

MS

Middle School and Up | Performance Guide



Walton Arts Center

# Down the Dirt Road Blues

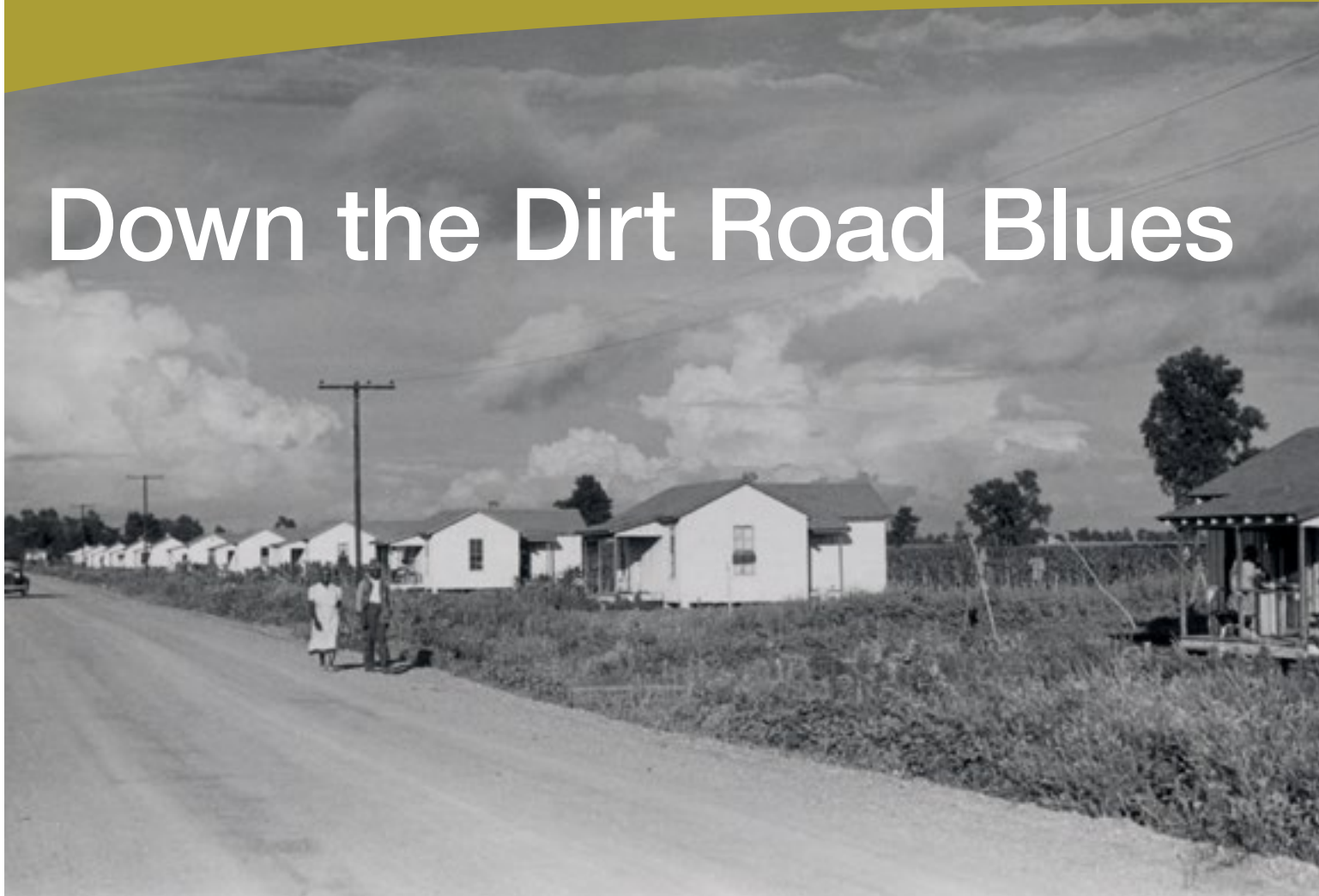


Photo Credit: Jack Pryor, from the *Arkansas Giant* Collection. Tenant housing for Lee Wilson & Co., ca. 1939. Wilson, Arkansas. University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections.

*Down the Dirt Road Blues tells the story of one song's journey through American history and culture, with stops in Arkansas along the way. It begins with a melody carried in the heart of a man chained in the hold of a slave ship. Using era-appropriate instruments as accompaniment, blues artist Spencer Bohren moves the African melody from Delta cotton fields to urban Memphis, Tennessee, and on to the Appalachian mountains, the studios of Nashville, the genesis of the Rock 'n' Roll era, and the Folk Boom and English Invasion of the 1960s.*

#### Ideas for Curriculum Connections

CCSS: RH.6-8.1, 2, 3, 4 and 6; RH.6-8.7 and 9;  
Music, grades 5-8: M.2.3; M.4.3; M.4.4; M.4.5;  
M.5.2; M.5.3; M.5.4 and M.5.5; grades 9-12:  
CA.3.IMIV.1, 2 and 3



Blind street musician, West Memphis, Arkansas, Ben Shahn, 1898-1969, photographer. Date created, October 1935.  
Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

## The Blues

The Blues is a musical style originating in America's southland that has influenced musicians around the world. Born in the Mississippi Delta, blues music tells of the struggle of people working in Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. Like jazz, blues is a uniquely American art form that the world has embraced.

## The Story

*Down the Dirt Road Blues* opens with a man walking down a lane. He works as a slave. He's hot and extremely tired. He has few possessions and relies on his voice, the oldest musical instrument in the world, to express himself by singing this song. The concert follows this song through time, through the Civil War to 1960s America and the integration of audiences. With accompaniment by period instruments, Bohren shares this music with references to geography and social studies curriculum. His story travels from the rural south to urban communities; from the US to Europe and back again; from acoustic to electric; from front porch to concert hall.

## The Artist

Born (1950) into a gospel-singing family in Wyoming, Spencer Bohren began singing and playing music as a young boy. At fourteen, inspired by the folk music he heard on the radio, Spencer picked up a guitar and began performing in public. He studied America's treasures of blues, country, gospel and folk music from hundreds of sources, both popular and obscure. He played with rock, country and blues bands through the sixties and seventies. Spencer now makes his home in the music city of New Orleans. He continues to celebrate the history, stories and sounds of American roots music in concerts around the world.

# Learning Activities

## Blues Lyrics

*"Who's that walkin' down that lonesome road?  
Who's that walkin' down that lonesome road?  
Must be Maggie, I can tell by the way she walks."*

The blues is built on three short musical phrases, usually in 4/4 time. A standard blues song has 12 bars of music and a three-line verse. Each line of the verse corresponds to 4 measures of music. The rhyming structure is A-A-B. By contrast, a popular song has 32 bars of music and a rhyming structure of A-A-B-A.

In blues lyrics, the first line is often repeated. The verses build on a theme. A blues song may or may not have a narrative. The blues break is a response to the "call" in a 12-bar blues song.

Ask students to:

- > Research examples of blues songs.
- > Discuss the standard blues lyrics.
- > Choose a historical character or event in Arkansas and write lyrics on the themes of struggle, hope or being overworked.

## Learn more about Blues Music

There are many excellent informational texts and research sites about blues music in Arkansas. Use internet sites to research multiple sources:

- > The Delta Cultural Center website  
[www.deltaculturalcenter.com](http://www.deltaculturalcenter.com)
- > The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History  
[www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net)

Learn more about Arkansas musicians by reading:

- > *Our Own Sweet Sounds, a Celebration of Popular Music in Arkansas*, by Robert Cochran.



Photo Credit: Spencer Bohren



## Blues Journey in Arkansas

The blues journey in Arkansas is a lively part of a popular musical form. Blues music became a way to understand the life and times of working class African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. The Mississippi River along the state's eastern border was a point of origin for the blues. The Arkansas Delta region was subject to annual overflow of the river. Uncertainties and hardships of living in this region shaped the expression of the people who worked on the land. Struggle and loss were themes in their songs. The unique phrasing and rhythm of their songs shaped the blues form.

The blues in Arkansas borrowed story telling qualities of African-American work songs sung by sharecropping farmers, riverboat workers and timber cutters in Arkansas. The vocal and instrumental sound of

the blues was borrowed from the songs of workers in Delta cotton fields. The rhythm of the blues was influenced by songs of convict laborers who helped rebuild levees after the Mississippi River flooded Arkansas in 1927. The blues rhythms echoed the sound of their back-breaking work. Delta blues spread across Arkansas during the 1920's. Radio stations in Little Rock, Fort Smith, Hot Springs and Fayetteville broadcast popular blues music performed by live orchestras. Helena and West Memphis, Arkansas were important centers for blues artists during the 1930's and 1940's. King Biscuit Time and other programs made blues artists like Sonny Boy Williamson, James Cotton and Howlin' Wolf famous. Today blues music continues to be broadcast from Helena, Arkansas on radio station KFFA I360, and is one of the longest running blues radio programs in America.



William Grant Still with school friends at Wilberforce University, Ohio, ca. 1915. From the William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers (MC1125), University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections. Used by permission of the William Grant Still Estate.

Arkansas is a place where influential musicians and song writers lived and worked. Composer, William Grant Still (second from right) grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. He composed over 150 works including symphonies and popular songs. In 1936, Still conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic performance of one of his works at the Hollywood Bowl.

### Reflect and Assess

- > Describe the performance of one version of the song, “Who’s That Walkin” in as much detail as possible.
- > What instruments were used? Describe the quality of voice.
- > What did you already know about blues music before seeing the performance?
- > Describe the characters in *Down the Dirt Road Blues*. Who were they? What were they doing? Why? How did their world influence their sound?
- > What moment in the performance do you remember most?
- > Which artist or time period would you like to research and write about or sample?

### Learn More Online

- > Learn more about Spencer Bohren  
[www.spencerbohren.com](http://www.spencerbohren.com)
- > Learn more about Arkansas history at University of Arkansas Special Collections  
<http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections>
- > Research musicians through the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture  
[www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net)

## Volume 11 Number 16

Colgate Classroom Series performances help students meet Common Core Standards.

**Learn more at:**  
[www.waltonartscenter.org](http://www.waltonartscenter.org)

### Walton Arts Center Learning & Engagement

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*This performance guide was developed in partnership with Joshua Youngblood, Research and Outreach Services Librarian, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries Contributors*  
*Down the Dirt Road Blues* is part of Walton Arts Center’s series of Arkansas performances for students:  
AHA - Arkansas History through the Arts

### Walton Arts Center 2013-2014 Learning programming is generously supported by these funders, sponsors and benefactors:

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### Season support provided by Walmart / SAM’S CLUB

Arkansas Arts Council is an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage and the National Endowment for the Arts