**Blues, Jazz, and Country …by Way of Train**

**Grades 9-12 Lesson**: Blues, Jazz, and Country …by Way of Train

**Grade Band**: 9-12

**Arts Subject**: Music

**Other Subjects**: History, English & Language Arts

**SUMMARY**

In this 9-12 lesson plan, students are introduced to the railroad/train connection to the blues, jazz, and country music and the cultures that influenced these genres. Students will listen to, analyze, and contrast songs about trains/railroads from each genre. Songs: Jimmie Rodgers (Country), “Train Whistle Blues (1929),” Trixie Smith (Jazz) “Freight Train Blues” (1924) Robert Wilkins (Blues), “Long Train Blues” (1930). Students will write a song in the traditional 12-bar blues structure, choose a backing track to insert their lyrics, and perform their blues song.

# PREPARATION

## Learning Objectives

Students will:

* Research and analyze history on the railroad’s connection to blues, jazz, and country music and cultures surrounding all three.
* Analyze and interpret “Train Whistle Blues” lyrics and music
* Analyze and interpret “Freight Train Blues” lyrics and music
* Analyze and interpret “Long Train Blues” lyrics and music
* Compare and contrast the lyrics and music of the three songs
* Compare the contrast the lives of the three artists and their connections to the railroad
* Write a traditional 12-bar blues song that includes a train and a problem

**Standards Met:**

**National Core Arts Standards**

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/1/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/2/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/3/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/4/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/5/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/6/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/7/)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/8/)

**Common Core State Standards**

RL.9.1, RL.9.2, RL.9.4, RL.9.6

W.9.2a, W.9.2d, W.9.5, W.9.7, W.9.8, W.9.10

RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.6, RH.9-10.9

RI.11.3, RI.11.6

W.11-12.3, W.11-12.3d, W.11-12.7

RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.6

RL.11-12-4

SL.11-12.1

##### **Student Materials**

* Lyrics “Train Whistle Blues” (downloadable PDF)
* Biography of Jimmie Rodgers: <https://www.jimmierodgers.com/biography>
* Trixie Smith Lyrics “Freight Train Blues” (downloadable PDF)
* Biography of Trixie Smith: <https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/trixie-smith-the-legendary-harlem-blues-singer-1895-1943/>
* Robert Wilkins Lyrics “Long Train Blues” (downloadable PDF)
* Biography of Robert Wilkins: <https://www.allaboutbluesmusic.com/rev-robert-wilkins/>
* A brief history of the railroad during the mid-1920s to early 1930s and the Jim Crow laws regarding segregation, specifically on the trains in the South. <https://history.howstuffworks.com/american-history/railroads-of-the-1920s.htm>

Recordings:

* (Jazz) Trixie Smith “Freight Train Blues”: <https://youtu.be/uFGamRcPJJw>
* (Delta Blues) Robert Wilkins “Long Train Blues”: <https://youtu.be/o4w-z8ldlfM>
* (Country) Jimmie Rodgers, “Train Whistle Blues”: <https://youtu.be/J6KjvAC8l38>

For students songs:

* Backing track: (blues) 12 bar blues in the key of C: <https://youtu.be/6gCNUfhRlLA>
* Backing track (blues-fast): (blues) 12 bar blues in the key of A: <https://youtu.be/nQCOnyBjGm8>
* Backing track (country): 12 bar blues in the key of A: <https://youtu.be/IXuBVEXcGuI>
* Backing track (jazz): 12 bar blues in the key of Bb: <https://youtu.be/GjLBGOIv6jw>

*If students play an instrument and want to back themselves up, they can do that instead of the backing track. The backing tracks are mainly to highlight the various instruments normally used within specific genres of Jazz, Blues, and Country.*

**Video & Audio Resources:**

* The Train and Jazz and Blues Podcast (18:25 minutes): <https://www.thejoysofjazz.com/the-train-in-jazz-blues/> *(Note: there is one profanity in a direct quote from jazz performer Duke Ellington located at 15:19 in the audio.)*
* Railroad Competition 1920 to 1930 (5:19 minutes): <https://youtu.be/SJBpg24A6Ok>
* The Classic Steam 1920s to 1940s (3:54 minutes) - <https://youtu.be/pDmNAu0v__g> (Students should make note of train sounds from this film to contrast with the songs in this lesson.)
* Same Train Different Time: Jimmie Rodgers and the White Man Blues (two one-hour podcasts with Jimmie Rodgers biographer, Nolan Porterfield. With students, the teacher will only play the Interview section found in Hour One.):

[**http://americanroutes.wwno.org/archives/show/176/Same-Train-a-Different-Time-Jimmie-Rodgers-and-the-White-Mans-Blues**](http://americanroutes.wwno.org/archives/show/176/Same-Train-a-Different-Time-Jimmie-Rodgers-and-the-White-Mans-Blues)

**Website Resources:**

* The Folklore and Folksong of Trains in America (Part 1) <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2015/07/folklore-of-trains-in-usa-part-one/?loclr=blogflt>
* The Folklore and Folksong of Trains in America (Part 2) <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2015/08/folklore-of-trains-in-usa-part-two/?loclr=blogflt>
* Train Songs, Freedom, the Blues and Country Music: <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/train-songs-freedom-the-blues-and-country-music/>
* Jim Crow: More Racist than the Railroads: <https://www.econlib.org/jim-crow-more-racist-than-the-railroads/>
* Understanding the Twelve Bar Blues: <https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essays12bar.html>

**Teacher Preparation**

Before introducing the lesson to students, the teacher should review provided lesson information within the resources and create a list of questions to spur the students’ critical analysis and interpretation of lyrics from that information. The teacher should also review the PBS “Understanding the Twelve Bar Blues” resource to understand this common blues AAB format. The teacher does not need to know or understand chord structure. The focus is on the lyric structure. A 12-bar blues song follows the AAB pattern. "A" refers to the first and second four-bar verse (Lines 1&2), and "B" is the third four-bar verse (Line 3). The first and second lines start and repeat the idea. The third line responds.

**Student Preparation for Lesson Engagement and Activity**

Before engaging students in song analysis, students should be familiar with the history of the railroad, railway travel, including Jim Crow laws relating to segregated cars from the teacher’s introduction to the lesson and prior instruction using the resources provided in this lesson plan.

# INSTRUCTION

## Instruct:

1. **Introduce the railroad** through the video and audio resources, saving the *The Train and Jazz and Blues* *Podcast* for last. Don’t use the *Same Train Different Time: Jimmie Rodgers and the White Man Blues* until the next step. Students should make notes of railroad sounds to contrast with the music in the following music audios. Some questions the teacher might ask are: *In listening to the sound of the trains, did you hear a continuous beat? A rhythm? Did the various kinds of trains sound differently or were they all similar? How did The Train and Jazz and Blues podcast unite the sounds of music and the train? What information about evolution of trains and music stood out for you?*
2. **Introduce Jimmie Rodgers and the railroad** through the *Same Train Different Time: Jimmie Rodgers and the White Man Blues* podcast. (Skip to the interview with Nolan Porterfield on Jimmie Rodgers found in the middle of Hour One. End the audio after the Jimmie Rodgers’ “T. B. Blues” song.) *Ask students: What did you learn about Jimmie’s childhood? How did Jimmie become connected with the railroad? What caused Jimmie to leave the railroad? What was unique about Jimmie’s singing style? What types of music influenced him? How did Jimmie compare his T.B. symptoms to a train?*

## Engage

1. **Student Research:** Divide students into four groups. Assign each group one website resource from the **Website Resources** found in this lesson plan (omitting the Understanding the Twelve Bar Blues website resource): Each group will research the content and pull pertinent information from their assigned site to create a bullet point information list to share with the classroom. After students share their research results, *ask questions like: Why do you think trains were so intriguing to the songwriter? Can you think of another mode of travel that has been so written about in music? If so, what? If not, why? How were trains seen as a mode of freedom throughout history? For some, how did prejudice and segregation affect the “freedom” found on trains?*
2. **Introduce the audio versions “Train Whistle Blues,” “Freight Train Blues,” and “Long Train Blues.”** Consider each song:Have students make notes of the instruments they hear and specific instrumentation within the song resembling the sound of a train. For each song, ask: *What instrument(s) do you hear? Is the mood lively and fun or dark and sad? Do you hear repeated words? Repeated sounds? Is the rhythm fast, slow, or in between?*
3. **Introduce the lyrics of each song.** Hand out lyric sheets to the students and play the songs again. In reviewing the lyrics *ask* *students what each song is about? What is the song about? Who is telling the story? What is similar about each song? What is different?* Talk about the blues song structure and the AAB format. Ask students, *from any lyric, what is one line from the song that is within the AA structure? What is one line belonging to the B structure?*

## Build

1. **Introduce and review the basic history of the railroad and railroad travel to students.** *The teacher should ask the students questions developed from your review of historical information: What are some things that led to the rise of the railroad and railway travel? Why do you think so many artists included the train in their songs? What set Jimmie Rodgers apart from the other artists when it came to writing and singing about trains? Which artists would have to worry more about traveling on the train? Why?*
2. **Compare/Contrast lives of the Artists: Jimmie Rodgers, Trixie Smith, Robert Wilkins.** *Ask students where Jimmie Rodgers is from? What was unique about Jimmie’s childhood? What were some of the difficulties that Jimmie Rodgers experienced in his life? What were some of his accomplishments? Where was Trixie Smith from? What was unique about Trixie’s childhood? What were some of the difficulties Trixie faced in her life? What were some of her accomplishments? Where was Robert Wilkins from? What was unique about Robert’s childhood? What were some of the difficulties Robert faced in his life? What were some of his accomplishments? Do you see any similarities in any of the performers’ lives? What were the biggest differences?*

## Apply

1. **Students write a 12-bar blues song about a train:** This can be an individual assignment, partner assignment, or group assignment. The song’s main idea about a train should present a problem. Each verse should progress the story/problem. The lyrics should have at least four verses. The story doesn’t have to resolve, and the problem can worsen. After all, …this is the blues! The Teacher can brainstorm with the students on ideas and lists on board or have students brainstorm in groups or as partners. A timeframe should be given, and a 10-minute warning and a 5-minute warning given.
2. **Reading the lyrics first as a poem.** Drafts of lyrics should be read aloud. As listeners, students will make note of where rhythm or meter might stumble, or where the story doesn’t evolve and seems unrelated from verse to verse. Teacher will explain that critique notes are to be done anonymously and that he/she will collect notes, review, and approve suggestions and comments before reading aloud to avoid the discouragement of a writer and suggestions and comments that aren’t helpful to and are critical of the writer. This will also avoid unnecessary silliness or comments that don’t build or assist the writer in improvement and revision.
3. **Revising the verse:** Students take into consideration the comments and suggestions read aloud and begin revising their blues song. The teacher sets the time frame, giving a ten-minute and a five-minute warning of the approaching deadline.
4. **Lyrics are read aloud again**. Teacher and students will discuss revisions and the process. The teacher will ask questions like; *can you hear the difference between the draft and revised lyric? Why do you think reading the lyric aloud is better than reading the piece silently? Can you feel the blues in your lyrics? Do your lyrics sound like the blues even without the music? Why do you think critiques are important to a writer?*
5. **Students will choose a backing track (blues, jazz, country instrumentation) from the resource tracks included with this lesson.** *Students should become accustomed to the music and then practice placing the lyrics within the 12-bar blues track.)*
6. **Teacher records the performance** to evidence achievement and for evaluation.

## Reflect

**Ask students:** *What are some things you now know about 12-bar blues and trains that you didn’t know before this lesson? What most surprised you about this lesson? What intrigued you most about all three artists in this lesson? What surprised you most? What was the greatest challenge of this lesson? What did you enjoy most about this lesson? What did you like least about this lesson? How could this lesson be improved?*

## Expand

1. **Have students write an essay** on the connections to music and trains using their website resource bullet points from this lesson. Students should credit the sources in their essays in the proper citing format. Have students read their essays in the classroom.
2. **Create a class blues train dance and a blues whistle accompaniment. (***Come up with movements that work with train whistles, and the choo, choo, choo sound, building up steam, and the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks. Play some 12-bar blues and do your classroom thing!*

**New Lesson ideas:**

1. **If your school has a band, work with the band director and band students in developing a live sound behind the original songs written in class.**
2. **Take a classroom field trip to the Jimmie Rodgers Museum. Contact the TV station and have students share their songs with the world, in the world of Jimmie Rodgers!**

Creator:

Richelle Putnam

Mississippi Arts Commission Teaching Artist

[www.richelleputnam.net](http://www.richelleputnam.net)

Freight Train Blues by Trixie Smith (written by

I hate to hear that freight train blow, boo-hoo
I hate to hear that freight train blow, boo-hoo
Every time I hear it blowin', I feel like ridin' too

I asked the brakeman to let me ride the blind
I asked the brakeman to let me ride the blind
He said "Little girlie, you know this train ain't mine"

(Sidney Bechet plays a blue clarinet solo here)

That's a mean old fireman, cruel old engineer
That's a mean old fireman, cruel old engineer
It was a mean old train that took my man away from here

I've got the freight train blues, but I'm too darn mean to cry
I've got the freight train blues, too darn mean to cry
I'm gonna love that man till the day he die

There's three trains ready but none ain't goin' my way
I said there's three trains ready but none ain't goin' my way
But the sun's gonna shine in my backdoor some day

Train Whistle Blues by Jimmie Rodgers

When a woman gets the blues she hangs her little head and cries
When a woman gets the blues she hangs her little head and cries
But when a man gets the blues he grabs a train and rides

Every time I see that lonesome railroad train
Every time I see that lonesome railroad train
It makes me wish I was going home again

Look a-yonder coming, coming down that railroad track
Look a-yonder coming, coming down that railroad track
With the black smoke rolling, rolling from that old smokestack

I got the blues so bad till the whole round world look blue
I got the blues so bad till the whole round world looks blue
I ain't got a dime, I don't know what to do

I'm weary now, I want to leave this town
I'm weary now and I want to leave this town
I can't find a job, I'm tired of hanging around

Long Train Blues by Robert Wilkins

She walked down the yard, caught the longest train she seen
She walked down the yard, caught the longest train she seen
Said she'd ride, she’d ride "till the blues wear offa me"

It's a bull and a freight train runnin' side by side
It's a bull and a freight train runnin' side by side
They done stole my rider and I guess they're satisfied

They rode in the Delta, kept on easin' by
They rode in the Delta, kept on easin' by
Know I feel just like she said her last goodbye

Friend, she won't write, she won't telephone
Friend, she won't write, she won't telephone
Makes me believe to my soul my rider calls that "gone"

But if I had wings, friend, like Noah's dove
Friend, if I had wings, friend, like Noah's dove
I would raise and fly, God knows, where my lover was

I lay down at night, I can't sleep at all
I lay down at night, I can't sleep at all
Awful lyin' there wondering if someone rollin' in her arms

Laid my head on my pillow, friends, it be too high
Laid my head on my pillow, friends, it be too high
Take it down little devil, I'm gettin' sick and 'bout to die