

Using Music to Teach about the Great Depression

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In 1932, one out of four Americans was out of work, and the banking system was near collapse. The Great Depression is typically taught through history textbooks, but the music of this time allows students to learn about this era through different perspectives.

No song captures the gloomy spirit of the Great Depression more than “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?”, written for a Broadway musical, “New Americana,” which flopped. Two days before the musical closed, Bing Crosby stepped into a studio and recorded his version of the song, with his melodious baritone, which would prove to stand the test of time. The lyrics juxtapose the optimism of the American spirit with the grim realities of the times:

...Once I built a railroad
I made it run
Made it race against time
Once I built a railroad
Now it's done
Brother, can you spare a dime?

This stanza describes how the American Dream came crashing down on the song's antihero. He recalls his hard work and patriotism, reminisces about former times when the future looked

promising, and muses bitterly that after all the sacrifices he made to achieve the American Dream, he is reduced to standing in a bread line “bumming” change from other unfortunates.

The Great Depression witnessed many musical styles—from the light heartedness of popular music to the sadness of the blues, gospel, which offered inspiration, to the tension between populism and the popular front. Americans who suffered the deprivation of the times sang lyrics that reflected their plight. No one style of music has been more intricately woven into the political culture of the times than the blues. Blues music was sometimes also referred to as the “Roosevelt's Blues,” because so many songs conveyed political commentary on Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was president for the greater part of the Depression.¹

African Americans and the Depression

The Great Depression hit almost all Americans, but it hit African Americans especially hard. They had been on the bottom rung of the economic ladder before the Depression hit, and, although most had precious little to lose, prospects for even subsistence work were especially poor once the Depression was under way. Unemployment in the “prosperity decade” had been much higher among blacks than whites. “The Negro was born in depression,” Clifford Burke told Studs Terkel (a Chicago radio personality of that era, who remains an

Photograph by Deb Palmer



All photography taken at the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC.

The second room of the Memorial contains bronze statues by George Segal including people standing in a breadline (see page 15), and this one depicting a man listening to a Roosevelt “fire-side chat” on the radio.



Photograph by Deb Palmer

active historian and social commentator today). “It only became official when it hit the white man.”² The Depression made a bad situation even worse; by 1932, unemployment among blacks reached approximately 50 percent.³ Even New Deal programs aimed at alleviating joblessness and poverty fell short when it came to African Americans—the National Recovery Administration (created in June of 1933 and presided over by Hugh Johnson), whose sole purpose was to “restore employment and prosperity,” had done such a poor job with employment and relief for African Americans that in the black community it became known as “Negro Run-Around” and “Negroes Rarely Allowed.”⁴ To counter this situation, FDR appointed Harold Ickes, a progressive who had been president of the Chicago branch of the NAACP to direct the Public Works Administration (PWA). In *Roosevelt’s Blues*, Guido Van Rijn notes that as a tribute to this program, “in August 1934, Mississippi-born blues guitarist Charlie

McCoy sang in his ‘Charity Blues’ that he would love to have a PWA job, which would bring him money instead of the ‘beef and meat’ relief from ‘Mr. Charity Man’ on ‘Charity Street.’”⁵

As a result of the PWA, Roosevelt won by a landslide among blacks in the 1936 election. In September 1936, 20,000 people filled Madison Square Garden for a re-election rally. Van Rijn writes that 300 followers of Elder Michaux’s *Happy Am I* radio preacher program enlisted a special train carrying 20 by 24 paintings of Christ, Lincoln, and Roosevelt titled “The Three Emancipators.” “Christ was termed the emancipator from sin; Lincoln emancipator from bondage, and Roosevelt the emancipator from social injustices.”⁶ Though blacks had little access to political power in the 1930s, African Americans used music to express dissent.

Music as Social Commentary

One of the greatest African American blues songwriters at this time was Huddie

William Ledbetter, known as “Lead Belly.” Lead Belly was born on the Jeter Plantation near Mooringsport, Louisiana, on January 29, 1885, and then when he was five years old, he moved with his parents to Leigh, Texas. His uncle first interested him in music by buying him an accordion. By the age of 21, Lead Belly left home and traveled throughout Texas and Louisiana, where he tried to eke out a living playing the guitar, and also got jobs as a cotton picker, railroad worker, and other rough labor jobs when his musical abilities failed to bring in sufficient cash.

In 1916, Lead Belly was sent to jail in Texas on an assault charge. He escaped, but two years later he was arrested again on murder charges and sentenced to 30 years hard labor in Huntsville, Texas. Seven years later, Lead Belly managed to gain his release with a pardon from Governor Pat Neff. Legend has it that he was granted the pardon after appealing to the governor in a song.

Despite his success, Lead Belly was

arrested again in 1930 for attempted homicide and sent to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where he met John and Alan Lomax, ethno-musicologists who were gathering material at that time for their classic book, *The Folk Songs of North America*. The Lomax father-and-son team recorded hundreds of songs and managed to get Lead Belly once again paroled (either for good behavior or partly due to the release of his most famous song, "Goodnight Irene"). Lead Belly continued to create songs up to his death in 1949, being increasingly associated with leftist factions in the late 1930s.

Lead Belly's opinions and lyrics flow from his experience of being a member of a racial minority in the South. In one of his earliest songs, recorded around the time of World War I, titled "Red Cross Store Blues" (the Red Cross headquarters in small American towns also served as army recruitment centers at the time), he resists attempts to enlist him to fight. He tells his girlfriend, Justine, that he has no intention of enlisting, as the thought of war and noble causes rings hollow to a man who has suffered hardships and persecution all of his life in the very land he is asked to defend.

Lead Belly claimed a repertoire of 500 songs, and many of these songs commented on the tough economic times of the Great Depression. In one song, titled "Tight Light That," he depicts how the severe economic climate led to the erosion of traditional roles and expectations, as well as morality, by wryly singing of two preachers he caught stealing corn from his cornfield. These desperate and less than honorable men of the cloth were also caught stealing some of his chickens. Lead Belly seems to enjoy recounting the unseemly deeds of those who preach to others about moral life.

While Lead Belly was the most famous of the African American singers who used music as social commentary, he was certainly not the only one. Robert Johnson is a man well known to historians of music, as well as blues aficionados, but he is little known generally. No one knows where or when he was born, or where he was buried after his murder in

1938 at the hands of a jealous husband. He writes of dislocation and the burdens of life in the 1930s. This dislocation and migration in America was not just from the Midwest to California, but from the South to the North, especially to Chicago. "Even with the lack of employment in the North, black migration from the rural South amounted to some 400,000 blacks during the Great Depression."⁷ In "Sweet Home Chicago," Johnson sings of setting out with his meager possessions for Chicago, the "California" of impoverished Southern blacks.

Oh, baby don't you want to go
Oh, baby don't you want to go
Back to the land of California,
to my sweet home Chicago

In "Ramblin on My Mind," the theme of dislocation is linked to the theme of love gone sour. The flight to the open road is associated with the leaving of a woman for the arms of another, a recasting of the hope for a better future that the nation as a whole cherished in a scenario of personal human relationships. "Cross Roads Blues," his most famous song of all, focuses on a life of misery always on the move. He sings of loneliness and the deep anxiety of a rootless life on the road, falling to his knees begging God for mercy, and being passed by those from whom he is seeking rides as if he weren't even there, a biting comment on the lack of concern for the plight of African Americans in the 1930s.

John Lee Williamson, better known as "Sonny Boy" Williamson, was one of the first blues harmonica players. Born in Jackson, Tennessee, in 1912, he moved to Chicago in 1934, where he became one of the key founders of the Chicago blues scene. In "Collector Man Blues," recorded in November 1937, he relates what life was like for so many during the Great Depression:

Who is that knockin' on that door?
I believe that's the collector man.
Man, go tell him I ain't got a dime today.

Tell him I ain't made a penny all this week.
Tell him I'm just as broke as I can be,
oh just knock him down...
Tell him I'll have the money some-time.

The dreaded knock of the rent collector on his door calls to mind the fact that he is totally broke like everyone else and can't pay him, yet he lives in hope that one day his lot will improve. Williamson was murdered in 1948.

Tampa Red, a blues singer known as the "Guitar Wizard," recorded "Turpentine Blues" in Chicago on May 7, 1932. The turpentine business offered absolutely miserable working conditions for the most underprivileged classes, who were the only ones willing to take on such jobs. Workers sweated in insect-infested pine forests of the Deep South, cutting slashes into trees, and collecting the pine residue that flowed into cans pegged to the trees. African Americans were often reduced to doing jobs that were so distasteful that even desperate whites wouldn't do them. Not only was this work hard and miserable, but it was also insecure, with periods of employment infrequent, and times between jobs seemingly endless, as reflected in the lyrics to "Turpentine Blues."

So Lordy please tell me
What we turpentine people gonna do
Lordy please tell me
What we turpentine people gonna do
But we got to lay off a month or two.

Jobs were in short supply to begin with during the Depression, and competition for them provoked racial violence, including lynchings in the South.⁸ McElvaine notes that "...a white clerk in Marianna, Florida, said in the wake of a lynch mob attack on a store that employed blacks, 'a nigger hasn't got no right to have a job when there are white men who can do the work and are out of work.'"⁹

In "Western Bound Blues," recorded

on May 7, 1932, Tampa Red sings of the dislocation experienced by so many who left home to ride the freight trains, or even to walk to where job prospects were hoped to be better.

If you lose your money, don't lose
your mind
If you lose your money, don't lose
your mind
And if you lose your sweet woman,
well brother you better not mess
with mine

He cautioned at the beginning of the song that the loss of one's money should not cause the more serious loss of one's sanity.

In addition to the songs written about the misery of living during the Depression a significant number were written to encourage hope and inspiration. Titles such as "No Bread Line in Heaven," "Roosevelt Blues," "Don't Take Away My WPA," "President Roosevelt is Everybody's Friend," and "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt" played on radios throughout the Great Depression and into World War II. Otis Johnson, a Miami disc jockey, recorded "Tell Me Why You like Roosevelt," in April 1946 one year after the president's death:

Tell me why you like Roosevelt?
Wasn't no kin
Huh, God Almighty; was a poor
man's friend.

This is probably the most important song about how the president was perceived by the black population. Jackson's song is divided into five parts, which compare Roosevelt to other administrations including Abraham Lincoln's. The main theme is that the president did not set himself above others, but identified with the common man. Van Rijn writes, "The song shows how Roosevelt advanced Negroes in different fields and explained how the Roosevelt myth arose."¹⁰

When Wall Street crashed, the total number of blues and gospel songs fell, but the number of songs with political commentary increased. Van Rijn provides



a list of artists who recorded songs with political import:

(seven [songs]) John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson (1914-1948); William "Big Bill" Broonzy (1898-1958); Josh White (1915-1969); Bill Gaither (1910-1970); (six [songs]) Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter (1889-1949); Lonnie Johnson (1889-1970); (five [songs]) Rev. J.M. Gates (c. 1884-c.1942); Louis Jordan (1908-1975); (four [songs]) "Champion" Jack Deprea (1910-1992); Charley Jordan (c. 1890-1954); Buster "Buzz" Ezell (18??-195?).¹¹

Roosevelt's attitude toward African Americans has been called contradictory and paternalistic.¹² On the one hand, he established programs ostensibly to help the poor. But such programs as the National Recovery Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and the Office of Price Administration were targets of criticism. Despite a mixed record on civil rights, FDR inspired hope and confidence in many African Americans. His Civil Works Administration and Public Works Administration programs were hailed enthusiastically, and his leadership after Pearl Harbor proved decisive to marshaling black political support. His legacy lives on in blues lyrics of the Great Depression. 🎧

Notes

1. Guido Van Rijn, *Roosevelt's Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 32-33.
2. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression in America 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 187.
3. *Ibid.*, 87.
4. *Ibid.*, 158.
5. Van Rijn, 105-106.
6. *Ibid.*, 106-107.
7. Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 67.
8. Stevens, Robert L. and Jared A. Fogel, "The Depression in the South: Seymour Fogel's Images of African-Americans," *Social Education* 62, no. 2 (1998).
9. McElvaine, 188.
10. Van Rijn, 200.
11. *Ibid.*, 207.
12. Nathan Miller, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Life* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1992), 363.

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Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. *Music and Social Movements*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Lomax, Alan. *The Folk Songs of North America*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960.

Teaching Activities

During the Great Depression, musicians used a range of musical styles to depict the troubled times: light hearted popular music, melancholy blues, inspirational gospel, populism, and popular front. An analysis of Depression-era song lyrics can reveal a great deal about socio-economic circumstances and musical diversity from 1929 to 1941. The following activity, comparing and contrasting lyrics of the 1930s, has been adapted from Education Programs at the Franklin D. Roosevelt library.

Provide students with four copies of the Lyrics Analysis Worksheet. After playing four songs in the classroom, have students answer the questions on their worksheets. The teacher may also provide written lyrics for the students.

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Lyrics Analysis Worksheet

Handout 1

Step 1. Observation

A. Listen to the song. Form an overall impression of the song. Jot down or describe your overall feeling (e.g., sadness or joy). Next, examine individual lyrics. B. Use the chart below to list musicians, style, and lyrics in the song.

| Musicians | Style | Lyrics |
|-----------|-------|--------|
| | | |

Step 2. Inference

Based on your analysis above, list three things you might infer from the song.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step 3. Questions

A. What questions do these lyrics raise in your mind?

B. Where could you find the answers?

C. Why do you think this song was written?

D. What evidence in the song helps you know why it was written?
Quote from the lyrics.

E. List two things the song tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

F. Write a question to the composer that is left unanswered by this song.

G. How might this song be useful to historians?

Teacher's note: An excellent source for songs of this time period is Smithsonian Folkway Recordings, 750 9th Street NW, Suite 4100, Washington, DC 20560-0953, www.Folkways.si.edu or www.Folklife.si.edu.

Handout 2

Musical Styles

In addition to the blues, there were several other musical styles that reflected life during the Great Depression: popular music, populism, and popular front. Students should compare and contrast the lyrics to these other styles to better understand the America of the 1930s.

Popular

| <i>Artist</i> | <i>Title</i> | <i>Sample Lyrics</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ella Fitzgerald | "It's Only a Paper Moon" | _____ |
| David Franklin | "When My Dreamboat Comes Home" | _____ |
| Cliff Friend | "The Merry Go Round Broke Down" | _____ |
| Bing Crosby | "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby" | _____ |
| Johnny Mercer | "Jeepers Creepers" | _____ |
| Tom Gerun | "Cheerful Little Earful" | _____ |
| Ira Gershwin | "Strike Up the Band" | _____ |

Populism

| <i>Artist</i> | <i>Title</i> | <i>Sample Lyrics</i> |
|------------------|---|----------------------|
| Carter Family | "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" | _____ |
| Jimmy Rogers | "The Singing Brakeman" or "America's Blues Yodler" | _____ _____ |
| Emry Arthur | "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" | _____ |
| Harry McClintock | "Big Rock Candy Mountain" | _____ |

Popular Front

| <i>Artist</i> | <i>Title</i> | <i>Sample Lyrics</i> |
|----------------|---|-------------------------|
| Ralph Chaplin | "Solidarity Forever" | _____ |
| Alfred Hayes | "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill" | _____ |
| Earl Robinson | "Red, White and Blue but Mostly Red" | _____ |
| Florence Reese | "Which Side Are You On?" | _____ |
| Woody Guthrie | "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd" or "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues" or "Hard Travelin'" | _____ _____ _____ |