

APOLLO

EDUCATION

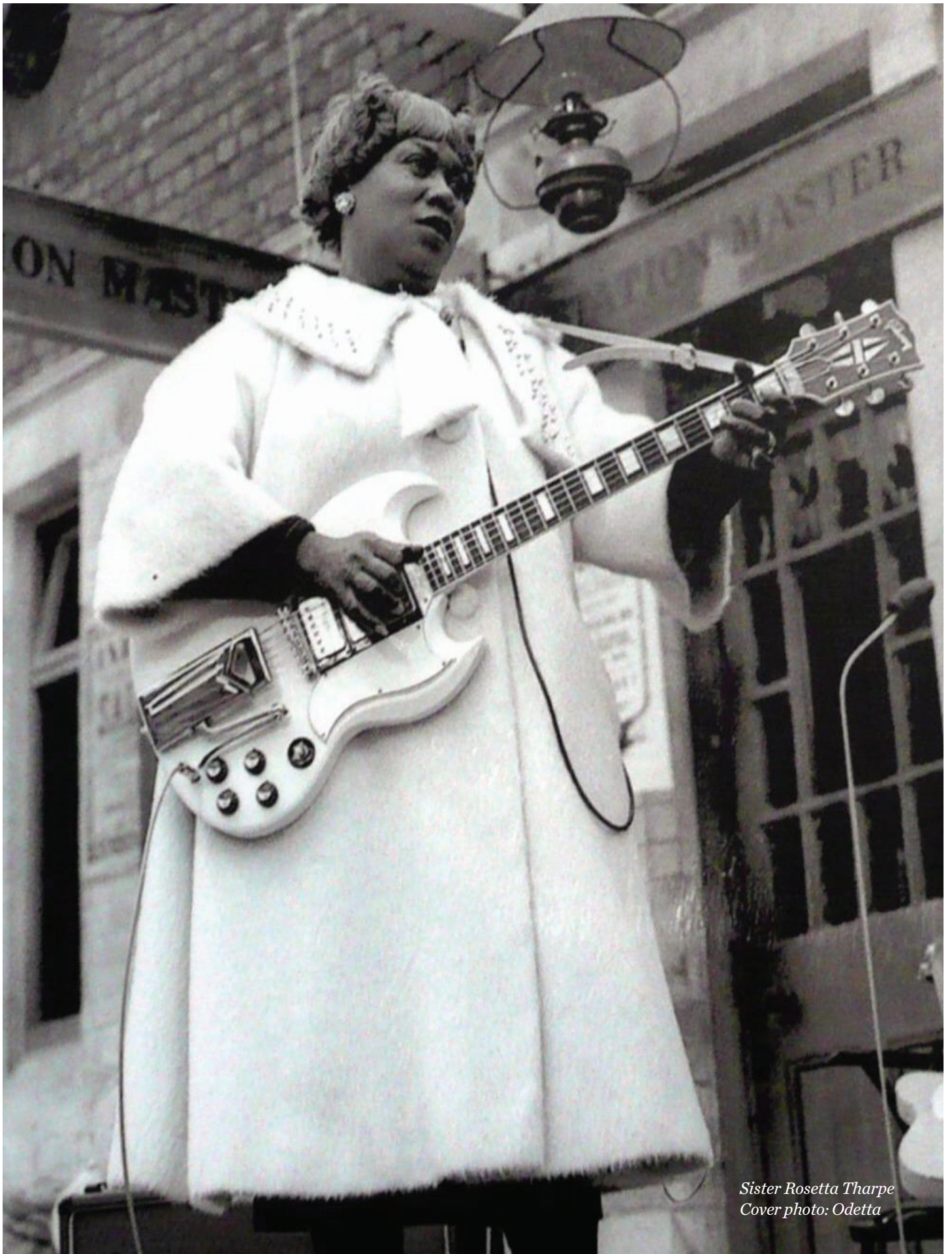
THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE

PUBLISHED BY THE APOLLO THEATER EDUCATION PROGRAM IN NEW YORK, NY

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 1, OCTOBER 2022



STRING STORIES



*Sister Rosetta Tharpe
Cover photo: Odetta*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUES

The roots of the Blues date back to the Civil War, a time when millions of African Americans were enslaved and forced to work on plantations in the South.

In order to communicate without plantation owners knowing, slaves had to develop resourceful methods for sharing information. One of those methods was to conceal messages in the stories they told, as well as the **work songs and spirituals** they sang.

Following the Civil War, African Americans in the Mississippi Delta continued the musical traditions of their ancestors, which included singing and playing instruments such as the **banjo and acoustic guitar**. By the late 1800s, the “**blue notes**” and **call and response** patterns heard in work songs and spirituals evolved into one of the earliest known styles of the Blues, called **Delta Blues**.

As performers traveled outside of the Delta during the **Great Migration**, they brought their songs and stories with them. In cities like

Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Louis, Missouri, the music developed its distinctive “**12 bar blues**” form and grew in popularity.

In the Piedmont region along the Eastern Seaboard, musicians developed their own technical style of guitar playing in the 1920s called **Piedmont Blues**. Following the invention of the electric guitar in 1931, guitarists in Chicago revolutionized the Blues during the 1950s by plugging into amplifiers and belting out their electrified style called **Chicago Blues**.

Since emerging in the Mississippi Delta over a century ago, multiple styles of the Blues have developed. In turn, those styles have influenced the development of Jazz, Country, Gospel, Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, and more.

Today, the Blues continue to influence musicians and inspire audiences around the world. Like the Apollo Theater, the music and its history will forever be rooted in the soul of American culture.

WORDS TO KNOW

Blue notes: Expressive pitches that musicians bend up and down to create a longing effect.

Blues Shouters: Powerful vocalists who can sing over a band without the use of a microphone.

Call and response: Similar to a conversation, musicians perform “calls” for fellow musicians or audiences to “respond” to.

Country Music: Rural style of folk music, emerging in Eastern Tennessee in the 1920s.

Gospel Music: A style of Christian music, modernized and becoming popular in African American church communities in the 1940s.

Jazz: Early musical style to evolve out of the Blues, emerging in New Orleans in the early 1900s.

Race Music: A controversial label for black music used during the first half of the 20th century.

Rhythm and Blues (R&B): A direct descendant of the Blues, becoming popular in the 1940s

Rock and Roll: A direct descendant of Rhythm and Blues, becoming popular in the 1950s.

Shuffle rhythm: The heartbeat of the Blues.

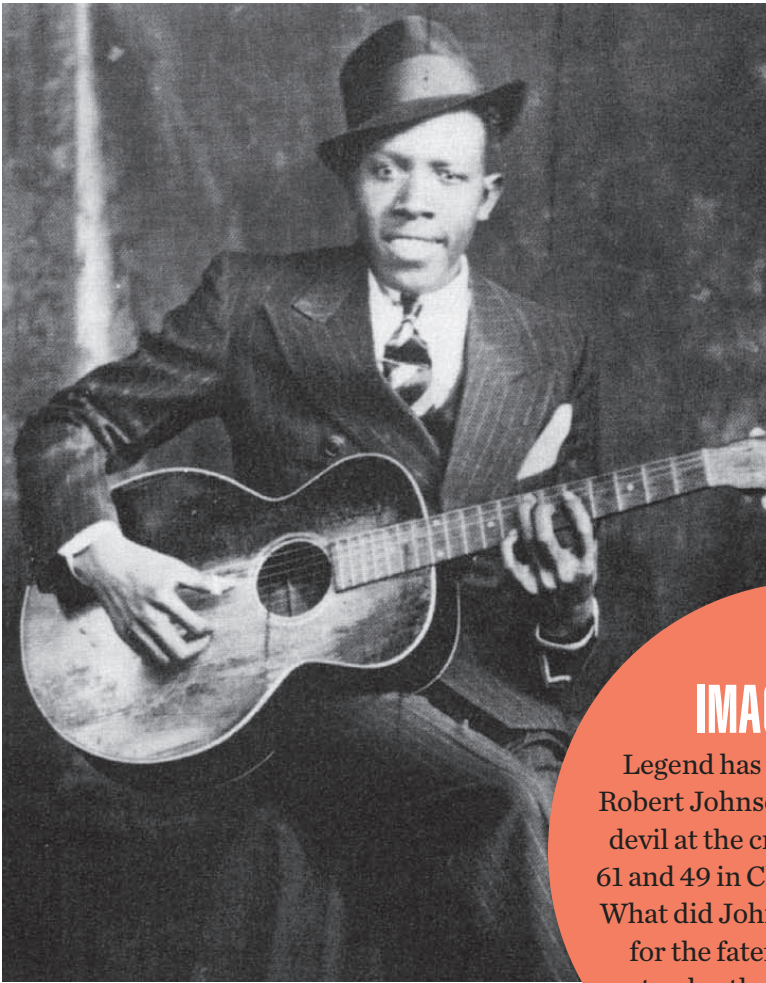
Spirituals: Religious songs strongly associated with the African American experience.

Swing Music: Popular style of Jazz music, emerging in Chicago and New York in the 1920s.

Work Songs: Songs sung and performed in rhythm that accompany work related activities.



THE ROOTS AND FRUITS OF THE BLUES



IMAGINE THIS:

Legend has it that Blues Legend Robert Johnson, sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of Highway 61 and 49 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. What did Johnson receive in return for the fateful deal? The ability to play the guitar better than anyone in the world!

What makes the Blues such an expressive and powerful music? Listen closely and you're likely to hear the following musical elements:

"Blue notes" are expressive pitches that musicians bend up and down on their instruments (or when they sing) to produce a longing effect. Oftentimes, this effect is referred to as sounding "bluesy."

Listen to Odetta bend notes up and down with her voice and make them sound "bluesy," in her performance of ["This Little Light of Mine."](#)

The **shuffle rhythm** is the heartbeat of the Blues. Think about the sound of your own heartbeat: "Boom. Boomba. Boom. Boomba. Boom." Believe it or not, our heartbeats sound similar to the shuffle rhythm! Another example is the sound of a train chugging along the tracks. "Chugga. Chugga. Chugga. Chugga."

Listen to ["Up Above My Head"](#) by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and feel the shuffling rhythm.

The **"12 bar blues"** is a musical structure that typically consists of just three chords organized over 12 measures, or bars. It has become one of the most popular song forms in all of American music, and was widely adopted in styles such as Jazz, Rhythm and Blues, and Rock and Roll.

Listen to Memphis Minnie following the "12 bar blues" form on ["When The Levee Breaks"](#).

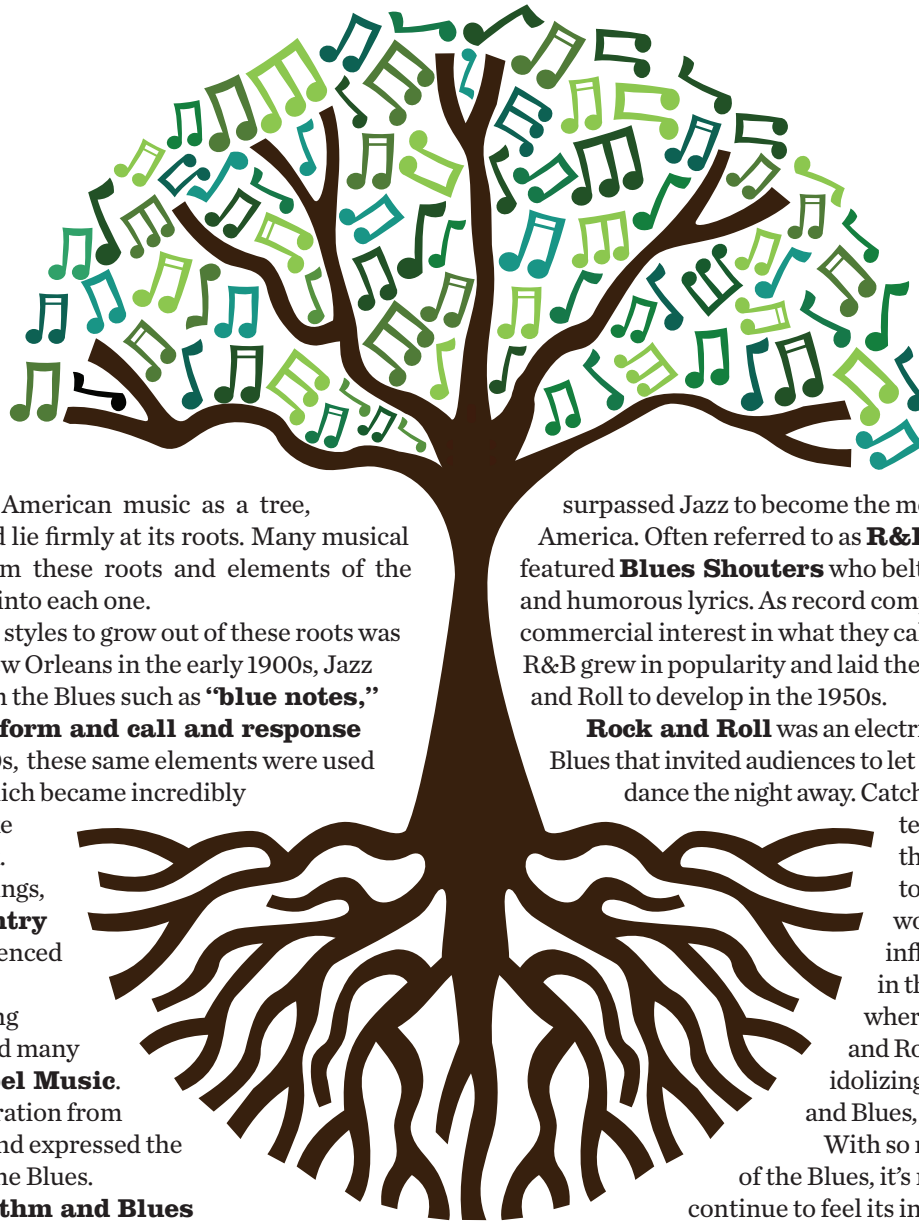
Finally, go back and listen to ["When The Levee Breaks"](#) one more time. Can you hear the **call and response pattern** in Memphis Minnie's lyrics? After a lyrical phrase is "called" out in the first four bars, she repeats the phrase in the second four bars, then sings a different phrase in "response" during the last four bars. Blues melodies and song lyrics are often structured around this call-call-response (or same-same-different) pattern.



Top: Robert Johnson;
bottom: Memphis Minnie
album cover

“The Blues is the roots; everything else is the fruits.”

—Willie Dixon



If you think of American music as a tree, the Blues would lie firmly at its roots. Many musical styles grew from these roots and elements of the Blues were integrated into each one.

One of the earliest styles to grow out of these roots was **Jazz**. Developed in New Orleans in the early 1900s, Jazz adopted elements from the Blues such as “**blue notes**,” the “**12 bar blues**” form and call and response patterns. In the 1920s, these same elements were used in **Swing Music**, which became incredibly popular in big cities like Chicago and New York.

In more rural settings, early pioneers of **Country Music** were also influenced by the Blues. Writing songs about overcoming sorrow, Country shared many similarities with **Gospel Music**. Both styles drew inspiration from **Spirituals Music** and expressed the storytelling power of the Blues.

In the 1940s, **Rhythm and Blues**

surpassed Jazz to become the most popular music in America. Often referred to as **R&B**, the exciting style featured **Blues Shouters** who belted out entertaining and humorous lyrics. As record companies learned of the commercial interest in what they called “**Race Music**,” R&B grew in popularity and laid the groundwork for Rock and Roll to develop in the 1950s.

Rock and Roll was an electric extension of the Blues that invited audiences to let their hair down and dance the night away. Catching on with young

teenagers in America, the music quickly spread to audiences around the world. Nowhere was its influence felt more than in the United Kingdom, where bands like the Beatles and Rolling Stones grew up idolizing Rock and Roll, Rhythm and Blues, and Blues artists.

With so many styles growing out of the Blues, it's no wonder audiences continue to feel its influence today.

DO NOW: TELL YOUR STORY, SING YOUR SONG

The Blues allow performers the opportunity to tell their story and express themselves. Using the musical elements learned in this guide, express your story by composing a “**12 bar blues**” using the simple **call-call-response pattern**.

A common storyline in the Blues is that someone is confronted with a problem that they don't want to face. Addressing their concern in the first

four bars of the “12 bar blues” form, the performer repeats their phrase in the second four bars, then follows both “calls” with a “response” that offers a solution to their problem.

For example:

Have you heard the news?

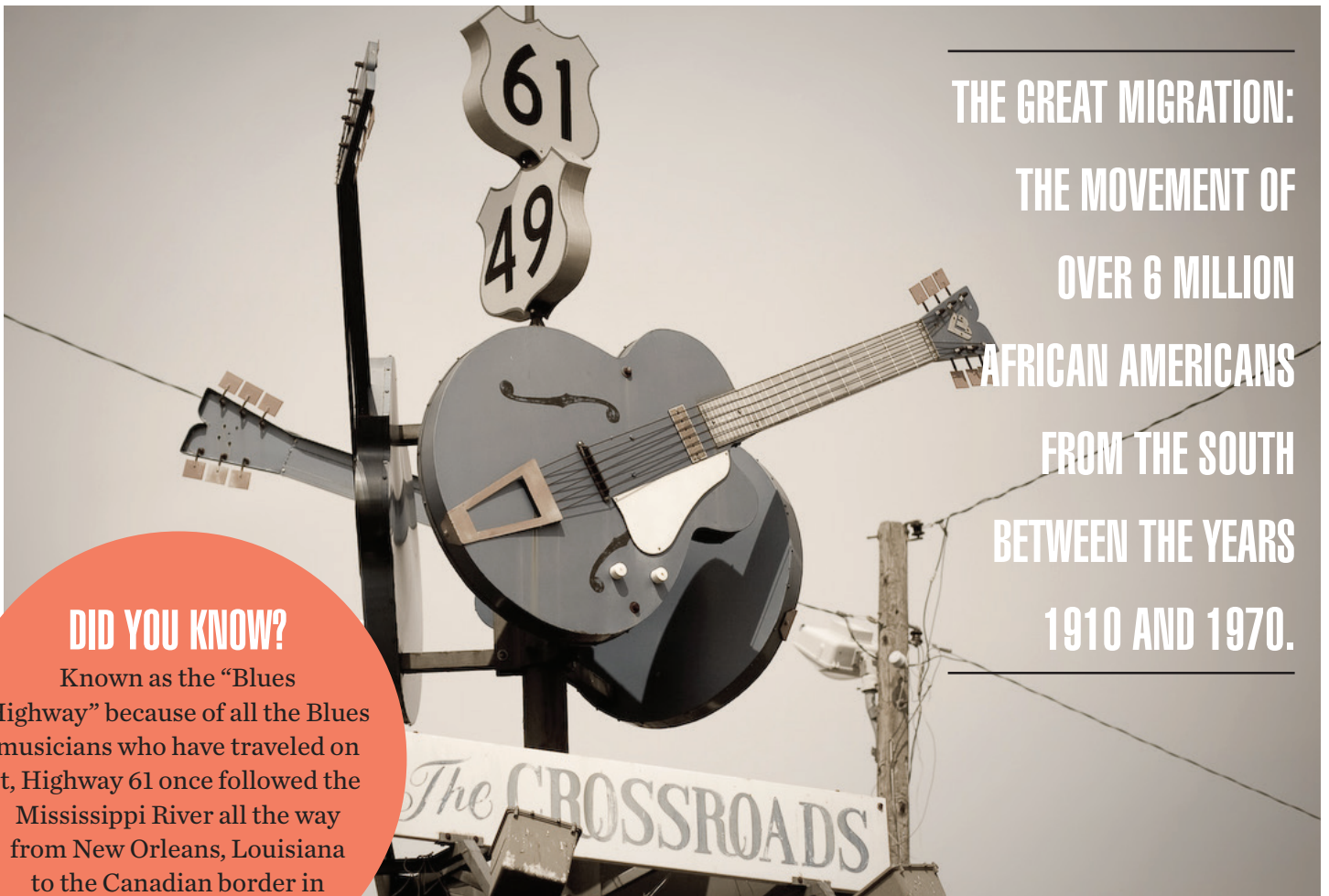
I got the alarm clock blues.

Have you heard the news?

I got the alarm clock blues.

*I'm feeling so awfully blue! I think
I'll have to hit the snooze.*

Now tell your story and compose your own “12 bar blues” using the call-call response pattern. For a truly “bluesy” feel, sing your lyrics using “**blue notes**” while feeling the **shuffle rhythm**!



THE GREAT MIGRATION:
THE MOVEMENT OF
OVER 6 MILLION
AFRICAN AMERICANS
FROM THE SOUTH
BETWEEN THE YEARS
1910 AND 1970.

DID YOU KNOW?

Known as the “Blues Highway” because of all the Blues musicians who have traveled on it, Highway 61 once followed the Mississippi River all the way from New Orleans, Louisiana to the Canadian border in northern Minnesota.

TRAVELING BLUES:

HOW THE GREAT MIGRATION INFLUENCED THE SOUND OF THE BLUES

For over a century, Bluesmen and women have been traveling across the United States telling their stories and sharing their songs. Traveling by foot, riverboat, train, plane, or automobile, the Blues have spread to every corner of the country, thanks largely in part to the **Great Migration**.

Between 1910 and 1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved out of the rural South, in search of employment opportunities and refuge from racial discrimination. With many people moving to the North, the Great Migration brought the Blues out of the Mississippi Delta and into some of the nation’s most bustling industrial cities.

In the early 1900s, historic travel routes such as Highway 61, known as the “Blues Highway,” transported musicians from the Mississippi Delta to cities like Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Louis, Missouri. Sharing their songs and stories everywhere they went, **Delta Blues** musicians set the tone for all other styles of Blues to develop.

On the East Coast in the 1920s, musicians from the mountainous Piedmont region near Virginia and the Carolinas

migrated to industrial areas such as Atlanta, Georgia. There they introduced a technical guitar style called **Piedmont Blues**, which required performers to play fast and rhythmically.

The Blues moved west and spread to Texas. In Houston, the swinging sound of **Texas Blues** poured out of dance halls in the 1930s. Meanwhile in Dallas, figures like T-Bone Walker became one of the first to play and record the Blues on electric guitar. Moving to Los Angeles in the 1940s, Walker also helped establish the jazz-influenced West Coast Blues style.

In the Midwest, musicians in Chicago, Illinois fully electrified the Blues in the 1950s. Playing in clubs that were loud and lively, they had to plug their instruments into amplifiers in order to be heard. **Chicago Blues** musicians laid the groundwork for Rock and Roll to develop in the 1950s. Rock and Roll was a cultural phenomenon that introduced the Blues to audiences around the world.

By the end of the Great Migration, the Blues had traveled throughout the United States and beyond. Today, its journey continues to connect listeners using modern technologies such as the internet, the ultimate information highway.

STRING STORIES: THE GUITAR

There is one instrument more closely tied to the roots (*and fruits*) of the Blues than any other: the guitar.

With its origins dating back to Spain in the late 1700s, the **acoustic guitar** first arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1800s. Intended primarily for European Classical music, African Americans in the Mississippi Delta took a different approach to playing the instrument.

Incorporating musical characteristics such as “**blue notes**” and **shuffling rhythms**, musicians in the Delta were influenced by the musical traditions of their ancestors, many being of West African descent. In West African countries such as Senegal, musicians had been performing on stringed instruments similar to the guitar for centuries, like the **kora**, **akonting**, and **banjo**.

While its long neck and rounded body resemble a guitar, the lush sound of the **kora** is produced by plucking its 21 strings, much like a harp. The instrument is often performed



Kora

by **African Griots**, who are cultural historians responsible for teaching music and storytelling traditions to younger generations.

Also in West Africa, the three-stringed **akonting** serves an important role during social gatherings. Akonting players can be very expressive in the way they bend and slide their fingers over the instrument’s strings, creating exciting rhythms that invited dancers to move to the music.

Both the kora and akonting are close musical ancestors to the **banjo**, which in its earliest form, was similarly constructed from a hollowed-out gourd, wooden stick neck, and animal skin. It was brought to the United States by enslaved Africans, who, over time, modified the instrument to become the metal-bodied five-string banjo we commonly see today.

Influenced by the musical traditions of their West African ancestors, both the banjo and acoustic guitar were adopted by African American musicians in the U.S. South. While the origins and evolution of each instrument date back centuries, their stories will continue to string listeners along for centuries to come.

ELIZABETH COTTEN AND HER UPSIDE DOWN GUITAR

Born in 1895 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Elizabeth Cotten taught herself to play the banjo as a young girl and soon learned how to play the guitar. This was a somewhat risky endeavor as the guitar belonged to her brother and he would not allow her to touch it. Young Elizabeth would wait until he left, grab the guitar from beneath his bed, and slide it across her lap to play. Eventually, she brought her own guitar for \$3.75.

Nicknamed “Libba”, Cotten was left-handed. Since guitars then were made to accommodate right-handed people, she held the guitar opposite



WATCH:

[Elizabeth Cotten perform Freight Train](#)

style of playing that was so distinct that people referred to it as “Cotten picking.”

When Cotten was just 12 years old, she wrote her first song about a freight train that kept her awake at night as it crossed through the town where she lived. The song, “Freight Train,” was first recorded in 1957, when Cotten was 62 years old. Over the years numerous musicians have recorded their versions of the song, a fitting tribute to

Cotten’s influence on music.

In 1984, Cotten was recognized as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts.

from how it is usually played, using her right hand to fret the strings and strumming the guitar with her left thumb and fingers. She developed a

MAPPING THE BLUES

Delta Blues - One of the earliest styles of the Blues, emerging in the Mississippi Delta in the late 1800s.

Piedmont Blues - A finger-picking style of guitar playing named for the Southeast region of the U.S. where it originated in the 1920s.

Texas Blues - A swinging style of Blues that emerged in Texas in the 1930s.

West Coast Blues - Jazz-influenced style of Blues, emerging on the West Coast in the 1940s.

Chicago Blues - An electric style of Blues that emerged in Chicago in the 1950s.

ACROSS

- 3: This style of Blues emerged in the 1950s
5: A style of Jazz that emerged in Chicago and New York in the 1920s
6: Three-stringed instrument from West Africa
7: Shuffle _____
8: A style of guitar playing that emerged in the Southeast in the 1920s
10: These are sung in rhythm along with work related activities

DOWN

- 1: This involved more than 6 million African Americans leaving the South between 1910 and 1970
2: _____ Minnie
4: Nickname for Elizabeth Cotten
5: Religious songs associated with the African American experience
7: Call and _____
9: One of the earliest styles of the Blues was from this region
11: Instrument with 21 strings

ANSWERS

- 1: The Great Migration
2: Memphis
3: Chicago Blues
4: Libba
5: Spirituals
6: Akontig
7: Rhythm
8: Piedmont Blues
9: Delta
10: Worksongs

DOWN

ACROSS

Published by the Apollo Theater Education Program

Credits

String Stories Study Guide
Written by: Tim Sullivan
Contributor: LaFrae Sci
Design: Van Gennep Design
"String Stories: The Blueswomen" Digital Resource Guide
created by DaMonique Ballou

Images:

page 1: Odetta, c. 1960s, Granamour Weems Collection/Alamy Stock Photo
page 2: Sister Rosetta Tharpe with her Gibson SG, 1964, Open Pics
page 4: Robert Johnson, 1935, Wikipedia; Memphis Minnie, "In My Girlish Days", album cover
page 6: "The Crossroads", 2008, Hank Word, Flickr Commons
Page 7: Elizabeth Cotten, 1977, Glasshouse Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Leadership support for Apollo Theater Education Programs provided by



**William R. Kenan, Jr.
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With generous support from Apollo EmpowHER, Steve and Connie Ballmer, ConEdison, The Walt Disney Company, The Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation, the Moore Charitable Foundation, The Neuberger Berman Foundation, The Pinkerton Foundation, Sony Global Social Justice Fund, and the Verizon Foundation and public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, with special support from New York City Council Member Julie Menin.