SPENCER BOHREN
DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES

Teacher's Supplement

Your school has arranged for Spencer Bohren to perform his documentary with musical accompaniment ***Down the Dirt Road Blues*** for you and your students. To get the most out of this presentation, we have assembled some materials that can effectively be used before and after the show. Included here are

~ Teacher's bibliography
~ Map: one song's journey through America's history and culture
~ Historical overview of the instruments that carry the song, emphasizing inventions of the time and reasons for those inventions
~ Other inventions important to the story
~ Social issues

We also invite you to request a copy of the CD ***Down the Dirt Road Blues***, with its booklet that gives historical background on the events covered in Spencer's presentation: spencer@spencerbohren.com

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Teachers may find the following bibliography helpful in preparing students for Spencer Bohren's visit to their school or for follow-up discussions in the classroom.

Guralnick, Peter, ed. Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues. New York: Amistad, 2004.

Lester, Julius. Blues Singers. Illus. Lisa Cohen. New York: Jump the Sun, 2001.

Oliver, Paul. The Story of the Blues. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998.

Santelli, Robert, and Holly George-Warren. American Roots Music. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.

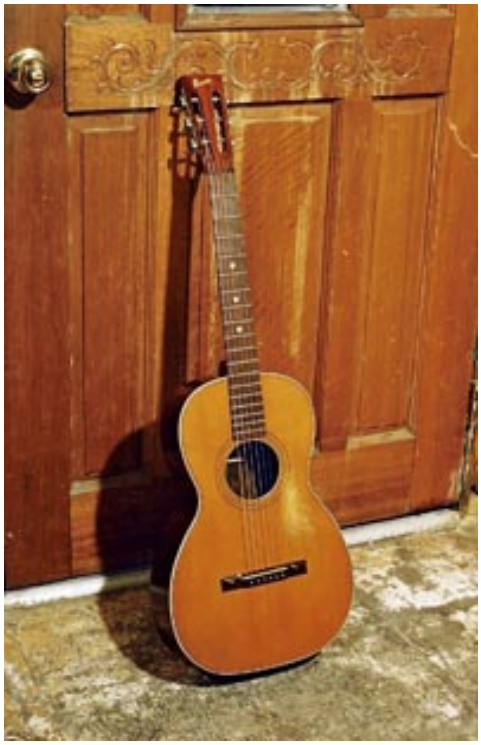
DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES
HISTORY OF THE INSTRUMENTS

Perhaps you haven't given it much thought before, but the current music we listen to is a function of the technology available to the performers. A story like ***Down the Dirt Road Blues*** shows how a song can change over time and geography, but it also illustrates the influence of the people looking to improve on the delivery of the music.

Our story opens with a man walking down a lane after work. He is a slave, hot and extremely tired. As you might imagine, he is not carrying an instrument but is instead using the oldest and most available instrument – the human voice. As a slave, he doesn't have many possessions and so has come to rely on his singing to express himself.

Following the Civil War (1861-1865), the song is still within the realms of the Black population. Now, though, a young man has devised a **banjo** out of some old wheel parts, a wooden stick for a neck, and an animal skin. Banjos have been around for untold centuries, having originated in the Middle East and Africa. The oldest reference in the Americas is documentation from 1678 in Martinique, wherein an observer names the banjo as an instrument of the slaves. The downstroke style of Africans today and the slaves of earlier America is similar to the frailing style still in use today.

Like so much else in our world, the **parlor guitar** of the late 1800s was built on a smaller scale than the acoustic guitars we see today. Mail-order houses sold guitars like this little Bruno, dated 1897 on the back of the headstock. They were mass-produced and so were affordable to many people, like the musician Charley Patton, traveling around the Mississippi Delta on foot. Remember that these were quieter times, as well. People played music for one another at home, as there was very little radio, no television, no iPods, personal stereos, or huge concerts. Hence the parlor guitar was perfect.



From here, though, the story shifts as the world became a faster and louder place. As America marched into the 20th Century (1900s), automobiles made it easier for larger numbers of people to get together. Musicians with parlor guitars had great difficulty being heard in bands playing for bigger groups of people, not to mention competing with the volume of mandolins and fiddles, trumpets and saxophones. The search was on for a better way to project the guitar's sound.

The first attempts were to make the guitar body itself bigger than the parlor guitar. Up until this time, the strings on guitars were made from animal gut, the same as violins today. Around 1900 people began experimenting with steel strings, increasing the guitar volume. Twelve-string guitars, with twice the number of strings, also made their appearance in 1904, coming to America from Italy or Mexico, or both places simultaneously to again boost the volume. However, the best early contribution to adding presence to the guitar came in 1925.

Steel player George Beauchamp approached violin repairman John Dopyera about making a guitar with a resonator cone that could act as an amplifier when the strings crossed over it. The basic idea was similar to a speaker cone. Several varieties were tried, some on wooden guitars and others on metal-bodied guitars. Different shapes and numbers of cones were tried. The resulting instruments were sometimes played on the lap and other times in a traditional position. Either way, the resonator cones amplified the guitar 3 to 4 times! Beauchamp and Dopyera formed the National String Instrument Company. A few years later Dopyera left to form his own company with his brothers, naming the resonator guitars **Dobros** (DOpyera BROthers). The instruments became prominent in Hawaiian music, as well as blues music of the south, as described in ***Down the Dirt Road Blues*** through Son House.

A note here about the way the Dobro is played: it can of course be played as a regular guitar, with or without finger picks. However, a more distinctive sound was achieved by guitarists hearkening back to the one-stringed African diddley-bow. These people tuned their guitars to a chord and used a metal bar or the neck of an old bottle that had been smoothed of its sharpness to fret the guitar and create a sliding, soul-reaching sound. Son House was a master with the **slide**.

Following the innovative Dobra resonator guitar, the luthier industry began a trend towards larger acoustic guitars. Country and western singer Gene Autry commissioned the Martin guitar company to build a large acoustic guitar in the style of his idol, Jimmie Rodgers', smaller acoustic guitar. This was in 1933. By 1938 Gibson guitars was also making **"jumbo" guitars**, and a new style became the country music standard, with its lush tone and take-control volume. Hank Williams favored a Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar.

While the acoustic guitar was changing, George Beauchamp and the Dopyera Brothers were not pausing from their success with the resophonic guitar. By 1931 Beauchamp had harnessed electricity with the first **electric guitar**. Hand-in-glove with this invention was the guitar **amplifier**. At first it was a matter of using just a power supply that could plug in. After all, America was now wired with electricity! The amp might be a public address or Hi Fi amplifier (the 1930 version of a CD player). Already Hawaiian guitars and acoustic guitars were being amplified. Now with an electric guitar, the advances came quickly, including effects like reverb and tremolo, the "whammy" bar, and volume and tone controls. And suddenly city musicians could play with the same urgency as their surroundings.

INVENTIONS THAT ARE SEMINAL TO THE STORY

Besides the improvements in guitars, other inventions that can be discussed, as they played a part in the advancement of changing the styles of popular music:

Recording process

Records and their playing devices
~ 78 rpm, 33 1/3 rpm, 45 rpm, cassettes, CDs, digital downloads
~ Victrolas, record players, tape decks, CD players, computers, iPods

Development of radio stations and their geographic reach

Transportation
~ Walking and riding behind a mule as a rhythm for the song
~ The hurried pace of city life with motorized vehicles changing that rhythm

Industrialization in the North
~ Huge labor forces were needed, particularly around the Great Lakes, to work the iron factories and meat packing plants around the industrial centers of America (Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, etc.), beginning in the early 1900s. Black people of the South were drawn northward for a chance to make a better living and to live a more equitable life than was available in the southern states. The movement north is called The Great Migration and is generally divided into two segments: 1910 to 1940 (migration to the industrial north) and 1940 to 1965 (migration to Californian military industrial centers). Millions of black people made the move in the hope of better schools for their children and a better living for the adults, as well as better civil rights. While the civil rights did not occur over night, overall the living conditions greatly improved over the southern existence pre-migration.

DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES
SOCIAL ISSUES

This story begins with a slave walking down a lane in Mississippi pre-Civil War (1861-1865). At that time the black and white races did not mingle socially, as a general rule, particularly in the U.S. South. After the Civil War, this situation did not radically change for quite some time. In fact, there is still a struggle in many parts of America over this issue. What is interesting is that music has a history of softening the attitudes of racial division. Some of these events are mentioned in ***Down the Dirt Road Blues***.

Early 1930s – Beale Street in Memphis was a center of the black culture in that city. Even though white people and black people were forbidden by law to co-mingle, once white people heard the incredible music happening on Beale Street, there was an informal social change. White people started walking the street, and the police largely ignored their presence.

1930-1950 – the Golden Age of Radio. Before television, radio was a major form of entertainment for people throughout America. The FCC granted licenses to radio stations for high power transmissions of 50,000 watts so that people in remote areas of America would be able to receive radio in their homes. In spite of the continued social split between white and black Americans, anyone could listen to anything coming over the airwaves in their vicinity. Everyone had access to both black and white music being played on the radio, and they did just that. Music again chipped away at segregation.

mid 1950s – Popular musicians present a music that combines elements of both black and white cultures. For instance, in 1954 Elvis Presley, a white man, was signed by Sam Phillips of Sun Records. Phillips wanted to bring African-American music to a wider audience. With a background in country, R & B, and gospel, Elvis melded these American musical forms into rockabilly. In 1955 Chuck Berry, who is a black man originally from the northern city of St. Louis, traveled to Chicago with his music. There he met Muddy Waters, who recommended he contact Leonard Chess regarding a recording deal. Chess was indeed interested in Berry, although it was for Berry's youthful take on R & B, which was highly influenced by his interest in Country Western music from Texas. The cover of Berry's first album, rather than a face photo, showed a stool with a guitar leaned against it. Combined with Berry's lack of a southern accent, this recording did not meet with racial issues and hence created an integration of audiences, in spite of themselves!

1900-1965 Industrialization in the North
Huge labor forces were needed, particularly around the Great Lakes, to work the iron factories and meat packing plants around the industrial centers of America (Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, etc.). Black people of the South were drawn northward for a chance to make a better living and to live a more equitable life than was available in the southern states. The movement north is called The Great Migration and is generally divided into two segments: 1910 to 1940 (migration to the northern industrial centers) and 1940 to 1965 (movement to Californian military industrial centers). Millions of black people made the move in the hope of better schools for their children and a better living for the adults, as well as better civil rights. While the civil rights did not occur over night, overall the living conditions greatly improved over the southern existence pre-migration.