are a number of contributing factors, but it is the overwhelming influence of the Western art tradition employed in our school systems and the educational model it spawned that lie at the very heart of this issue. While there is much of great value in the current school music program in the United States, it has its limitations in teaching improvised and vernacular musics. Our educational model was designed to promote the performance practice and pedagogy of a historically elitist European tradition. It holds Western art traditions to be of higher quality and value than “vernacular” traditions, i.e., African-American music traditions that do not conform to Euro-American theory and practice (Nketia, 1973, 8). This educational model, unfortunately, discourages appreciation for improvisation and improvisatory practice, holding composed music as superior in quality.
Furthermore, despite its enormous impact on our culture throughout the 20th century, blues and popular music studies, in the face of “curricular conservatism,” still face resistance in institutions of higher learning, the training ground for music educators. (Alper, 2007, 156) Even when world and popular musics are included in the curriculum, issues concerning authenticity arise. In critiquing the developments involved in the ‘westernization’ of jazz, for instance, Prouty (2008) highlights the inherent problems with regard to jazz performance practice, pedagogy, and individual creativity and self-expression. In an effort to avoid similar difficulties in blues studies, pedagogical strategies that focus on aural learning, rhythmic feels, and blues history would afford students a more in-depth and broad-based musical experience. (Alper, 2007, 163)

Change is required, not as a revolution, but toward more revolutionary thinking. Sir Kenneth Robinson (2007) suggests change, not to reform but to transform our educational practices to allow for more creative expression. The teaching of the blues provides just such an opportunity for reform. Music educators should learn to appreciate the blues for its value in music instruction and the benefits its inclusion in the music curriculum would provide our students.

As an esteemed professor of music often states, “We can change the world, but only one little bit at a time.” (B. Dalby, personal communication, 2011)
Appendix A

Selected Blues Titles

*Alphabet Blues*, Sesame Street, pbs.org

*Blue Suede Shoes*, Elvis Presley

Blues/Rock: allmusic.com

*Chicken Song*, Mississippi John Hurt

*Cornbread and Peas*, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee

*Fishin’ Blues*, Mississippi John Hurt

*Game Songs*, Alan Lomax, artistdirect.com

*Hi Dee Hi*, Cab Calloway

*Hound Dog*, Mamma Thornton

*Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday

*Lead Belly: Sings for Children*, Smithsonian Folkways

*Lost Bug Blues*, Sesame Street, pbs.org

*Put Down the Ducky*, Sesame Street, pbs.org

*Red Top*, King Pleasure

*Roll Over Beethoven*, Chuck Berry

*Rooster Blues*, Lightnin’ Slim

*Shake, Rattle, and Roll*, Joe Turner

*Swamp Blues*, Lightnin’ Slim

*The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock and Roll*, Muddy Waters

*Wooly Bully*, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs
Appendix B

Selected Video Resources

*Blues History and Culture:*

Alan Lomax Archive

American Patchwork Series

folkstreams.net

Nana Kimati Dinizulo Archives

*Blues Performance:*


*The Last of the Blue Devils-The Kansas City Jazz Story* (1979), Rhapsody Films.
References


blues.org, http://blues.org


Ricker, B. (1979). *The Last of the Blue Devils-The Kansas City Jazz Story* [Film documentary]. Rhapsody Films.


