

The Blues as Poetic Form and Literary Narrative

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Introduction:

Over many years of teaching, I have felt increasingly compelled to bring texts and writers outside of the traditional canon of American Literature. While this initially took the form of bringing in works by writers of color and trying to allow time for my students to read and study groups that may have been marginalized both within our culture and within our traditional curriculum, increasingly begun using forms and text types outside of the standard “literary” canon.

One way I do this is by incorporating music into my lessons. As a musician myself, I feel comfortable discussing both the structural and the lyrical content of songs. This specific unit was developed during a summer fellowship which allowed me to travel to the Mississippi Delta and study with historians and literature teachers at Delta Center at Delta State University in Cleveland, MS. As part of the fellowship, I met with blues musicians, juke joint owners, civil rights workers and academics who helped me more clearly contextualize the historical and musical movements that fostered the development of the blues.

This unit, which began as a lesson in my songwriting elective, is a result of the work I did at Delta Center. After seeing how strongly the students responded to it and how engaged they were when considering the historical context that inspired the lyrical content, I began incorporating this lesson into my American Literature II curriculum. Before beginning the unit, many students were either unaware of the importance of the blues in American culture or viewed it simply as an archaic musical form.

This 5-day lesson presents the blues as a uniquely American poetic and musical structure. At this point of the year, students would have studied several other poetic structures, such as the sonnet, villanelle, sestina, ekphrasis and odes. They would have already read survey of 19th century American literature as well as 20th century American literature up to the Great Depression.

Rather than simply studying the form, this unit also allows students to use iPads in order to write and record their own original blues songs.

Objective:

While studying poetic forms and learning about the cultural context in which these forms flourished, students will analyze the historical context and poetic structure of the traditional 12-bar blues song. Students will apply this knowledge to the composition of their own blues song.

Standards:

NJSLSA.R1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSA.R2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

NJSLSA.R4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

NJSLSA.R7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.9-10.2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details and provide an objective summary of the text.

NJSLSA.W2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Methodology and Sequence:

This unit is designed for four one-hour class periods, though it can be amended for students who may need time learning the basics of GarageBand on the iPad or Mac. Additionally, time can be added to allow students time to create and revise their original songs and to present their songs to the class. This can be done either live in class or by posting their digital files to a shared webspace.

Day 1:

Students begin class by completing an anticipatory prewrite to establish their previous knowledge about blues music. After sharing, students are given a handout "What is the Blues?" (Resource A), "Understanding 12 Bar Blues" (Resource B) and the circle of fifths chart (Resource C), which allows them to visualize the chord changes in the songs. After reading the first two documents, the class listens to several samples of blues songs, including Charlie Patten's "Pony Blues", Robert Johnson's "Love in Vain" and Muddy Waters' "Got My Mojo Working", all of which are available streaming on youtube.com.

In order to facilitate the student's ability to identify the chord changes, students are given slips of paper with I, IV and V written on them (Resource D). Between songs, I explain (or have a musically inclined student) explain the basics of chord progressions and time signatures. While listening to the songs, I count out the measures, showing students the basic time structure of the 12-bar blues. While doing so, I hold up a 1 while the 1 chord is being played, a 4 when the 4 chord is being played and a 5 when the 5 chord is being played. I invite the students to join along with me, in order to help them better understand the rhythmic and chordal structure of the blues.

By the end of this session, students will understand

1. That the blues was a musical form that emerged in the early 20th century in and around the Mississippi Delta that gave voice to the lived experience of marginalized African Americans living in Jim Crow-era American society.
2. That blues music functions as a sort of oral literature.
3. That 12 bar blues follows a codified structure both musically and lyrically.
4. That blues musicians used this structure to give voice to both the "anguish -and hopes- of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming."

Day 2

We begin the class listening to Leadbelly's "Jim Crow Blues", which is available on youtube.com. After, students compose a prewrite anticipatory set to establish their understanding of the Jim Crow-era South.

After sharing, student groups will use laptops to search the Blues Lyrics Database at <http://www.bluesforpeace.com/lyrics.htm>. Groups will identify lyrics that exemplify both the lyrical structure and the thematic content of traditional blues songs.

Using the "Blues Song Chart" handout (Resource E), the students will diagram a 12 bar blues using lyrics that they have identified in the previous activity.

By the end of the session, students will understand

1. The specific social and economic conditions that gave rise to the blues.
2. How the northern migration of blacks from the south to the industrial north spread blues beyond the Mississippi Delta.

Day 3

We begin class by listening to Willie Mabon's "Worry Blues" and John Lee Hooker's "Two Horse Blues", both streaming on youtube.com. Students use their I, IV and V chords to follow along with the chord changes. Students then read Prof Lawrence Levine's analysis of "Worry Blues" and "Two White Horses" (Resource F). I then pass out lyrics to Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" (Resource G). We listen to Mississippi John Hurt's song while students follow along with their lyric sheet. Using Prof. Levine's analysis as a model, class will close read and outline an analysis of "Cross Road Blues".

In groups of 3 or 4, students will begin drafting their own analysis of two blues songs of their choosing. Students will identify both the thematic elements of the songs as well as how the song conforms to or deviates from the 12-bar blues structure. This writing assignment will be completed outside of class.

By the end of the sessions, students will understand

1. That the blues lyrics reward close reading both as literary and historical texts
2. That the blues provides a voice for individuals who society had systematically disenfranchised and attempted to silence.

Day 4

We begin the class by using the circle of 5ths handout to identify the I, IV and V chord in various musical keys. Student pairs are given iPads, though this can also be done using GarageBand on a Mac or a similar software on PC. I lead the class through the basics of programming chords into GarageBand, changing tempos and layering instrumental tracks. This moves relatively quickly in my class since students have previously used iPads for a podcasting project, though if students are new to the software you could potentially use an entire class period simply getting comfortable with the software.

Once students are comfortable using GarageBand, they collaborate to program a 12-bar blues in a key of their choice. Depending on their musical background, some students layer in drums, or play piano parts over their chord changes. Once they have completed their recording, students collaborate to write original blues lyrics either mimicking the thematic content of the early blues or by re-contextualizing the blues to be about contemporary issues. Each group submits one "Blues Song Handout", in which they chart their original song.

By the end of this sessions, students will be able to

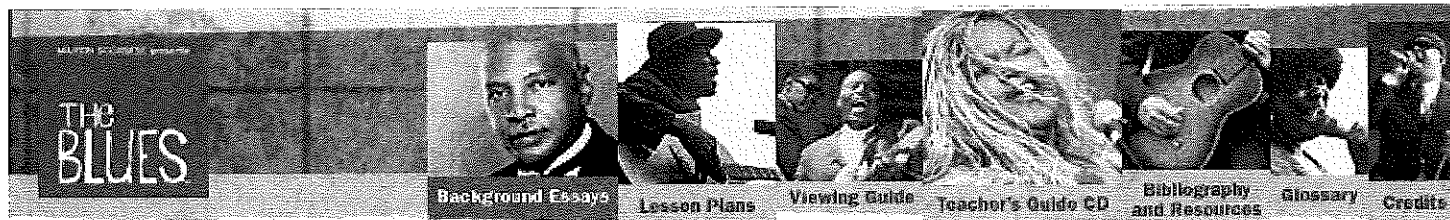
1. Utilize music recording software to program the 12-bar blues structure
2. Apply their knowledge of the thematic elements of blues songs to their own compositions.

Day 5

We begin the class by listening to The White Stripes' song "Ball and Biscuit", a contemporary song that utilizes the 12-bar blues structure. I offer some time for students to share any songs that they are aware of that fit the structure.

The rest of the class is devoted to performing the original songs that the students wrote in the previous class. Students are evaluated on their ability to follow the prescribed musical and lyrical structure.

Resources: (see attached)



[<< Blues Classroom](#)

What Is the Blues?

What Is the Blues?

Understanding the
12-Bar Blues

On a lonely night in 1903, W.C. Handy, the African American leader of a dance orchestra, got stuck waiting for a train in the hamlet of Tutwiler, Mississippi. With hours to kill and nowhere else to go, Handy fell asleep on a hard wooden bench at the empty depot. When he awoke, a ragged black man was sitting next to him, singing about "goin' where the Southern cross the Dog" and sliding a knife against the strings of a guitar. The musician repeated the line three times and answered with his instrument.

Intrigued, Handy asked what the line meant. It turned out that the tracks of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, which locals called the Yellow Dog, crossed the tracks of the Southern Railroad in the town of Moorehead, where the musician was headed, and he'd put it into a song.

It was, Handy later said, "the weirdest music I had ever heard."

That strange music was the blues, although few people knew it by that name. At the turn of the century, the blues was still slowly emerging from Texas, Louisiana, the Piedmont region, and the Mississippi Delta; its roots were in various forms of African American slave songs such as field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and country string ballads. Rural music that captured the suffering, anguish and hopes of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming, the blues was typically played by roaming solo musicians on acoustic guitar, piano, or harmonica at weekend parties, picnics, and juke joints. Their audience was primarily made up of agricultural laborers, who danced to the propulsive rhythms, moans, and slide guitar.

In 1912, Handy helped raise the public profile of the blues when he became one of the first people to transcribe and publish sheet music for a blues song—"Memphis Blues." Eight years later, listeners snapped up more than a million copies of "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith, the first black female to record a blues vocal. This unexpected success alerted record labels to the potential profit of "race records," and singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith began to introduce the blues to an even wider audience through their recordings.

As the African American community that created the blues began moving away from the South to escape its hardscrabble existence and Jim Crow laws, blues music evolved to reflect new circumstances. After thousands of African American farm workers migrated north to cities like Chicago and Detroit during both World Wars, many began to view traditional blues as an unwanted reminder of their humble days toiling in the fields; they wanted to hear music that reflected their new urban surroundings. In response, transplanted blues artists such as Muddy Waters, who had lived and worked on a Mississippi plantation before riding the rails to Chicago in 1943, swapped acoustic guitars for electric ones and filled out their sound with drums, harmonica, and standup bass. This gave rise to an electrified blues sound with a stirring beat that drove people onto the dance floor and pointed the way to rhythm and blues and rock and roll.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the electrified blues reached its zenith on the radio, but began to falter as listeners turned to the fresh sounds of rock and roll and soul. In the early 1960s, however, as bands like The Rolling Stones began to perform covers of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, aspiring white blues musicians in the United Kingdom helped resuscitate the genre. In the process, they created gritty rock and roll that openly displayed its blues influences and promoted the work of their idols, who soon toured England to wide acclaim. Although happy to be in demand as performers again, many veteran blues musicians were bitterly disappointed by seeing musicians such as Led Zeppelin get rich by copping the sound of African American blues artists, many of whom were struggling to survive.

Today, 100 years after WC Handy first heard it, the blues no longer commands the attention it once did; to many young listeners, traditional blues—if not contemporary blues—may sound as strange as it did to Handy. But if they listen closely, they'll discover a rich, powerful history of people who helped build America and created one of the most influential genres of popular music.



[<< Blues Classroom](#)

Understanding the 12-Bar Blues

What Is the Blues?

Understanding the 12-Bar Blues

The most common musical form of blues is the 12-bar blues. The term "12-bar" refers to the number of measures, or musical bars, used to express the theme of a typical blues song. Nearly all blues music is played to a 4/4 time signature, which means that there are four beats in every measure or bar and each quarter note is equal to one beat.

A 12-bar blues is divided into three four-bar segments. A standard blues progression, or sequence of notes, typically features three chords based on the first (written as I), fourth (IV), and fifth (V) notes of an eight-note scale. The I chord dominates the first four bars; the IV chord typically appears in the second four bars (although in the example below, Elmore James introduces it in the first four bars); and the V chord is played in the third four bars.

The lyrics of a 12-bar blues song often follow what's known as an AAB pattern. "A" refers to the first and second four-bar verse, and "B" is the third four-bar verse. In a 12-bar blues, the first and second lines are repeated, and the third line is a response to them—often with a twist.

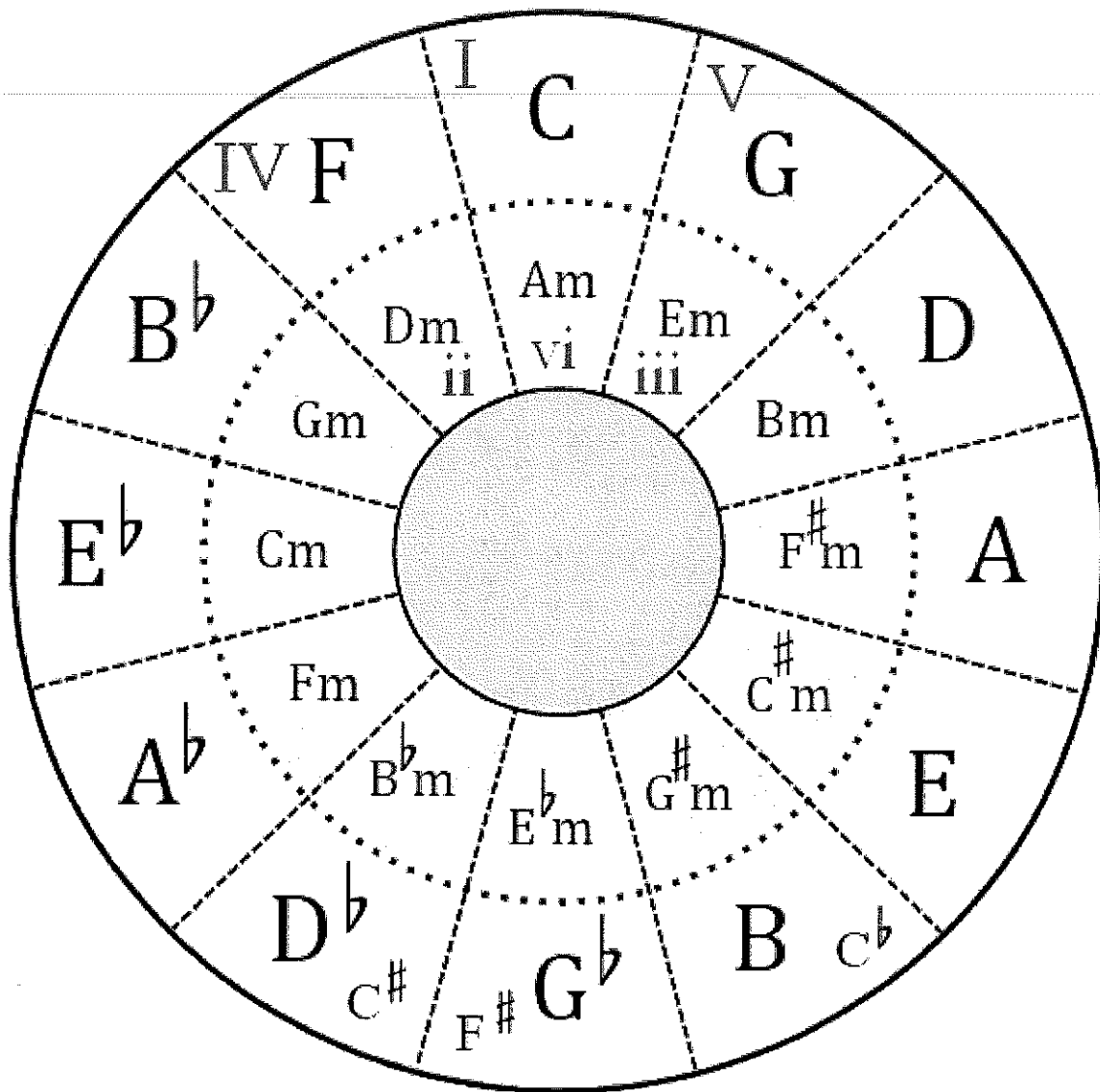
Below is an example of a 12-bar blues stanza from "Dust My Broom," as performed by Elmore James, and broken down by bars (measures), beats, chords, and lyrics:

First bar/measure 1-2-3-4 I chord <i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	Second bar 1-2-3-4 IV chord <i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>	Third bar 1-2-3-4 I chord	Fourth bar 1-2-3-4 I chord
Fifth bar 1-2-3-4 IV chord <i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	Sixth bar 1-2-3-4 IV chord <i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>	Seventh bar 1-2-3-4 I chord	Eighth bar 1-2-3-4 I chord
Ninth bar 1-2-3-4 V chord <i>I quit the best girl in lovin'</i>	Tenth bar 1-2-3-4 IV chord <i>Now my friends can get my room</i>	Eleventh bar 1-2-3-4 I chord	Twelfth bar 1-2-3-4 V chord

In each 12-bar stanza, the third four-bar segment (in the example above, the 9-12th bars), serves to resolve the previous four-bar segments. The resolution may signal the end of the song or set up another stanza. If the song continues, the transition to the next stanza is known as the turnaround. "Dust My Broom," for example, contains seven 12-bar stanzas, with a turnaround between each.

Not all blues songs follow the 12-bar format, but by understanding this basic musical framework, the listener will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for all blues music.

Resource C



Resource D

Resource D Flash Cards for Blues Song Chords

I

One Chord

IV

Four Chord

V

Five Chord

Resource E

Blues Song Chart
1 measure = 4 beats

Measure 1 I Chord	Measure 2 I	Measure 3 I	Measure 4 I
Lyric:			
Measure 5 IV	Measure 6 IV	Measure 7 I	Measure 8 I
Lyric:			
Measure 9 V	Measure 10 V	Measure 11 I	Measure 12 I
Lyric:			



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What do you notice when you listen to "Worry Blues"?

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What other knowledge of music and history helps you to understand these songs?

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SCHOLARS IN ACTION!

LAWRENCE LEVINE ANALYZES THE BLUES

Lawrence Levine, Professor of History at George Mason University, received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1962. Levine, formerly the Margaret Byrne Professor of History at Berkeley, is an internationally renowned interdisciplinary scholar whose work has focused on American culture. In 1983 he was one of the very first historians to be awarded a MacArthur Prize; most recently he served as President of the Organization of American Historians. Among his many books, probably the best known are *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, and *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*.



"Worry Blues" (sung by Jesse Lockett)
([see transcript](#))

▶ 0:00

"Two White Horses Standin' in Line" (sung by Smith Cason)
([see transcript](#))

▶ 0:00

Professor Levine's analysis

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE WHEN YOU LISTEN TO "WORRY BLUES"?

It's a song sung by one person and a guitar. It's a song that, the structure of which are three line stanzas. It has what we now call an A,A,B, pattern. That is the first line is repeated with a slight variation, Sometimes with no variation, sometimes with a large variation. This one very slight variation. So the first line then the second line is a repeat of the first line with a slight variation, then the third line is culmination--a resolution, a supplement to the first line that's repeated twice. It's a soliloquy, that is it's about the person -- it's all about the person who's singing. This song and many other songs, "Some people say the worried blues ain't bad, but its the worst old feeling, I most ever had."

It has a formula and therefore if you listen for awhile it's familiar and because it's familiar you can make certain judgments about how well the person operates within the formula. These are things that occurred to me just by looking at this. You wouldn't have to read anything about this--just by studying the structure and the sound.

The message is life is hard. Life is difficult for ME, for "I." Life is hard: "My woman left me. I have no money. The soles of my shoes are thin. I can feel a dime right through them. I haven't got enough food, I'm going to catch a train." There's also humor in them. There doesn't happen to be in these two, that I can see, but you know, "I'm going to lay my head right down the railroad track, when I hear the two-o-nine I'm gonna take my head right back." You know, uh, that's that's, you know, they fool around. They make jokes. There is humor in these things as well. But there is a lot of trouble. So, you without knowing anything else, you--I want to just stress that--you can learn a lot by just listening carefully, reading carefully, these songs, a lot. And I encourage that because I don't want to make, people say--I don't want people to think that if they don't come as scholars they're not going to be able to understand this music. Yes, they can understand a lot of it. To look carefully at what's happening, to listen to the voice- listen, I think the most important thing that students and scholars can do, both professional and lay, is to listen to the voices.

Listening to other blues you can really tell that they're not sitting in a dark room making all of this up completely by themselves, but they've heard other blues, they've sung other blues, there is a reservoir--a cultural reservoir--of lines they can use to depict their own feelings.

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE WHEN YOU LISTEN TO "TWO WHITE HORSES"?

Well, right off the bat you know you're listening to the blues. It's got a lot of the same structure as the other one--again, you got that most common form of blues, that is, a three line stanza with an AAB pattern: A line, repeated, and then a third line. There are ABB patterns, there are BAA patterns, there are different kinds of things. But the most common form of blues is AAB, and this has it. Once again it's centered around the singer --it's a lamentation, it's about hard times. This guy's about to die, or at least symbolically, metaphorically, he's about to die and he's worried about his grave being cleaned. And he's talking about the church, and horses burying him. You might say that burials are important. If you knew nothing else, you might conclude that burials are an important thing. And you might also conclude that these people are singing out of a certain negative frame of reference. That is, life is hard for them and they're singing. So there are many similarities. It stands right out however that they're not identical musically. You don't have to know a lot about music to hear that. But this guy is using a guitar in a very epiphanal way. It's call and response--very overtly. He's talking to the guitar. He's sometimes letting the guitar finish his sentences for him. He's having a discussion with the guitar and the guitar is taking on a very vocal, human voice. The guitar is speaking. You hear falsetto on the guitar, you can just listen to this without much background and here are these two people having a conversation. So you could say if you know anything about music, that epiphany, that is call and response, is one of the important elements. It is one of the most important elements of slave music. It's continued here.

All kinds of thing are being done musically, and I'm not a musician, but all kinds of things are being done musically that you don't necessarily hear in typical American music. Slides, slurs, falsetto, polyrhythms, where you keep more than one rhythm going at a time--he does that with his guitar and his voice. And he sometimes doesn't finish lines and lets you imagine the finish because he's established a pattern by now and if you come from this culture you know the finish. And he doesn't need to sing it.

So there's a musical diversity. One type of blues does not set the parameters for all types of blues, and you can tell that without knowing very much. Just by listening to these songs. They're both blues, they're both blues sung by nonprofessional singers in prisons. We should say that: these were both recorded in prisons by guys who did not earn their livings singing blues. So, that's another thing. If you know that then you can say, well, maybe you've heard BB King, but these guys ain't BB King. Or they are not BB King. And they nevertheless do a pretty good job. So you might conclude without knowing anything else, that this is community music.

RESOURCE G

“Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above
"Have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please"

Yeoo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
Ooo eeee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down
I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroad blues this mornin'
Lord, babe, I am sinkin' down

And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked east and west
Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman
Oh well, babe, in my distress