

THE BLUES BERRIES

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

The Blues Berries have performed before hundreds of young audiences in schools, festivals, and community venues across North America for over seven years. They've been nominated twice for West Coast Music Awards for their CDs *Little People Music* and *Funky Blue Diner*, and in 2006 released their third CD, *Let's Jam*.



GORD GRDINA BIO

In addition to his work as leader of the popular young people's band, *The Blues Berries*, Vancouver native Gord Grdina is a very versatile and in-demand performer. He currently is working with four other bands in widely varying genres from folk-roots to Middle Eastern classical. Best known among the

groups Gord plays with is, perhaps, *Loose Acoustic*, an outlet for Gord's interest in funk- and roots-style grooves. Then there's *Box Cutter* where the group's focus is on free improvisation and new compositional forms. In turn, the group *Maqam* works with the Iraqi folk melodies with Grdina playing the *oud*, a fretless precursor to

the European lute and guitar, but the presence of a violinist signals that this group is anything but traditional. And then there's *Sangha*, a slightly more traditional cross-cultural experiment that fuses Grdina's interest in the Arabic oud with North Indian percussion, plus Iranian *tar* and *tombak*.

THEMES:

- BLUES
- CULTURAL HISTORY
- IMPROVISATION
- JAZZ
- LYRIC WRITING
- POPULAR CULTURE
- RHYTHM
- ROCK AND ROLL
- SOCIAL HISTORY
- TRADITION

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

The *History of the Blues* guides the audience through a history of popular music from the beginnings of slavery to the current musical

scene. While their song lyrics reflect subjects relevant to the lives of young people such as learning the alphabet and riding bicycles, The Blues

Berries' instrumentation reflects the period of the music whether it be call and response, a washtub band, or electric combo.



The Blues Berries perform with students at Carmi Elementary, Penticton



THE HISTORY OF THE BLUES

Blues music is defined as a verbalization of deeply felt personal feelings in a musical form. It evolved from the plight of the African slaves (who were brought to America nearly 400 years ago) in the United States. As slaves without entitlement to any rights, the black people endured harsh working conditions that left them very little joy or relief. It is from their misery that the seeds of blues music first sprang roots.

It is believed that the beginnings of blues music came directly from the field, where field slaves engaged in a kind of singing sometimes called *field calling*, *hollerin'*, or *chanting*. These songs,

sung while they worked, helped make their back-breaking work more bearable and served to lament their treacherous situation. The *caller* would sing out one line, to which the others in the field would sing a response. Thus, the earliest and most pure form of blues music was born.

In those early days, the songs were largely unaccompanied by instrumentation of any kind, though sometimes, the banjo was used as early as the 17th century. Aside from that, clapping was commonly used to accompany the songs. The American slave owners had banned the drum, a

traditional African instrument, because they felt it would incite slave riots.

The lyrics were the black people's way of expressing how they felt. By expressing their feelings in song, their situation seemed less hopeless; singing brought them a small bit of happiness. And so it became a strong tradition carried down through decades of slavery. The dual purposes of blues music in the early years was in verbalizing personal feelings and calling a community's attention to those feelings.

With the *Emancipation Proclamation* and the end of the Civil War in the U.S., slavery came to an end.

Though blues music was closely tied to and developed from slavery, it did not die with the emancipation. In fact, blues music now had a new lament. For many of the former slaves, the future as a free people was no more hopeful than their past as an enslaved people. The free black man now had another challenge ahead of him: where did he belong if he did not belong to a slave owner?

Blues songs now revolved around the black person's feelings of displacement and uncertainty as they were left to navigate their own way through life in America. At this time, during the 1800s, many different types of instrumental accompaniment made their way into blues music. Many black people were poor because they had few job opportunities, so they resourcefully fashioned instruments out of everyday

household objects, like a steel wash tub normally used to wash clothes or a milk jug. The wash tub was transformed into a washtub bass and the milk jug into a tuba-like instrument. With these everyday objects, black people had instruments with



The Memphis Jug Band, 1938

which to enjoy and play their music. The blues had reached the next stage of evolution.

Throughout the 20th century, many different blues styles evolved: urban and classic blues played by women and bands in dance halls and clubs in cities; country blues played by traveling musicians in rural areas all over the U.S.; and *zydeco* or *cajun*, which came from the mixed European cultures in Louisiana. Today, the influence of the blues can be seen in other musical styles including pop, jazz, swing and rock 'n' roll. Blues music can be heard in venues throughout North America and the world, and is still a distinct heartfelt expression of not only weariness and sadness, but also happiness and joy.



ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS— UNDERSTANDING SLAVERY

Have your class close their eyes. Tell them to imagine they are together with their families and friends in their communities at school or home, doing everything they normally do. Now have them imagine that a spaceship lands in their community. Strange creatures, speaking a language they've never heard before, emerge from the spaceship and force the children to get

on the space vessel and are shipped to another planet that is completely foreign to them. Ask them to imagine these creatures forcing them to work on this planet day in and day out, with little food or water and minimal rest. They know neither the language nor the land, and are punished for speaking to one another or doing anything these space creatures don't want them to do.



ACTIVITY SUGGESTION— WRITE YOUR OWN BLUES LYRICS

WRITING LYRICS

Blues lyrics are very loose in their structure and scheme. Rhymes are often near-rhymes and based on vowel sounds alone. For example, "time" can be rhymed with "night" even though there is a difference in the final consonant.

The number of syllables in a line can also vary so long as the meaning remains the same. A bar of music can thus contain the line, *I'm goin' back to Georgia* the first time through the chorus, but on the second time through, the very same bar might contain something like, *I said, I'm goin' back down to my ol' sweet lovin' Georgia...*

These attributes make blues lyrics ripe for improvisation and personal expression.

Put a list of eight to ten rhyming or near-rhyming words on the blackboard. Give the students a theme or scenario for the song. Select two students and have each of them create a line to a song, the second following logically from the first. For example, if the list on the board contains the words:

down

found

Theme: a rainy day.

Student A might come up with:

I'd like to go outside but the rain keeps coming down

I'd like to go outside but the rain keeps coming down

To which Student B might add:

So I'll just stay inside with the friends I've found.

Then have students C and D create the next two lines, and so on, until the entire lyric is complete.

"I BEEN IN THE
BLUES ALL MY
LIFE. I'M STILL
DELIVERING
'CAUSE I GOT A
LONG MEMORY."

MUDDY WATERS
(1915—1983)



"Let's see.. How about:
*I got the blues/
Feels more like chartreuse /
Hmm... No, that won't work"*

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION — BLUES RHYTHMS / CALL & RESPONSE

Divide the class into three groups and have each group clap or stomp the following patterns:

Group 1:
Clap pattern $\frac{4}{4}$ | \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow ξ | | \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow ξ |
clap clap clap rest | | clap clap clap rest |

Group 2:
Clap pattern $\frac{4}{4}$ | ξ $\downarrow\downarrow$ ξ \downarrow | | ξ $\downarrow\downarrow$ ξ \downarrow |
rest clap clap rest clap | | rest clap clap rest clap |

Group 3:
Foot stomp $\frac{4}{4}$ | $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ | | $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ $\downarrow\downarrow$ |
LR LR LR LR | | LR LR LR LR |

When the class gets the hang of these rhythms, try a field call and have them respond.

For example:

(Call) Got to get to school

(Response) Got to get to school

(Call) I said, Got to get to school

(Response) I said, Got to get to school

(Altogether) I said, Got to get to school

And learn the Golden Rule...

Make up your own field chants – the sky's the limit.



HOSTING THE PERFORMANCE

The Blues Berries will arrive at your school approximately 30 minutes prior to show time. They will set up on the stage or at one end of the gymnasium on the floor, and will need access to an electrical outlet. A changing room would be helpful, as well as fresh drinking water.

DISCOGRAPHY

Blues Berries CDs are available at a cost of \$15 each.

How about a fundraiser for your school?
For each CD sold, you keep 20%.



Let's Jam (2006)



Funky Blue Diner (2000)



Little People Music (1998)



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