

**DEAL  
FESTIVAL**  
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THE HERITAGE  
OF THE

**BLUES**



Teaching Resource Pack  
Written by Russell Callaghan Grooms

# INTRODUCTION

The Blues is a musical style that dates, as far as recorded music goes, to the early 20th Century. It is the music of the deep south of America and of Highway 61, a road that runs South out of Memphis along the Mississippi River. The Blues is a melting pot of styles, from African traditional songs to field hollers (work songs) to songs of freedom and oppression, travel, poverty, celebration, love, good times and hard times. We're going to travel down Highway 61 and along the way, we will learn that the themes and the sounds of the Blues are as present and relevant today as they were back in the 1920's, right through the last century and into present day. We will learn the songs, the artists and the soul of the music and even write our own blues song. It's impossible to say where the blues first started because it's been around in one form or another for 1000's of years, and it would take a lifetime to document the history of the Blues as it has become so deeply embedded into the fabric of music, history and culture of the 20th and 21st Centuries but we will try to get a snapshot of the music, the artists who made it famous and a glimpse at the feeling of the blues, the soul of the sound and the very real human emotion that comes from a deep longing for change.

However, before we start our journey, we must step into the shoes of the men and women who made this music and become our very own bluesmen and women.

To be a real bluesman (or woman), you must have your own blues name. This name tells everyone a little bit about you, where you were born (Mississippi John Hurt) or something physical about you (Blind Blake). Try the table on the right and have some fun finding out your own blues name.

*Task 1: Finding your Blues Name*

## What is your Blues name?

**1. Use your first initial to find your first name...**

A = Fat	J = Boney	S = Blind
B = Buddy	K = Curly	T = Big
C = Sticky	L = Pretty	U = Yella
D = Old	M = Jailhouse	V = Toothless
E = Texas	N = Peg Leg	W = Screamin'
F = Hollerin'	O = Red	X = Fat Boy
G = Ugly	P = Sleepy	Y = Washboard
H = Brown	Q = Bald	Z = Steel-Eye
I = Happy	R = Skinny	

**2. Use your middle initial to find your middle name...**

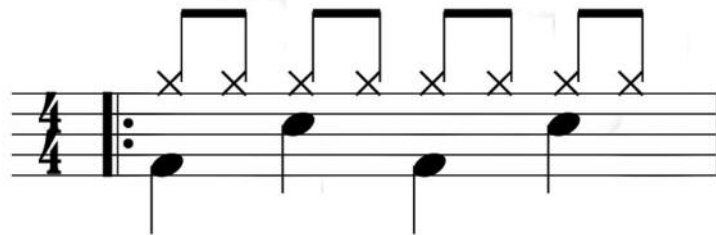
A = Bones	J = Fingers	S = Bad Boy
B = Money	K = Boy	T = Baby
C = Harp	L = Liver	U = Chicken
D = Legs	M = Gumbo	V = Pickles
E = Eyes	N = Foot	W = Sugar
F = Lemon	O = Mama	X = Willy
G = Killer	P = Back	Y = Tooth
H = Hips	Q = Duke	Z = Smoke
I = Lips	R = Dog	

**3. Use your last initial to find your last name...**

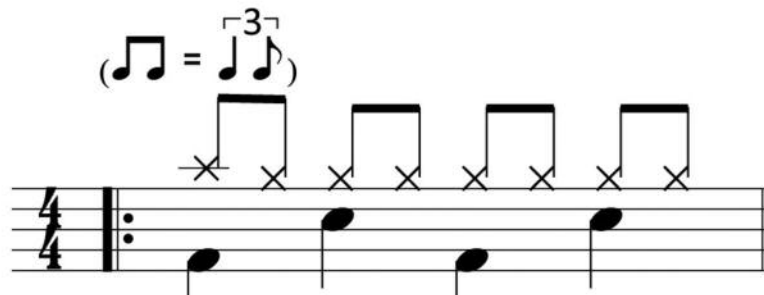
A = Jackson	J = Washington	S = Davis
B = McGee	K = Smith	T = Franklin
C = Hopkins	L = Parker	U = White
D = Dupree	M = Lee	V = Jenkins
E = Green	N = Thompkins	W = Bailey
F = Brown	O = King	X = Johnson
G = Jones	P = Bradley	Y = Blue
H = Rivers	Q = Hawkins	Z = Allison
I = Malone	R = Jefferson	

Task 2: Now that we have our Blues Names, we must try and understand the rhythms of the blues. There are really 2 rhythms, referred to as 'straight' and 'shuffle' and these can be broken down like this.

## Straight



## Shuffle



## HISTORY

Before we go any further, let us look at where the Blues, from the point that it was written down and recorded, may have come from:

In 1903, a traveling musician named William Christopher Handy was in Tutwiler, Mississippi, waiting for a train when he heard an itinerant musician playing a guitar with a knife blade and singing, "*Going Where The Southern Crosses The Yellow Dog*." (The Southern and the Yellow Dog were both railroad lines.) It is widely considered that the song was played by Henry Sloan but more of him later!

The song, in three twelve-bar stanzas, intrigued Handy and he never forgot it. We'll find out what a twelve-bar stanza is in a little while so hold that thought!

<https://archive.org/details/FirstBluesSongHeardByWcHandyIn1903>

Using the knife, or a bottle as a 'slide' on a guitar wasn't new. This was a style known in Hawaii for many years so whilst this may be the first documentation of a Blues artist using this style, it's likely that people had been using many things to slide for many years.



There is current debate on when the first blues with vocals was recorded and by who: Although written and published in 1914, WC Handy's 'St Louis Blues' was first recorded by Marion Harris in 1920. Interestingly, Marion was white but was often mistaken to be black because of her voice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4Qccz2qsHY>

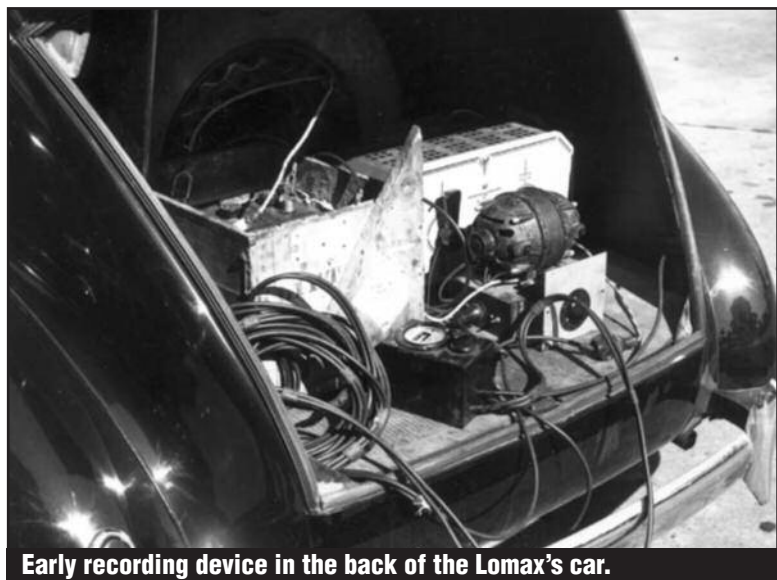
Another contender for the title of first recorded blues song is 'Crazy Blues' recorded on 10th August 1920 by Mamie Smith, entitled 'Crazy Blues'

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaz4Ziw\\_CfQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaz4Ziw_CfQ)

In the early 1920's, major US record companies saw the potential to sell to an African American audience and released 'Race Records'. These were records made by black artists for black audiences and often involved just one man singing to a guitar accompaniment. This is most likely, coupled with the haunting image of the man at the crossroads witnessed by WC Handy, where the image of the itinerant Blues musician comes from. As the Blues moved out of the Delta, spurned north with migration and industry, the Blues moved with the times. Electric guitars allowed performers to play louder and rawer than before. Soon, record labels were snapping up artists such as Muddy Waters, BB King and Buddy Guy. The early 50's saw Rock and Roll; Chuck Berry and Elvis (a white kid singing black music!!). In the 1960's, the Blues enjoyed a revival which was heard in London, spearheading bands such as The Yardbirds, Cream, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones to redefine the Blues their way. Through the 70's right through to present day, the Blues has been a source of inspiration and a rich cultural and musical heritage. To try and understand it in one day is impossible so let's try and get a sense of the style, some of the names and the forms so that you can launch off into your own Blues research.

### **John and Alan Lomax**

Probably the 2 most influential figures in the Blues story are father and son team John and Alan Lomax. Traveling together on behalf of the Library of Congress in Washington (now considered to be the largest international library in the world), the Lomax's collected recordings of folk songs, field hollers, working songs and interviews with musicians throughout Louisiana, Texas and Memphis. These recordings now provide us with a rich heritage of music but at the time also opened up opportunities for musicians to be discovered and to have a chance to be signed to record companies. The effect and lasting legacy of the work of these two men can never be under-



**Early recording device in the back of the Lomax's car.**

estimated. Within a few years, rural traditions would die and out with them, the songs inspired by that life. Without these recordings, whole catalogues of songs may have been lost and without it, arguably we may not have had 'the Blues' tradition as we know it.

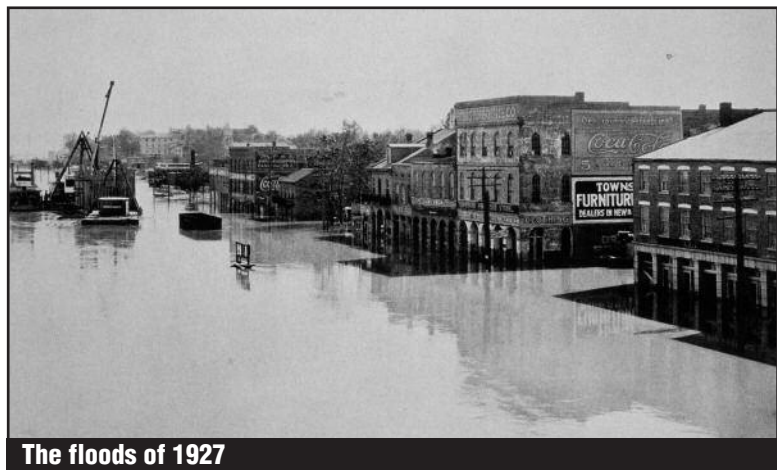
## GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT

Although the Blues is known by many forms these days, it is most understood that the original form originated in an area of America called The Delta. This is an area of flat and wet farmland that due to regular flooding, contains some of the most fertile land in the world. A noted definition of the Delta region is by author David L. Cohn, who wrote "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg"

For many years leading up to the 1900's, the Delta was farmed by black slave workers working on Plantations, having been sold into slavery to support the growing cotton and tobacco industries. Following the Civil War (1861 to 1865), over-farming had caused soil erosion and many people had to sell off their land, losing money and rights in the process. Many plantation workers had to resort to Share Cropping or Tenant Farming. Sharecropping is a system of agriculture in which a landowner provides tools, grain and storage but allows a tenant to use the land in return for a share (often 50%) of the crops produced on the land. A Tenant Farmer is someone who brings their own tools, rents the land and then pays for the rent on the land with money earned from the crop. The Tenant farmer had more rights but both situations led to debt and poverty, with whole families unable to earn enough money each year from their yield. Evictions were high and hours were long, often resulting in health problems, depression and a sense of despair. From these conditions rose the blues and many of the lyrical themes centre around poverty, loss, death and suffering.

## FLOODS

Comprising of flat wetlands, ideal for growing crops, the Delta has long been associated with floods. Levees constructed to hold back the Mississippi river during heavy rains have been known to give way, causing torrents of water to flood the land. The most famous floods in history occurred in 1912, 1927 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Flooding not only causes large scale destruction of land, crops, homes and property but also causes population loss and displacement. Many



The floods of 1927

people initially flee the rising waters but then are unable to return home. If they are able to return home, they find their livestock drowned and their homes destroyed, along with their livelihood. The Louisiana floods are now being widely documented by historians but have also been written about in song, most famously by Randy Newman (who also wrote the scores for Toy Story) and Led Zeppelin. We'll be returning to the issue of flooding later in the day so keep your thoughts in mind.



Randy Newman - Louisiana 1927

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGs2iLoDUYE>

Led Zeppelin - When the Levee Breaks (Trad arrangement)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NaQZojWi6U>

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The 'Great Depression' originated in the U.S., after the fall in stock prices that began around September 4, 1929, and became worldwide news with the Stock Market Crash of October 29, 1929 (known as Black Tuesday). In the rural south, crop prices fell by 60%, causing further poverty and suffering for migrant black workers. Many workers were forced to leave their land and homes in search of work and money. The Great Depression has been the subject of many works of music and writing. Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck, written in 1937 details the story of two



Poor Mother and Children - 1936 by Dorethea Lange

ranch workers called George Milton and Lennie Small who travel in search of work. It is seen as one of the most important literary works of the 20th Century and shows how real life events can influence works of fiction.



### *Task 3: Reflections on the Floods and the Great Depression. In Groups:*

How does the image and description of floods in the Delta compare to recent times in the UK?

Discuss how different your life might be if you had started work at 10 years old

Describe how it might feel to leave your home and move to a new town to find work

Discuss how the Great Depression might still be relevant today with the banking crisis, poverty and debt

Think of some lyrical themes that might go into a modern blues song. Keep your ideas for later

## ARTISTS PROFILES

Although there are many many Delta Blues artists, some are more notable than others. Here we take a brief look at two of them in more detail.

### ***Charley Patton***

Charley Patton was born between April 1887 and 1891 and died April 28th 1934. He is considered by many to be the "Father of the Delta Blues", and with inspiring just about every Delta Blues man in history. Charley Patton was born in Hinds County, Mississippi and lived most of his life in Sunflower County. In 1900, his family moved 100 miles (160 km) north to the legendary 10,000-acre (40 km<sup>2</sup>) Dockery Plantation sawmill. It was here that he met John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf, two important Blues musicians in their own right. At Dockery, Charley was taken under the wing of none other than of Henry Sloan who had a new, unusual style of playing music. You



**Charley Patton**

might remember that it was Henry Sloan who was first heard by WC Handy at the crossroads singing 'Where the Southern Crosses the Yellow Dog'. Charley followed Henry Sloan around, and, by the time he was about 19, had become an accomplished performer and songwriter in his own right. Considered as a jack-of-all-trades bluesman who played many styles of music, Charley Patton was extremely popular across the Delta and also performed annually in Chicago and New York City. In contrast to the itinerant wandering of most Blues musicians of his time, Patton played scheduled engagements at plantations and taverns and regularly crossed paths with Robert Johnson.



Complete Recordings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QI7QTbWTSc>

### Robert Johnson

Robert Leroy Johnson was born on May 8, 1911 and died on August 16, 1938. He was just 27 when he died. His landmark recordings made in 1936 and 1937 display a combination of singing, guitar skills, and songwriting talent that has influenced later generations of musicians. Robert Johnson's life and death has had more influence on the idea of a Blues musician than any other. The myth that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil at a crossroads near Clarksdale in return for amazing guitar skills and his death by suspected poisoning by a jealous husband have given rise to so much legend in the Delta Blues that there is almost a whole industry based around the myth.



Given his first guitar at the Dockery Plantation (the same place that

Charley Patton worked) Johnson became a full time 'itinerant performer' who played mostly on street corners, in Juke Joints (a type of bar) and at Saturday night dances. Johnson had little commercial success or public recognition in his lifetime and has largely been rediscovered following the release of his 'King of the Delta Blues Singers' recordings by Columbia Records in 1961. Robert Johnson is rumoured to be buried in a remote graveyard near Greenwood, Mississippi.

Complete Recordings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-P4WhmJt9XM>



# MUSICAL FORMAT

Many Blues songs are often referred to as being '12 bar' which means that each verse and/or chorus contains 12 bars before returning to the coda. The chord voicing's are often simple, with 1 or 2 forms seen as standard. Variations are added to bring subtle flavour. The first form is the I, IV, V or 1, 4, 5. This means starting at the root of the key, moving to the 4th chord, back to the first and then to the 5th. A typical progression might look like this.

C / / / C / / / C / / / C / / /  
F / / / F / / / C / / / C / / /  
G / / / F / / / C / / / C / / /

Another 12 bar progression might look like this. This appears in 'How can a poor man stand such times and live' by Blind Alfred Reed.

C / / / G / / / C / / / C / / /  
C / / / C / / / G / / / G / / /  
C / / / C7 / / / F / / / F / / /  
C / / / G / / / C / / / C / / /

Blues formats can also break away from the 12 bar. Here is an example of an 16 bar blues found in Chuck Berry's '30 Days'.

C / / / C / / / C / / / C / / /  
C / / / C / / / G / / / G / / /  
C / / / C / / / F / / / F / / /  
C / / / G / / / C / / / C / / /

Signify the end!

The Blues has 2 classic endings, the first is where a descending run is taken from the root note:

C, Bb, A, Ab, G / / / C (resolve) and the second is where the band stops on the 15th bar of the phrase and allows a solo instrument to improvise for 1 bar before joining in a chord. The band can either push the last beat, add a 7th chord or slide from a C# to a Major C for effect.

*Task 4: Practice all of the 3 forms above, including endings until you are comfortable with the differences, the changes and the endings.*

NB: whilst the descriptions above are simplified and standardised, don't be afraid to move outside of the form or to add extra chords where you feel they can lift the feeling of the song. Try adding 7th, 9th and Diminished Chords to get a new feeling. The Blues isn't about copying, it's about adding your own personal touch to the music.

## LYRICAL THEMES

There are a number of reoccurring themes throughout the Blues, and with the music being mostly simple progressions, this allows for the lyrics to shine through. A common rhyming form for the Blues is to repeat several lines and then resolve with a 3rd and 4th line:

'Before You Accuse Me' by Bo Diddley is a good example.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAjXfytr9rg&feature=kp>

"Before you accuse me, take a look at yourself  
Before you accuse me, take a look at yourself  
You say I've been spending my money on other women  
You've been taking money from someone else"

Flip, Flop and Fly by Big Jo Turner is another good example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLP6PScAYVk>

"Now when I get lonesome,  
I jump on the telephone  
When I get lonesome,  
I jump on the telephone  
I call my baby, tell her  
I'm on my way back home

Now flip, flop and fly,  
I don't care if I die  
Now flip, flop and fly, I don't care if I die  
Don't ever leave me, don't ever say goodbye"

### **Good Times**

'Flip Flop and Fly' by Big Joe Turner

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLP6PScAYVk>

### **Hard Times**

'How can a poor man stand such times and live' by Blind Alfred Reed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtLNCmsJVFI>

### **Drinking and Drugs**

'Champagne and Reefer' by Muddy Waters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHowqKYSXNI>

### **Poverty**

'Nobody knows you when you're down and out' by Bessie Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MzU8xM99Uo>

### **Migration and Leaving**

'Leaving' by LeadBelly

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZodsl32ZrM>

### **Sex**

Let me put my banana in your fruit basket by Bo Carter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQcq2Y7YI14&list=PLC7A8043CCF27EE30&index=17>

*Task 5 - Write 3 verses and a chorus in the style and format of 'Flip, Flop and Fly' and then present them to the class. The best verses will be chosen for the final performance.*



# AFTERNOON SESSION

'How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live?'



Blind Alfred Reed (centre)

Written in 1929 by Blind Alfred Reed and largely considered to be the first protest song, the lyrical themes remain poignant and universal. As a reaction to the floods of Katrina, Bruce Springsteen took the lyrics and added his own as a comment on the catastrophe of New Orleans and his feelings on the failure of the American government to act.

C /// G /// C /// F // C  
C /// C /// G /// C // G  
C /// C7 /// F /// D7 ///  
C /// G /// F // G C ///

*Task 6 - Study both lyrics in relation to each-other*

*Task 7 - Learn the format and the tune (aurally)*

*Task 8 - Re-write the lyrics to reflect a modern twist*

Blind Alfred Reed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtLNCmsJVFI>

Bruce Springsteen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ2yrgCsuaM>

## How Can A Poor Man - Blind Alfred Reed

*There once was a time when everything was cheap,  
But now prices nearly puts a man to sleep.  
When we pay our grocery bill,  
We just feel like making our will --  
I remember when dry goods were cheap as dirt,  
We could take two bits and buy a dandy shirt.  
Now we pay three bucks or more,  
Maybe get a shirt that another man wore --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Well, I used to trade with a man by the name of Gray,  
Flour was fifty cents for a twenty-four pound bag.  
Now it's a dollar and a half beside,  
Just like a-skinning off a flea for the hide --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Oh, the schools we have today ain't worth a cent,  
But they see to it that every child is sent.  
If we don't send everyday,  
We have a heavy fine to pay --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Prohibition's good if 'tis conducted right,  
There's no sense in shooting a man 'til he shows flight.  
Officers kill without a cause,  
They complain about funny laws --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Most all preachers preach for gold and not for souls,  
That's what keeps a poor man always in a hole.  
We can hardly get our breath,  
Taxed and schooled and preached to death --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Oh, it's time for every man to be awake,  
We pay fifty cents a pound when we ask for steak.  
When we get our package home,  
A little wad of paper with gristle and a bone --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Well, the doctor comes around with a face all bright,  
And he says in a little while you'll be all right.  
All he gives is a humbug pill,  
A dose of dope and a great big bill --  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

## How Can A Poor Man - Bruce Springsteen

*Well, the doctor comes 'round here with his face all bright  
And he says "in a little while you'll be alright"  
All he gives is a humbug pill, a dose of dope and a great big bill  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*"Me and my old school pals had some mighty high times down here  
And what happened to you poor black folks, well it just ain't fair"  
He took a look around, gave a little pep talk, said "I'm with you"  
then he took a little walk  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*There's bodies floatin' on Canal and the levees gone to Hell  
Martha, get me my sixteen gauge and some dry shells  
Them who's got got out of town and them who ain't got left to drown  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*Got family scattered from Texas all the way to Baltimore  
Yeah and I ain't got no home in this world no more  
Gonna be a judgment that's a fact, a righteous train rollin' down this track  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?  
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

### Conclusion and a personal note:

The universal appeal of the Blues can be attributed to its human nature. Lyrically, all of the subjects are about the human condition; pain, suffering, celebration, life, death, sex, escapism, poverty, work, loss and love. Whilst there are standard formats, these are often taken and developed into new styles and forms - jazz, soul, rock, gospel, folk, country, hop-hop.

After 20 years of studying and playing the Blues, I am still only scratching the surface of what this musical heritage is. When I started, there were only records and books and listening at gigs. Now there is almost everything you could ever want to know at your fingertips through the web so finding out about the Blues is easier and more fascinating than ever before. Having travelled through the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta and stood at Robert Johnson's grave-side, seen first hand the desolation left by Hurricane Katrina and heard the melting pot of musical styles from Chicago to New Orleans, I am humbled and indebted to people like John and Alan Lomax, to Blind Alfred Reed, John Lee Hooker, LedBelly, and numerous other artists for creating and keeping this music alive. May you enjoy traveling down your own Blues highway and enjoy finding and adapting your own style and voice in the Blues.

Russell Callaghan Grooms 2014



# DEAL FESTIVAL

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This Teaching Resource Pack has been written to accompany Deal Festival's 'Heritage of the Jazz and Blues' music education programme and is intended for use at secondary school music level.

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**[http://www.dealfestival.co.uk/dealfest\\_education.htm](http://www.dealfestival.co.uk/dealfest_education.htm)**  
or contact our Education Director, Laura Callaghan  
Grooms, on **[laura@handonheartarts.com](mailto:laura@handonheartarts.com)**