

Student Tool 35: Civil Rights and the Blues Song Lyrics

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

Program-Related Activity 2—Read the Song Lyrics

This document includes the song lyrics for the blues songs to be highlighted in each of our programs. We encourage you to have the students read the lyrics in advance of the program, discuss what they think they mean, listen to recordings of the songs to hear how the musicians brought the lyrics to life, and discuss their reaction to listening to the songs.

Song Lyrics for Songs Highlighted in the 10:00 a.m. Central Time Program (Program 1)

“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 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" enn
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

Song Lyrics for Songs Highlighted in the 1:00 p.m. Central Time Program (Program 2)

“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>.

This song will also be highlighted in the 10:00 a.m. program, so you will find the lyrics earlier in this same document.

“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.

“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>.

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