



THE JOHNNY MERCER  
FOUNDATION



## Blues In The Night: Unit 2: Lessons 1 & 2

### “Blues in the Night” (1941) by Johnny Mercer & Harold Arlen

#### Lesson Overview

These lessons are an introduction to Johnny Mercer, the Great American Songbook, and lyric writing. Classes will receive the original Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids programming. Students will be exposed to different subject matters and will have opportunities to learn tools for lyric writing and creating personal lyrics, all while fulfilling national core standards. Have fun!

#### Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson students will be able to:  
Know more about songwriter Johnny Mercer  
Gain an understanding of composer/lyricist collaboration  
Describe the mood of a song  
Have more songwriting skills: Syllabication, Onomatopoeia  
Write lyrics for a song

#### Standards

*Nat'l Core Arts: Creating.* Students will generate rhythmic phrases within a given structure that conveys expressive intent. Another core standard is satisfied when students are encouraged to present and share their creative musical work that conveys intent and demonstrates craftsmanship.

*English/Lang Arts Standards: STRANDS--Language Standards, Reading Standards for Information Text, for Literature, for Foundational Skills, Standards for Speaking & Listening, and Writing Standards.* During the writing portion of the workshop, students will utilize phonological awareness by analyzing the syllabic structure and patterns within the material. They will also be encouraged to write their thoughts in story form through song structure using personal experiences.

#### Time Required

One class period of at least 45-50 minutes



## Blues In The Night: Unit 2: Lessons 1 & 2 (*con't*)

### Lesson Preparation

Ask students what music they like and have them start to investigate who wrote those songs.

#### Materials:

Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet

Whiteboard space for teacher/teaching artist

Writing paper and pencils

#### Resources:

The Johnny Mercer Foundation: [www.johnnymercer.org](http://www.johnnymercer.org)

If needed, refer to the video of the educator workshop on the Accentuate the Positive webpage.

Johnny Mercer Collections at Georgia State University: <http://library.gsu.edu/mercer>

### Lesson Procedure

Introduce concept that sometimes lyricists and composers are different people.

Define collaboration.

Explain collaboration between Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen (refer to page 8 of the Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet).

Discuss the background of the song “Blues in the Night” (see below: Information about “Blues in the Night”).

Play the song “Blues in the Night” and ask students to follow along with lyrics (see page 9 of the Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet).

What is the message of the song?

What is the mood of the song? (Is this a happy song or sad song and why?)

What is the evidence in the lyrics and music to support answer?

Review understanding of lyrics – clarify definitions of words they may not understand.

Explain that students will be putting personal lyrics into Harold Arlen’s music just like Johnny Mercer did.

Familiarize students with the melody of the song.

Call and Repeat—Sing/Speak in rhythm the lyrics on page 9 of the Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet.

Define term syllable.

Practice syllabic breakdown of familiar words (examples: House, Family, Johnny Mercer).

Break down the syllabic structure as a class for each lyric line of the song.

Record syllable numbers in appropriate boxes on page 9 of the Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet.

Define term onomatopoeia.

Instruct students to turn attention to the single syllabic line of the lyrics on page 9 of the Accentuate the Positive: Guide to Lyric Writing for Kids booklet).

Invite students to explore various examples of onomatopoeia that are one syllable.



## Blues In The Night: Unit 2: Lessons 1 & 2 (*con't*)

### Lesson Procedure (*con't*)

Brainstorm Song Ideas

What are things that make you sad?

Write the lyrics for a song using the brainstorming prompt.

Students should follow the same syllabic pattern in the song "Blues in the Night" (6/6/6/1...).

Practice singing their lyrics with Harold Arlen's melody in "Blues in the Night."

Have students share their work.

Review the importance of copyright and have the students copyright their songs.

### Extension

Have students choose a song they love and rewrite the lyrics using the same syllabic structure the writers used in the song.

Pair students and have them collaborate writing lyrics to a song representing their shared ideas.

### Lesson Evaluation

Teacher observation of participation.

Evaluation of song lyrics using a rubric.

Student self-evaluation of process and project.



## Blues In The Night: Unit 2: Lessons 1 & 2 (con't)

### Information about “Blues In The Night”

Written for the 1941 American film noir musical *Blues in the Night*.

Was a collaboration with Harold Arlen (who wrote the music for Mercer’s lyrics) and marks the beginning of a string of collaborations between the two, resulting in some of the best music of their respective careers.

Nominated for the 1942 Academy Award for Best Original Song.

#### **From an interview with Willis Conover, Mercer said this about writing the song:**

“Well “Blues in the Night” is right out of Savannah, my background and all the things I heard when I was a boy and experienced...”

Citation: M011\_MercerJ-ConoverW, Johnny Mercer Oral History Project, Popular Music and Culture Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library

#### **From *The Complete Lyrics of Johnny Mercer*:**

“Mercer’s own mama, Miss Lillian, lived near Five Mile Bend [in Savannah, Georgia], where the trains turned, and she always remembered the sad sound of their whistles (“A-whoeee-duh-whoeee”).

“Trains are a marvelous symbol,” Mercer noted. “Somebody’s always coming in or leaving on one, so it’s either sadness or happiness.”

Citation: Mercer, Johnny, and Robert. Kimball. *The Complete Lyrics of Johnny Mercer*. 1st ed., Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

#### **From *Johnny Mercer: Southern Songwriter for the World*:**

Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen played “Blues in the Night” for a group of guests at Margaret Whiting’s house one night in the summer of 1941, before the song’s release, to test it out. Margaret recalled, “Harold sat down at the piano and played a few blues chords and Johnny began to imitate a train whistle... The room grew very still. I looked around. Mel Tormé’s mouth was hanging open. Judy Garland had her head down and just her eyes were peering up at Arlen. Everyone in the room knew something great was happening. Just to watch Arlen and Mercer perform was a treat. They ‘wailed’ before the term came into fashion... We couldn’t get Mel Tormé up off the floor, and for the first time Martha Raye didn’t have anything funny to say. Everyone wanted to sing it. Judy and I rushed to the piano to see who could learn it first.”

Citation: Eskew, Glenn T. *Johnny Mercer : Southern Songwriter for the World*. Athens : The University of Georgia, 2013.