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MUSIC STUDIES

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A Note from the Editor

It's a pleasure to open the third decade of *JPMS* with this exciting guest-edited special issue on the topic of Popular Music Pedagogy. Jason Hanley and Susan Oehler have worked long and hard to compile this rich and diverse collection of perspectives, experiences, suggestions, and provocations, and I'm personally excited to have these interventions in hand to bring to my own popular music teaching.

I trust you'll enjoy reading and reacting to them as much as I have in watching the issue take shape. Hats off to Jason and Susan for the intelligence and imagination they've brought to the assignment, and to the stimulating contributions of all of their writers. And special thanks to our former Editor-in-Chief Emmett Price, who put all this into motion.

Warmly,

Kevin J. H. Dettmar

W. M. Keck Professor and Chair of English, Pomona College

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*

Teaching the Blues Effectively

Fernando Jones

Columbia College Chicago

American music has been a soundtrack to the world for over fifty years, and the Blues is at the core of its molecular structure. When most Americans think of this music stereotypical images of Southern Black Bluesmen undoubtedly come to mind—artists who seem to have taken an oath of poverty playing off-brand guitars in smoke-filled rooms. The last thing one might ever think of when discussing pedagogy on any level is the use of this music to cultivate interdisciplinary skills—in literacy, the fine arts, critical thinking, and other areas.

Music is a universal language and is of educational value. Why don't we as principals, teachers, and politicians publicly support the arts? Could it be that we don't truly believe that music is a noble profession? Could it be that we don't feel it's a profession at all? Whatever the case it is something that we should make students of interest feel proud about, comfortable about, and empowered by choosing music as a life path.

Unfortunately, some in US schools view the arts as senseless, dispensable, extracurricular activities instead of a forum in which multiple intelligences are expressed. Harvard professor Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory clearly shows that people learn differently, and it identifies music as one area of intelligence. School House Rock's "Preamble" cartoon with music singlehandedly helped me pass my eighth grade Constitution test.

In my twenty years as an educator I've had the opportunity to train administrators, teachers, and students (pre-kindergarten through college) across the country on how to use the Blues as a tool to teach and improve literacy and other skills effectively through my *Blues Learning and Understanding Education Systems* (B.L.U.E.S.) via the Blues Kids of America program. Something I started doing at four years old (trying to make music like my older brothers) has given me a career both as a player and educator. I'm not a "know it all," just someone who likes to share his experience; good and bad; my mission has always been to make the Blues accessible to the entire family.

I started playing the Blues by ear when I was four years old on a guitar that my brother, Greg, asked me not to touch, and have been doing so ever since. My “professors” were my older brothers, Foree (one of the last stand-alone Chicago Blues singers) and Greg (organ, bass, guitar, vocals, and drums). The classroom was our family living room in an apartment on the Southside of Chicago on East 60th Street with marble hallway staircases made available to working-class Blacks by “white flight.” And Foree took me on my very first field trip to Theresa’s Lounge in 1968. The efforts of my brothers, coupled with my parents’ ability to provide me a private school education, collectively gave me everything in the world that I needed to get to where I am today. Live music was accessible to me at church and in my brothers’ rehearsals and performances. I was exposed to music through the lens of the Blues before I even attended nursery school.

Today much of what our school-aged children listen to is digitally generated (through computers, MIDI, drum machines, etc.) and can be written, arranged, produced, and performed by one person. In the past, the same song would take an entire band plus a team of engineers and producers to create. Today we live in a global village where we can use technology to communicate with friends across the world in cyber time. The Blues, too often viewed as a celebratory reflection of enslavement in song, is in fact a perpetual courtship of freedom.

People always ask me what my secret is in keeping the attention span of students of all ages, and I tell them that I catch them where they are. This is important because in order to connect with our students we have to first meet them where they are musically and then point them in the direction we want to take them. This simply means I come into the classroom incorporating some of the pop culture language into my own. You have to show them that you identify with them and what they know; this scores you major points in the trust department. Then we’ll play a song they know. From there a connection is made. After that we can take them in any direction we want—resulting in them showing us that they know more about the Blues than anyone expected.

As educators we have to catch the students where they are and bring them up to where we’d like for them to be instead of “knocking them” down. We are in their domain. A digital, real-time, high-definition domain. And in order for us to be effective as teachers we have to embrace the digital way scientifically, musically, educationally.

I have learned throughout my two-decade teaching career as an educator that if you do these three basic things you'll be all right:

- 1) **Share your experiences and secure student trust** by embracing their ideas. It's important to remember you can identify without compromising the integrity of your authority. The students know you are in charge. Share your vulnerabilities as well as your professional experiences with them. It's okay. Don't they deserve it? If you have a story that goes with a lesson, feel free to reminisce. Generally, my students love it. For example, "I grew up listening to this song. We thought it was kind of corny, but when we played it for the first time at the Chicago Blues Festival the crowd went wild. Now we play it all the time." Or pick a song that you want your students to learn/perform and share your reflection about it.
- 2) **Listen to students more than you pontificate** because it's not about you. Your reputation has already preceded you. Your students will know who you are and what you represent. In other words, it's understood that you are qualified to teach them, so take time out to hear what they want to do. This will gain you leverage and reaffirm trust.
- 3) **Keep students engaged** at all times by having them be part of the hands-on creative process.

I've learned that the learning process can and should be a fun and exciting experience that continually evolves for both teacher and learner. But it is my philosophy that I also am there to impact the classroom culture and give learners a well-rounded education. As a mentor, I owe it to the learners under my supervision to be current and competent in the content area I'm teaching. And that means putting on a multimedia show in class each class to engage students in thinking, reading, and performing. I use traditional and nontraditional methods of teaching through the use of creative strategies incorporating everything from sound recordings and videos to field study visits.

I have used the following approaches to shape the classroom culture with younger learners and college level students. Feel free to try them out.

- 1) **Sessions should generally start off with some sort of routine.** Here's a slogan I wrote that I teach through call-and-response and then use periodically through the session:

I am somebody.

I am a musician.

A musician is a person who makes music.

A good musician . . . listens.

And a musician that listens learns.


And a musician that learns earns.

- 2) **Pick age-appropriate songs.** For younger students select simple melodic songs. You cannot go wrong with call-and-response selections. Don't forget to stick to a routine, and don't be afraid to be repetitive. Pick songs for older students that are popular, but without ribald lyrics or slurs. Allow students to express themselves through poetry, rap, comedy (no signifying), and appropriate dances. These approaches also have been successful with students in juvenile detention centers, providing an outlet to express themselves creatively in a structured environment.
- 3) **Connect the music to its history in an activity.** Consider role playing using popular music artists as characters. With my collegiate students we collect and share background information on a song before learning how to play it. It helps the ensemble better understand the piece's significance, thus, giving them a vested interest. For my Blues I students we role play, too, but trace the lineage of contemporary artists back to their roots. For example, rappers Nas (son of Olu Dara) and Shaunna (daughter of Buddy Guy) of DTP have famous fathers who were Bluesmen.
- 4) **Make interdisciplinary connections so students get involved in reading and writing.** In connection with a song like "Route 66" have students use literacy and map skills as they chart the stops along Route 66 on a US map. Have students write songs in groups about their city's landmarks.
- 5) **Connect the classroom culture to the performance culture.** My college-level classroom gives me a practical opportunity to facilitate and participate in the shaping of tomorrow's players, today. The room is laid out in a circular hands-on, user friendly, nurturing, educational, and entertaining environment. Faculty members, guest artists, family, and friends are welcome to observe sessions. This policy conditions students to be able to perform before non-biased diverse audiences at a moment's notice. These experiences enhance the learning environment and growth process. Current events get incorporated into our lesson plans without compromising the integrity of the unit's focus. Learners

are assessed and evaluated based on individual growth and performance. Individual needs are identified, addressed and supported, resulting in our classroom becoming a resource unto itself. It is imperative that learners are in a comfortable and trusting environment.

- 6) **Sometimes my lessons are shared with my colleagues to get feedback.** To ensure my professional development as an educator and life-long learner I still participate in professional growth and development seminars, am involved in professional organizations, and go to conferences that focus on serving the needs of those I serve.

My peers, as well as the press, have often asked me my views on the lifespan of the Blues, and my response is always the same. As long as there is movement in the universe the element of music will exist; as long as human beings express themselves through music—the keyword is *express*—the Blues as a music and culture will be present, happy or sad. To help ensure the vibrancy, integrity, and popularity of the Blues, where current and future American Blues artists can compete as professionals in a global market worthy of note, we as practitioners and players must keep the educational component of this music at the vanguard. The Blues is alive, but like all things living, we have to keep it healthy. And one way to do this is through interdisciplinary classroom-based programming.

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