

Teacher Tool 2: Blues Lyrics

History in the First Person: Music Moved the Movement— Civil Rights and the Blues

This document includes the song lyrics for the blues songs highlighted in our program “History in the First Person: Music Moved the Movement—Civil Rights and the Blues.

Resources: Video Music 1: Big George Brock Discusses and Performs Hard Times

Video Music 2: History in the First Person: Bobby Rush—King of the Chitlin’ Circuit

Teacher Tool 1: Compare and Create

“Why I Sing the Blues,” B.B. King, Dave Clark (1969)

If you do not have your own recording of the song, you can find one on YouTube at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJrZ1LAOLYQ>.

Everybody wants to know
Why I sing the blues
Yes, I say everybody wanna know
Why I sing the blues
Well, I've been around a long time
I really have paid my dues
When I first got the blues
They brought me over on a ship
Men were standing over me
And a lot more with a whip
And everybody wanna know
Why I sing the blues
Well, I've been around a long time
Mm, I've really paid my dues
I've laid in a ghetto flat
Cold and numb
I heard the rats tell the bedbugs
To give the roaches some
Everybody wanna know
Why I'm singing the blues
Yes, I've been around a long time
People, I've paid my dues
I stood in line
Down at the County Hall
I heard a man say, "We're gonna build
Some new apartments for y'all"
And everybody wanna know
Yes, they wanna know
Why I'm singing the blues
Yes, I've been around a long, long time
Yes, I've really, really paid my dues
Now I'm gonna play Lucille.
My kid's gonna grow up
Gonna grow up to be a fool
'Cause they ain't got no more room
No more room for him in school

And everybody wanna know
Everybody wanna know
Why I'm singing the blues
I say I've been around a long time
Yes, I've really paid some dues
Yeah, you know the company told me
Guess you're born to lose
Everybody around me, people
It seems like everybody got the blues
But I had 'em a long time
I've really, really paid my dues
You know I ain't ashamed of it, people
I just love to sing my blues
I walk through the cities, people
On my bare feet
I had a fill of catfish and chitterlings
Up and down Beal Street
You know I'm singing the blues
Yes, I really
I just have to sing my blues
I've been around a long time
People, I've really, really paid my dues
Now Father Time is catching up with me
Gone is my youth
I look in the mirror everyday
And let it tell me the truth
I'm singing the blues
Mm, I just have to sing the blues
I've been around a long time
Yes, yes, I've really paid some dues
Yeah, they told me everything
Would be better out in the country
Everything was fine
I caught me a bus uptown, baby
And every people, all the people
Got the same trouble as mine
I got the blues, huh
I say I've been around a long time
I've really paid some dues
One more time, fellows!
Blind man on the corner
Begging for a dime
The rollers come and caught him
And throw him in the jail for a crime
I got the blues
Mm, I'm singing my blues
I've been around a long time
Mm, I've really paid some dues
Can we do just one more?
Oh I thought I'd go down to the welfare
To get myself some grits and stuff
But a lady stand up and she said

"You haven't been around long enough"
That's why I got the blues
Mm, the blues
I say, I've been around a long time
I've really, really paid my dues
Fellows, tell them one more time.
Ha, ha, ha. That's all right, fellows.
Yeah!

“Strange Fruit,” Abel Meeropol, Billie Holiday (1939)

If you do not have your own recording of the song, you can find two recordings by Billie Holiday on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI>

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

“Jim Crow Blues,” Leadbelly (1930)

If you do not have your own recording of the song, you can find a recording on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq0lXTTS_1E.

[spoken]
Gotta get together let it
Don't be no stone
Well we'll all be in the same boat rather

Okay now you gonna want this “Jim Crow Boys” en
That man mus makes a man wear out his shoes when I give en the Jim Crow playin.

[Actual song]
Bunk Johnson told me too, This old Jim Crowism dead bad luck for me and you
I been traveling, I been traveling from toe to toe
Everywhere I have been I find some old Jim Crow

One thing, people, I want everybody to know
You're gonna find some Jim Crow, every place you go

Down in Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia's a mighty good place to go
And get together, break up this old Jim Crow

I told everybody over the radio
Make up their mind and get together, break up this old Jim Crow

I want to tell you people something that you don't know
It's a lotta Jim Crow in a moving picture show

I'm gonna sing this verse, I ain't gonna sing no more
Please get together, break up this old Jim Crow

“A Change is Gonna Come,” Sam Cooke (1964)

If you do not have your own recording of the song, you can find a recording on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEBlaMOMKV4>.

I was born by the river in a little tent
Oh and just like the river I've been running ev'r since
It's been a long time, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will
It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die
'Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will
I go to the movie and I go downtown
Somebody keep tellin' me don't hang around
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will
Then I go to my brother
And I say brother help me please
But he winds up knockin' me
Back down on my knees, oh
There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long
But now I think I'm able to carry on
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will

“Hard Times,” Big George Brock (2005)

If you do not have your own recording of the song, you can find one on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=660WxI76USw>.

Talking about hard times
You don't know what a hard time is
Talking about hard times
You don't know what a hard time is
You oughta seen me baby
When I was in that lonesome cotton field

Talking about hard times
You don't know what a hard time is
Talking about hard times
You don't know what a hard time is
You oughta been with me darling
When I was in that lonesome cotton field

Sun beaming down
The heat about 90 degrees
The sun beaming down
Heat about 90 degrees
I was way out there in that lonesome cotton field

Talking about hard times
Baby you don't know the way I feel
Talking about hard times
Baby you don't know the way I feel
You oughta seen my face
When I was in that lonesome cotton field

Everybody gone home
Left me sitting here by myself
Everybody go on home
Left me sitting here by myself
Time was so hard then woman
I didn't know which way to go

Hard time
Hard time
Hard time
You just don't know what hard time is
Hard time
You all don't know what a hard time is
You oughta been there with me
When is was in that lonesome cotton field

“A Keen for Medgar,” Jim Williams (1965)

We sing no blues for you
No man!
We sing no blues for you
No man!
Blues is dead — but not you
No man!
Not you.
You'll always live — forever
Always live — forever
Wherever freedom lives
There's where ya'll are,
Right where you are.
Blues may die — but not you
no man! Not you!
You'll always live forever!
and
We sing no blues for you
No blues
For you.

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