A Curriculum Guide to Teaching and Discussing: Stomping the Blues (1976) by Albert Murray

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*Stomping the Blues* (1976)

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*Stomping the Blues*

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**Abstract:**

*Stomping the Blues* is a counterhistory that challenges conventional definitions of blues as a therapeutic “folk art” born from black suffering. In his analysis the blues is synonymous with jazz rather than an entirely separate genre and culture. Murray employs a lyrical narrative voice to place blues music in the context of black social rituals, including dancing and socializing, and characterizes it as a complex form of poetics: a stylized mode of responding to life laced with humor, irony, resilience and spirit rather than sentimentality and dejection. He asks the reader to look beyond the stereotypically depressing lyrics and look toward the emotions voiced in the performance and the complex ways audiences react to the music itself. He also uses the Saturday Night dancehalls of the 1930s-1950s, populated by black adults, as a framing device to help readers connect blues music with social behavior he views as secular rituals of purification and affirmation.

In Murray’s corrective the blues is a highly refined artistic style with a phalanx of formal and idiomatic elements, that must be learned, practiced and mastered, rather than a simplistic style that comes “naturally” and is merely born from raw emotion. Some of the performers he addresses as important blues exemplars include Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, the Count Basie Orchestra and Duke Ellington. The evolution of the blues from its humble Afro-American origins into a fully realized American musical style performed by gifted professional artists, resonant with multiple generations of listeners, and continually able to express the textures of black life, imbues it with a unique cultural profundity.
Chapter 1: The Blues As Such

Summary: Murray, an essayist and novelist, provides a creative sketch of the woes of life and presents the blues as a musical analogy for life grounded in reaffirmation.

Chapter 2: The Blues Face to Face

Summary: Murray extends his opening sketch of the blues by outlining philosophical notions of the blues including the notions that morale is at stake in the blues (10), blues music is the ultimate counteragent to the blues (16) and pinpointing the unique depth of joy in blues (20). He locates the blues in a social context and cites the dance hall as its veritable temple of expression by noting the subtext of relief in blues lyrics that provides meaning for blues-oriented dancing social rituals (20).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Understanding the complex tension between lament and relief in blues music.
- In what ways might blues music be understood as a unique counteragent compared to other musical genres? Are such qualities inherent to all music?

Chapter 3: The Blues Devils and the Holy Ghost

Summary: Murray provides an almost tongue-in-cheek account of how Black protestant churches have traditionally rebuked blues music as flesh-oriented sinful music (23) though gospel music shares many of its orgiastic qualities with blues music (25-27). In addition to noting musical elements derived from church music Murray views blues music and social rituals as rituals of resilience and perseverance (42). Other than secular music attitudes and choreography he sees immense parallels between sacred and secular aspects of black music (30).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- What kinds of social and cultural issues may have motivated black churchgoers to dismiss secular social culture?
- Murray presents dancehalls as unique spaces for purification and affirmation. Are there parallel social milieus where these terms are applicable?

Chapter 4: The Blues as Music

Summary: Murray defies the correlation of blues music with depression and defeat by reminding readers that it is a creative entertainment form with a stylized and playful aspect (45). He notes the correlation between the grit of blues lyrics and the sensuality and spontaneity of dancing to the music. In the blues he sees a unique combo of spontaneity, improvisation and control, and concludes that blues dance is an act of getting oneself together (50). Musically, he sees the blues as an influence on genres like soul music and rock music but characterizes their atmosphere as sentimentality rather than earthiness, and sees a one-dimensional earnestness and propensity toward tantrums or self-pity (51). Comparatively the blues is a kind of elixir played by musicians who are motivated by an aesthetic affinity and inspiration from other musicians (54).
CRITICAL THEMES:
- Considering ways that music itself can defy, contradict, and redirect the content of lyrics.
- Understanding the blues as an artistic form played by professionals with technical competence as opposed to a spontaneous folk genre.

Chapter 5: Blues Music and Such

Summary: By surveying a variety of dictionary definitions of the blues Murray is able to develop his argument that the blues is misunderstood. Among the critical errors writers traditionally make include the following:
- failures to understand the blues as American genre inflected but not completely defined by West African music
- conflations of blues music with the blues
- ignoring the joyfulness frequently heard in the blues
- an emphasis on vocal performances that downplays instrumentalists (57-64)

In addition to dispelling myths he burrows deeper into defining the blues aesthetic. Murray further defines the blues as a form of lyric poetry with a moral/philosophical dimension though it is primarily concerned with love and relationships rather than politics. For Murray blues lyrics are existential and metaphysical about human experience than issue-driven (66-68).

He elaborates on his contention that the blues is a professional form noting the influence of music hall and vaudeville on certain blues forms (i.e. classic blues)—thus informing the burlesque, mockery and derision in some blues. He also attributes the emergence of published sheet music in the genre and the sophisticated instrumental accompaniment on many blues vocal records as aspects of professionalism (68-70).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Distinguishing the blues from prior musical forms.
- The importance of music in understanding the tone and intent of the blues.
- Aligning blues with lyric poetry and theatrical arts.
- Blues as a professional rather than folk genre.

Chapter 6: Singing the Blues

Summary: Murray examines the art of blues singing with particular attention to the “Empress of the Blues” Bessie Smith. He examines her performances, including one where she misreads or substitutes a lyric, to note that musical precision and interpretive nuance are often far more important than literal lyric readings since music ultimately determines the tone. He contrasts two classic performances of W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” by Smith and Louis Armstrong to illustrate how singers subvert dark lyrics based on musical choices including tempo, a key narrative device (83-87). He places this in the context of musicians’ parlance of “playing blues” as shorthand for playing with a sense of fun and improvisation (87). As a whole these aspects
inform his argument that blues is an artful contrivance, rather than mere autobiography and operates as a very specific technology of stylization (87, 90).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Words are second to music in blues singing.
- Various musical devices, especially tempo, determine the mood and understanding of blues vocals.
- Blues has a rich idiomatic depth.

Chapter 7: Playing the Blues

Summary: Having established certain axioms about the blues in terms of its emotional tone and its status as a professional genre Murray expands his discussion by defining formal musical aspects of the blues. He discusses the main body as a series of choruses derived from traditional three line stanza form (93-94), multiple opportunities to solo, the frequent use of riff choruses (95-96), the use of breaks (“a kind of ad-lib bridge passage or cadenza-like interlude between two musical phrases that are separated by an interruption or interval in the established cadence”), a prominent usage of syncopation (108-09), and an elaborate use of tonal coloration (108). Murray reiterates the role of skill and taste, over emotion, in discussing blues musicianship and emphasizes the discipline and training required to pay the blues credibly (98-99). He discusses the genius of Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker to illustrate the innovation in blues as building on foundations: “it is in effect the very process of improvisation, elaboration, variation, extension, and refinement (or just plain fooling around, for that matter) that makes sport of, and hence serves to put the blues demons of gloom and ultimate despair to flight” (128).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Discernible formal aspects define unique aspects of blues performance.
- Formal aspects of blues override its emotional appeal for musicians.
- Blues requires a mastery of idiom as a prelude for innovation.

Chapter 8: Swinging the Blues

Summary: Murray ends the chapter by reflecting on the underlying meaning Duke Ellington’s famous jazz anthem “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Ain’t got that Swing)”—notably the relationship of blues music to social dancing and the presumption among blues musicians that music must have a strong dance/beat orientation to gain favor with audiences (144, 148). Throughout the chapter Murray reviews the social aspects of blues dance culture including iconic spaces like jook joints and jook houses, the rivalries between territory bands and the ire blues inspired among religious communities (132-38). Murray refers to compositions by W.C. Handy (“Father of the Blues”) and jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton to illustrate the influence of dancing on songwriting (138-39). He also touches on the way phonograph technology and radio networks were key technologies that popularized blues bands.

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Dance culture is integral to the creative process and performative aspect of the blues
- Swing can be understood as a dance and musical concept.
Technological developments significantly advance the cultural dissemination of the blues.

Chapter 9: Kansas City Four/Four and the Velocity of Celebration

Summary: Murray paints a loving portrait of the vibrant swing culture of Kansas City. He refers to early 1930s Kansas City as “the epicenter of swing” that grows nationally (151), a claim he supports by noting the key musicians including the bandleaders Bennie Moten and Count Basie and musicians like Andy Kirk (152, 158). He also defines aspects of the Kansas City swing aesthetic including 4/4 swing, jam session like riff choruses as a basic structural device, and head-arranged/improvised compositions (i.e. “One O’Clock Jump”) (170). Among the rituals he outlines are the legendary and extraordinarily influential Kansas City jam sessions including all night jams and battle royal cutting contests (158, 164). In noting that Kansas City bands are most celebrated “for the drive with which they swing the blues and anything else in all tempos” he includes instrumentalists with their ability to stampede the blues away and signature Kansas City singers, Jimmy Rushing and Big Joe Turner, who shout the blues away (164, 166). Overall the vibrancy of the scene reiterates the unique synthesis of music with dancing and rhythmic appreciation (178).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Individual cities developed unique musical scenes that transcended the local environment.
- Kansas City is a model of the quintessential nature of swing in the blues aesthetic of the 1930s and 1940s including playing and singing.

Chapter 10: The Blues as Dance Music

Summary: The relationship between social dancing and the beat-driven nature of blues music is a core aspect of Murray’s argument. One of its main functions is to challenge what Murray sees as a Eurocentric critical bias, reflective of classical music aesthetics, toward music as a formal affair for listening divorced from corporeal and emotional needs. He begins the chapter by challenging the social background and musical biases of music critics who object to blues being played in dance halls and nightclubs rather than formal concert halls (181-83).

As he progresses he arches toward a populist appreciation of blues including the way recordings serve as the “authorized score” for blues performances, the role of records and radio to bringing the blues to mass audiences (184-88) and affirming the social orientation of blues. Culturally speaking Murray argues that, “the primordial cultural conditioning of the people for whom blues music was created in the first place. They are dance-beat oriented people.” Further he notes that the music and dance orientation are “consistent with their most fundamental conceptions of and responses to existence itself” (189). He is particularly adamant that critical writing on the blues stems from an idiomatic understanding of the blues rather than a generic application of universal musical principles. Murray concludes by noting “the most fundamental prerequisite for mediating between the work of art and the audience, spectators, or readers, as the case may be, is not reverence for the so-called classics but rather an understanding of what is being stylized plus an accurate insight into how it is being stylized” (196).
CRITICAL THEMES:
- Blues defies European classical music’s evaluative criteria based on its distinct musical elements and social origins.
- The populist roots of the blues means that its refinement stems from listening and interacting in many forms rather than just formal concert settings.
- Blues vernacular is the standard of evaluation and requires an idiomatic immersion.

Chapter II: Folk Art and Fine Art

Summary: In one of his most fervent discussions Murray painstakingly distinguishes blues from folk art. He views this as a reductionist attitude that diminishes the high level of skill, nuance and professionalism required to play the blues convincingly (203-05). In his view folk art is conservative and derivative by definition whereas the blues hinges on counterstatement and extension. He cites the ability of blues musicians to counterstate and extend 32-bar showtunes and standards as a key mode for understanding the art of blues musicians (205). He rejects sentimental attitudes toward the blues as an amateur art and employs the example of Duke Ellington to illustrate the full artistic scope of the blues noting that Ellington “achieved the most comprehensive synthesis, extension, and refinement to date of all the elements of blues musicianship. Indeed so all-inclusive was Ellington’s synthesis that it amounts to a special vocabulary and syntax of orchestration” (214). In addition to cataloguing his musical achievements he also notes the originality of Ellington’s blues with the more European influenced style of American composers like Aaron Copland and John Cage (224).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Counterstatement and extension as key factors distinguishing blues music from folk music.
- Blues as a genre focused on originality more so than pastiche and emulation.
- Blues, as embodied by Ellington, as a distinctly American style.

Chapter 12: The Blues as Statement

Summary: Murray reiterates the earthiness and accessibility of the blues by focusing on the style, humor and quirkiness of jazz musicians, a contrast to what he sees as an overemphasis on blues as a socioeconomic phenomenon (227, 230). He references outfits, bandstand procedures and manners, the way blues musicians tend to remain in character and deliberately stylized aspects of the blues and their pervasive influence on other musicians (230, 238). A key part of his discussion is to deflate the myth that modern jazz musicians were inaccessible and unconcerned about the social milieu of the blues by noting the iconic style of musicians like Dizzy Gillespie (245). He returns to his philosophy of the blues as a secular ritual of affirmation and purification by noting how in modern jazz performance music was performed as a sacred act of self-expression and framing this attitudinal shift from the swing era as a method for gaining attention and attracting new listeners (250).

Murray alludes to the challenges of the 1940s era for black musicians, the pioneers of bebop, by noting that this new approach could be viewed as a statement about the human condition most notably “about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance of
equilibrium despite precarious circumstances and about achieving elegance in the very process of coping with the rudiments of subsistence” (251). He furthers this by line of thought by referring to the blues as an equivalent of an epic for in the blues: “what is accepted is the all too obvious fact that human existence is almost always a matter of endeavor and hence also a matter of heroic action” (251). Musically he views revolutionary aspect of Armstrong, Ellington, Bessie Smith, etc. as “not nearly so much a matter of a quest for newness for the sake of change as of the modifications necessary in order to maintain the definitive essentials of the idiom” a streak that endures in modern jazz artists like Charlie Parker who sought new ways to swing the blues (252).

Murray ends his discussion by reviewing key notions of the blues:

- They are neither negative nor sentimental.
- Blues-idiom dance movement reflects a disposition to encounter obstacle after obstacle as a matter of course.
- Blues-idiom dance gesture is in effect an exercise in heroic action, and each selection on a dance program is, in a sense, a rehearsal for another of a never-ending sequence of escapades as is suggested by the very fact that each not so much begins as ends as continues (254).

Epilogue
Murray provides a lyrical description of blues as music of triumph and resilience (257-58).

ADDITIONAL CRITICAL THEMES for *Stomping the Blues*

- Murray gives limited attention to politics and economics in his discussion of blues and jazz. How would attention to these aspects fit into the argument he constructs, if at all?
- Murray frames the blues as a derivative of West African and European elements yet rarely discusses non-black musicians as contributing to the blues. Are there musicians of other racial and ethnic backgrounds who embody and extend the blues aesthetic he outlines?
- Why is Murray so vigorous in his argument that the blues is a professional, stylized form of entertainment as opposed to an emotional, autobiographically-driven folk genre?
- Murray reproduces a substantial gallery of photographs in each chapter. What is the narrative function of these photographs in terms of who is depicted, their actions and settings, and how do they relate to his argument?
Survey of Black Popular Music (featuring *Stomping the Blues*)


Scholarly Essay on *Stomping the Blues*


Additional writing on the blues by Albert Murray