

John Cephas



Photo by Alan Govenar

NEA National Heritage Fellow, 1989 Master Piedmont Blues Musician

When I grew up as a kid and we had these get-togethers in the country, almost everyone had a repertoire that included “John Henry,” and you were judged by how well you played it. Some played it in open keys, some in standard keys. And you were judged by how far along you were. People love this song because it’s such a powerful song. The experience in this song is like in the movies or books, good finally wins over bad. After tackling this steam drill, this man in human flesh finally overcomes. This is like one of those hero stories that everyone likes. Although he died in the end, he accomplished his goals. People like to hear stories where people win.

– **John Cephas**

John Cephas was a master of Piedmont blues music. He played acoustic guitar and sang in a strong, melodic voice. The distinguishing characteristics of the Piedmont style are its finger-picking and a bouncy rhythm, which demonstrates the influences of ragtime, string bands, and other popular styles. Learning more about John Cephas, the Piedmont, blues, and the folk hero John Henry opens a window to American history, music, race relations, and the power of traditional culture.

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Meet the Artist John Cephas

John Cephas (1930-2009) grew up in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, DC, during the 1930s and '40s, during the era of Jim Crow racial segregation. He had a musical family, and his father was a Baptist minister. As a boy John sang as a duo with his brother and with a cappella quartets in the family church. (A cappella means singing unaccompanied without instruments).

John and his family often visited relatives around Bowling Green, Virginia. There his aunt, a noted guitar player, taught him Piedmont style guitar, which is acoustic, not electric. Listening to relatives and 78 rpm records by earlier Piedmont bluesmen provided further inspiration and instruction. He especially liked Blind Boy Fuller, Reverend Gary Davis, and Blind Blake.

Here is how John described his childhood musical experiences, “I guess my main influence came from the environment I used to live in. When I grew up as a kid in Washington, DC, and Caroline County, VA, naturally I grew up in a segregated society. On weekends and times for celebrations in the black community, all the folk used to join themselves together and they used have house parties. They would bring their instruments and they would come and they would sing, play piano, fiddle, banjo, and have all this wonderful music. As a kid, I heard this music and when I grew up I couldn't help but fall right into that same mold because this is what I heard and what they enjoyed and what I enjoyed.

“As far as any main influence, my Aunt Lillian Dudley was my main influence. She was one of the main people at house parties. She's still alive and knows how much I learned from her. My grandfather, he used to be one of the main ones too. When I was growing up, 8 or 9 years old, my aunt had a guitar and when she was by herself I used to ask to play the guitar. She would let me pluck on the guitar and show me one chord here and one note there, like that. So she was probably my main influence along with all this music I heard in the community. Then I had a cousin down in Virginia and he was very good at playing guitar. During our early teens that's all we used to do, Piedmont style.”

Where do
your relatives
live? Do you
make trips to
visit them?

After serving for the U.S. Army in Korea in the 1950s, John returned to Washington, DC. “I started off doing construction work, the only thing available to me since I didn't get an education. My parents weren't able to send me to college. I didn't finish the tenth grade, and the only thing available was non-skilled labor, and I did that until I learned how to do carpentry work as an apprentice with one of the black-owned construction companies. Then I later acquired a journeyman's license as a carpenter after taking tests.”

Like many traditional musicians, John's worked at a day job, but music was always a big part of his life. “All during that time I did play music at house parties, just music for enjoyment, not knowing it would one day be my main support in these later years, when the music I played all

these years in my youth turned out to be worthy of concert stages around the world. I'm at that stage right now. I retired from being a carpenter in 1987. I don't lift a hammer now if I don't have to!"

When asked why he did not work as a musician when he was young, John said, "The type of music that I play wasn't prominent enough that I could have launched a successful career because when I grew up the blues wasn't considered concert hall-worthy. If I could have started earlier and figured that I could make a living at doing that, I would have been very happy to do that. But I grew up in a society where there was a lot of segregation, and things that black people did didn't have a lot of merit. But as I grew older, then the blues got more exposure, and people who were interested in this music and saw its true worth brought it out, exposed it, opened up doors for artists to perform before many audiences. Today blues has a high position in the music world, and it's because of so many people's efforts at exposing the blues and so many musicians' efforts at performing it.

In the mid-1970s, John met and began performing with bluesman Big Chief Ellis. In 1977, John joined other DC-area Piedmont musicians in a nonprofit organization called The Traveling Blues Workshop. Members included John Jackson, Elizabeth Cotton, Mother Scott, Flora Molton, and Archie Edwards. Around this time he met a younger musician, harmonica player Phil Wiggins, who became his musical partner.

Phil also grew up in Washington, DC, a few decades after John. As a boy, Phil was interested in African American street singers in DC and records by the Piedmont blues musician John Jackson. Phil also loved the old lined-out hymns he heard when he visited his grandparents' church in Alabama. Although he was surrounded by popular music genres from rock and roll to rhythm and blues, traditional Piedmont music was what he loved.

What music did you hear when you were a child? What songs did you sing? Do you play an instrument? Do your relatives listen to different music that you do?

After John retired from his job as carpentry foreman at the DC Armory, he and Phil began touring to play music around the country and the world. By 1981 they made their first LP record and continued to perform, tour, and record together as Cephas and Wiggins until John's death in 2009.

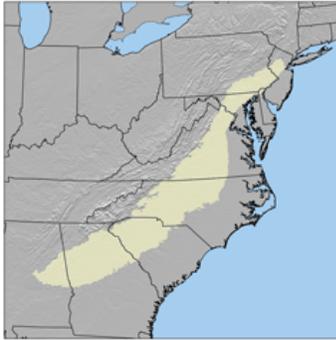
Acclaimed as one of the best country blues duos in blues history, Cephas and Wiggins won two W.C. Handy Awards and were nominated for Grammy Awards. They played from the White House to Russia, and were musical ambassadors on U.S. Department of State tours.

Teaching music was also important to John, who was an instructor for many workshops and classes here and abroad. When John received the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1989, his nominating letter read, "Abroad, he serves as a goodwill ambassador for American music, but at home, he is always learning as well as teaching. As he puts it, he never stops learning."

Learn more about John Cephas by reading the transcript of his [Local Learning Interview](#).

John Cephas' Regional Background

John's family was from the gently rolling hills of the Piedmont Region, which lies between the Appalachian Mountains and the Coastal Plain, stretching from Maryland to Georgia. This area is called the Piedmont because in French pied is the word for "foot" and mont is the word for mountain, so "Piedmont" means at the foot, or beginning, of the hills.



The Piedmont is distinct in its geography, history, and culture. Compared with early settlements in the mountains or the coast, it had a diverse economy, primarily supported by agriculture but including textile mills, foundries, and small manufacturers. The terrain, economy, and settlement patterns allowed more contact between African Americans and Anglo Americans than in the mountains or plantation areas. As towns and cities developed, the increasingly urban areas attracted both African Americans and Anglo Americans in search of jobs and supported a growing middle class.

What is the landscape of your community?
Do you live in an urban or rural area?
Have you ever been to a place where the landscape was very different from yours?

Farms and mills and towns were not only places of work, they were also sites for people to gather and exchange musical styles. Piedmont music and dance forms are a unique blend of African American, Anglo American, urban, and rural styles.

Thus, the Piedmont music style reflects a cultural conversation between blacks and whites, rural and urban, and a diverse range of musical influences from ragtime to string bands. Black and white musicians exchanged techniques and repertoires, producing the unique and diverse Piedmont style. Like other Piedmont musicians, John knew many types of songs, not just blues.

What are some music traditions in your region?
Make a list and choose one to investigate.

Piedmont blues is only one form of Piedmont music. It is more melodic than other blues genres such as the Mississippi Delta blues. John described his Piedmont guitar style as "alternating thumb and finger-picking where I keep a constant bass line going with my thumb. I pick out the melody or the words I'm singing with my fingers on the treble strings at the same time. It's almost like the guitar is talking, mimicking your feelings or the words to the songs and that steady accompanying bass gives it a jumping rhythm, a

loping sound."

As in the case of John Cephas, many residents of the Piedmont have kept their ties to rural areas over the generations. John went back and forth from Washington, DC, to Bowling Green, VA, all

his life and eventually bought land and built a home there. He often called himself “Bowling Green John Cephas.”

John Cephas Sings “John Henry”

Listen to John Cephas Sing “John Henry”

Buy this recording, featured on Richmond Blues, by Cephas and Wiggins, from [Smithsonian Folkways](#).



The ballad of John Henry’s struggle with the steam engine is so compelling that he has become one of our best-loved folk heroes. Scholars have traced the legend of John Henry to the early 1870s during the building of the Big Bend Tunnel through the West Virginia mountains by C & O Railroad workers . To carve this tunnel, then the longest in the U.S., men worked in pairs to drill holes for dynamite. One man used a large hammer to pound a huge drill, while another man screwed it into the rock.

In the legend, John Henry was an African American man of impressive stature. He was known for his strength and skill in driving the steel drills into the solid rock, and also, apparently, for his singing. One day the white “captain” brought a newly invented steam drill to the tunnel to test. Which was stronger, man or machine? John Henry, the strongest steel driver of them all, beat the steam drill, but, according to the song, the effort killed him.

Do you know a
version of
“John Henry”?
Sing it! Write
down the lyrics and
compare them with
John Cephas’s
version.

In the song John Henry fought the steam drill, yet met a tragic and noble end. As an African American hero, he can be seen as a man who pitted his strength against his human and technological oppressors and won. In many ways, he represents the plight of the confident, heroic worker replaced by the soulless machine. Over a hundred years after his death, his story is still retold.

The way that John Cephas sang “John Henry” combined elements of ballads, work songs, and legends. Ballads are songs in verse form that tell a story. Work songs are sung while people work to synchronize a task or help pass the time. Legends are stories about people who lived in the past, often about people we admire. Often heroic traits are exaggerated in a legend.



While driving steel, John Henry and his fellow workers might have sung work songs. With the help of this tradition brought from Africa, many heavy, cooperative tasks became more bearable. Work songs were used for different types of railroad work, such as lining track and, in the case of John Henry, pounding drills into the rock or “driving steel.” Workers mixed and matched both improvised and pre-existing lyrics to fit the rhythm of the work. For example:

*Take this hammer, huh!
Take it to the captain, huh!
Tell him I'm gone, huh!
Tell him I'm gone, huh!*

Imagine John Henry swinging his legendary 20-pound hammer high above his head as a line began, and hear the ring of the steel as it landed on the drill: “huh!”

Some elements of John Cephas’s version came from work songs. For example, in his version of the song he uses a dialogue between John Henry and the captain. Also, in the manner of blues or work songs, singers of “John Henry” improvise and combine verses of many versions depending on the occasion.

While work songs must be rhythmic to keep the work going steadily, ballads tell a story and are more melodic. “John Henry” probably gets its melody from an old ballad brought to America by Scottish settlers.

John Cephas’s Lyrics to “John Henry”

John Henry was a little boy,
‘Bigger than the palm of your hand,
‘Time that boy, he was nine years old
Driving spikes like a man
Driving spikes like a man.

John Henry was a little boy,
Sitting on his mammy’s knee,
He picked up a hammer and a little bit of steel:
“Hammer’s gonna be the death of me,
Hammer’s gonna be the death of me.”

John Henry said to the captain, yeah,
“Man, you ought to see me swing
Love to hear the cold steel ring,
Love to hear the cold steel ring.”

John Henry said to the captain, yeah,
“A man ain’t nothing but a man,
But before I let the steam drill beat me down,
I’m gonna die with this hammer in my hand,
Die with this hammer in my hand.”

Captain said to John Henry, yeah,
“This mountain is caving in,”
John Henry said, “Oh captain, yeah,
‘Just my hammer sucking wind,
‘Just my hammer sucking wind.”

John Henry went to that tunnel to drive,
Steam drill was by his side,
He beat that steam drill three inches and down,
He laid down his hammer, Lord, he died,
Laid down a hammer, Lord, he died.

They took John Henry to the graveyard,
Buried him six feet in the sand,
‘Time a locomotive passed by,
Says, “There lies a steel driving man,
There lies a steel driving man.
There lies a steel driving man.
There lies a steel driving man.”

Interview with John Cephas



In 1998 we interviewed Piedmont musician John Cephas as our first virtual artist in residence using questions submitted by web site visitors, mostly students. Like many traditional musicians, John learned to play guitar and sing within his community and family. You will discover in this interview that he did not know how to read music. He did not earn a living from music until he retired from work as a carpenter in 1987. Then he made several recordings and toured the world with the younger harmonica

player, Phil Wiggins. Cephas and Wiggins performed for many students here and abroad. As you read the transcript of the interview, think about how John's life story compares with your own and what you could learn by interviewing a musician in your community.

Paddy Bowman of Local Learning interviewed John Cephas on February 23, 1998, in Alexandria, Virginia. He was delighted to answer the questions that students had submitted.

Questions for John Cephas

1. Do you feel that to play the blues well, you have to play it all the time, in exclusion of other types of music?
2. Do you sometimes wish you had pursued your music career earlier?
3. What are the experiences you had as a child that influenced you to become a musician? Was there a particular person who had a lot of influence on your decision?
4. Tell about a book or two that you've read that you think other people should read.
5. Why do you like to play the guitar?
6. Did you ever write a song yourself? If you did write a song, how did you decide what to write about?
7. Who were your influences when you were learning to play?
8. Why the blues?
9. Where do you continue to receive inspiration for composing and singing?
10. What other kinds of music do you like to sing or listen to?
11. Why do you like to sing folk ballads?
12. Where did you first learn of "John Henry"?
13. What kinds of songs did you sing in church as a child?
14. How do you compose a song?
15. What was the first song you composed or sang professionally?
16. What is your favorite song?
17. Besides your aunt, do you have other family members who sing or play?
18. Are you married? Do you have children? If so, do they like the Blues also?

19. Do you use computer technology? Have you visited your online residency? If so, what do you think?
20. Which is your favorite Cephas and Wiggins recording?
21. Do people in other countries know about the Blues?
22. Can you read music?

Answers:



Q1: Do you feel that to play the blues well, you have to play it all the time, in exclusion of other types of music?

With the blues, as with almost any other kind of music, you wouldn't necessarily have to play it all the time, but practice is the most important thing. If you want to specialize in a type of music, if you practice it and you're dedicated to it and you have ambitions to play it, then you perfect your skills the more that you practice. Now, if you play blues, the blues has its own

technique, its own feeling, its own emotion, and to play the blues by itself you wouldn't necessarily have to just play blues. Other music is also adapted to blues. Almost all pop music that you hear has some influence from blues. The main thing is practice, in blues or any other kind of music. That is the key to success.

Q2: Do you sometimes wish you had pursued your music career earlier?

The type of music that I play wasn't prominent enough that I could have launched a successful career because when I grew up the blues wasn't considered concert hall-worthy. If I could have started earlier and figured that I could make a living at doing that, I would have been very happy to do that. But I grew up in a society where there was a lot of segregation, and things that black people did didn't have a lot of merit. But as I grew older, then the blues got more exposure, and people who were interested in this music and saw its true worth brought it out, exposed it, opened up doors for artists to perform before many audiences. Today blues has a high position in the music world, and it's because of so many people's efforts at exposing the blues and so many musicians' efforts at performing it.

I started off doing construction work, the only thing available to me since I didn't get an education. My parents weren't able to send me to college. I didn't finish the tenth grade, and the only thing available was non-skilled labor, and I did that until I learned how to do carpentry work as an apprentice with one of the black-owned construction companies. Then I later acquired a journeyman's license as a carpenter after taking tests. All during that time I did play music at house parties, just music for enjoyment, not knowing it would one day be my main support in these later years, when the music I played all these years in my youth turned out to be worthy of concert stages around the world. I'm at that stage right now. I retired from being a carpenter in 1987. I don't lift a hammer now if I don't have to!

Q3: What were some experiences you had as a child that influenced you to become a musician? Was there a particular person who had a lot of influence on your decision?

I guess my main influence came from the environment I used to live in. When I grew up as a kid in Washington, DC, and Caroline County, VA, naturally I grew up in a segregated society. On weekends and times for celebrations in the black community, all the folk used to join themselves together and they used have house parties. They would bring their instruments and they would come and they would sing, play piano, fiddle, banjo, and have all this wonderful music. As a kid, I heard this music and when I grew up I couldn't help but fall right into that same mold because this is what I heard and what they enjoyed and what I enjoyed. As far as any main influence, my Aunt Lillian Dudley was my main influence. She was one of the main people at house parties. She's still alive and knows how much I learned from her. My grandfather, he used to be one of the main ones too. When I was growing up, 8 or 9 years old, my aunt had a guitar and when she was by herself I used to ask to play the guitar. She would let me pluck on the guitar and show me one chord here and one note there, like that. So she was probably my main influence along with all this music I heard in the community. Then I had a cousin down in Virginia and he was very good at playing guitar. During our early teens that's all we used to do, Piedmont style.

Q4: Tell about a book or two that you've read that you think other people should read.

There are any number of books about the blues that I like. One is by Dr. Barry Lee Pearson of the University of Maryland and is about Piedmont and Delta blues, *It Sounds So Good to Me*. He also wrote *Virginia Piedmont Blues*, which features Archie Edwards and myself. *Red River Blues*, by Bruce Bastin of England, is a good book, and there are also several volumes of *Who's Who in the Blues*, which have bios and background of the most prominent people in the blues of yesteryear as well as today.

Q5: Why do you like to play the guitar?

I like to play the guitar because of the wonderful sound that comes from the guitar. It's a rich, melodic sound that lends itself to my emotions and feelings. It's almost like it's an extension of myself and my feelings. I can play any emotion on the guitar.

Q6: Did you ever write a song yourself?

I've written many songs, some with lyrics and some instrumentals. They're about almost anything that happens in life, real experiences that happened in my life. In instrumentals I don't have to have any lyrics to express my emotions. Some titles I've written are "Black Cat on the Line," "Blue Day Blues," "Back Biter Blues," and I did a new arrangement of the old song "John Henry," which is featured on your web site.

Q7: Who were your influences when you were learning to play?

Some of the blues musicians I heard on records growing up were very influential on my playing. First was Blind Boy Fuller, a Piedmont blues musician. Also Reverend Gary Davis played the Piedmont blues. Blind Blake played a lot of ragtime. He was another of my main influences. Pink Anderson, Blind Lemon Jefferson were less influential, but I liked them. From the Mississippi Delta my main influence was Skip James.

Q8: Why the blues?

That's what I heard when I grew up. Black folk were the creators of the blues, and this is what I heard and I fell right in that same mode. Blues are about the black experience, what happened in the black community, true stories about daily living. There are blues for every emotion, every feeling, every incident that happens in your life. There are happy blues, sad blues, intermediate blues, dance blues, you name it. There's a blues for every occasion. There are many explanations for why this music is called the blues. I don't really know where the term came from, but I'm sure it has to do with emotion, feeling, and the blue notes we use. A person's feelings aren't on one straight line but are up and down, like a wavy line, up and down. There are some moments when you're at a high peak, some you're at a low point. It's like looking at the sky and you can imagine that line is going up and down and that it's really sweet and pleasing like the blueness of the sky, the blueness of the ocean. You play a major chord and then add a blue note to it, maybe that's where it comes from. One student asked me, "Why isn't it the reds, the yellows, the oranges?" Good question, but I can't really answer that. The blues, it fits.

Q9: Where do you continue to receive inspiration for composing and singing?

Things that happened to me in my life motivate me to write. I wrote "Black Cat on the Line," and it's related to a true happening in my life. "Meet That Mule Blues" was something friends experienced. That's where all the songs come from, my experience or someone else's.

Q10: What other kinds of music do you like to sing or listen to?

I'm closely attached to religious music. I grew up in a Christian home. My father was a Baptist minister, and you can imagine we had plenty of good church songs going on in our house almost at all times. I listen to just about all other kinds of music. I like country and western—I've even been inspired to try to learn to play pedal steel guitar. Bluegrass is absolutely wonderful. I listen to reggae, symphonies, classical music. Some rap I listen to, but rap, although it had its roots in the basic blues, has some lyrics that I'm not really proud of.

Q11: Why do you like to sing folk ballads?

A lot of the songs are like oral histories. This music and the black experience had its roots in Africa. Griots in Africa played music and mentally recorded histories of families and life, and they related this to the community through song. This is the same thing that happens in America. Ballads and blues are oral histories, how we document what happens. Songs tell about John Henry the steel driving man. Casey Jones, he was a train person. Stagger Lee was a mean, gambling man.

Q12: Where did you first learn of John Henry?

When I grew up as a kid and we had these get-togethers in the country, almost everyone had a repertoire that included "John Henry," and you were judged by how well you played it. Some played it in open keys, some in standard keys. And you were judged by how far along you were. People love this song because it's such a powerful song. The experience in this song is like in the

movies or books, good finally wins over bad. After tackling this steam drill, this man in human flesh finally overcomes. This is like one of those hero stories that everyone likes. Although he died in the end, he accomplished his goals. People like to hear stories where people win.

Q13: What kinds of songs did you sing in church as a child?

Daily experience in life is a little different from that spiritual or religious side. We all, especially in the black community coming out of slavery and such a hard time, found religious music inspirational. It helped black folk to overcome and get over the segregation and oppression that was taking place in their daily lives. This was so instrumental. After a hard week's work you could go meditate and renew your spirit. We sang a cappella lined-out hymns with no musical accompaniment as well as hymns with piano and organ, then later guitars and other instruments. First we started off like the slaves who had no instruments and sang field hollers, patted their feet and clapped their hands to keep the beat, sang in groups together a cappella. In the church some of that tradition carried on. They would line the hymns, like a call and response. One person would lead off and say a certain phrase, then the whole congregation would respond in turn. The lead might start off, "I love the Lord. He heard my cry and pitied every groan." Then the congregation would repeat that all together. Then the lead sang, "Just as long as I live and trouble shall rise," and we all responded. This was so inspirational.

Q14: How do you compose a song?

A blues is usually two phrases saying the same thing, then one to respond to what you said in the first place. I'd do two lines of the same phrase then a third would respond and rhyme with the first two. This is called an AAB pattern. For example, my new song starts with this verse:

Woke up this morning, I didn't want to go to school.
Woke up this morning, I didn't want to go to school.
My father said, "Son, you got to get out here and meet that mule."

Start with the lyrics, then add the music later. First you want to lay down exactly what you want to say, then you work out the music to it. The music is poetry, but it's poetry in song. The foundation of it is the poetry, and then the song comes later. Lay the song on top of the poetry. An instrumental employs feelings, not lyrics. You're laying down feelings, not lyrics. There are a lot of feelings you can't put in words so you can put them in music. You play different notes, up and down, to reflect your feelings.

Q15: What was the first song you composed or sang professionally?

When I was able enough to sing, 7 or 8 years old, my mother used to rehearse my brother and myself to sing as a duo. My first performance was in the church, and I was so bashful my mother had to take me out in back of the church to stop me from crying. The first song she taught us was "Daniel, He Was a Good Man." I was singing the high part, my brother the low part.

Daniel, he was a good man, he prayed three times a day.
Angels hist a window just to see what Daniel had to say, say, say.

Daniel, he was a good man, prayed three times a day.
And he said, "I do thank God I'm in his care."

Q 16: What's your favorite song?

I don't know that I have a favorite song. I love so many. There's a song for every occasion and emotion and it depends on how I feel. I just love music in general, and that's what's deep inside of me.

Q 17: Besides your aunt, did you have other family members who could sing or play?

My father, my mother, almost everybody in my family could sing. I don't think there was anybody in my family who couldn't sing. We all gathered around the piano and started singing as a quartet, duet, a cappella, you name it.

Q 18: Are you married? Do you have children? If so, do they like the blues?

I have been married, and I have seven children, but right now I'm a bachelor. I'm divorced, but I have a good relationship with my kids. They all like the blues, but none of them play an instrument.

Q 19: Do you use computer technology? Have you visited your online residency?

What do you think? I'm kind of new at this, like a lot of people. I do have a computer and I just learned how to receive email, and I've got a new web site, but I'm not that good at it yet. I'm just learning. I'm in the very primitive stages of this computer business. Just from what I see right now, this is the technology of the future, and it's going to be really instrumental in the music field as well as all other fields and endeavors in life. Seeing my section on your web site is just fantastic. I'm just more and more amazed by computers and what you can pull up. Sooner or later I'll catch on to it.

Q 20: Which is your favorite Cephas and Wiggins recording?

Flip, Flop, and Fly was the first one I was fully satisfied with. We had some other musicians on there, which gave us a fuller sound.

Q21: Do people in other countries know about the blues?

Phil and I have traveled to just about every continent, from China to Russia, Africa to Australia, where you might not think the blues has made its mark, but the blues have been there long before we arrived. We were in Moscow before the fall of the Soviet Union and some young people came up to us and they were familiar with our European recordings through underground distribution. They knew Cephas and Wiggins.

Q 22: Can you read music?

Absolutely not. I wouldn't know a note of music if somebody paid me to read it. The music I play comes from the heart, and once you learn the basic chords you don't have to know the notes, just what chords go with what chords. If you want to play a certain tune, if you can figure it out and hear it, then you can play it. Basically, I've developed an ear over the years. I know if a person starts off with a C chord, then I know where he's going and I can go with it. Basically it's music that comes from the heart and from the ear.

Classroom Connections

Language Arts

Folk Songs

(Grades 4-8) Folk songs stay alive because people sing them. All traditions change over time, including folk songs, so there are many versions of “John Henry,” one of our country’s best-known traditional songs. **Play John Cephas’s version a few times and read the transcript of the lyrics.** Think about what you already know about the song and the legend of John Henry and then investigate further. Here are some suggestions.

- **Research the song “John Henry” online, in the library, and by interviewing people.** Collect different versions from recordings, picture books, songbooks, and interviews with people (see Resources). You can even record people singing their versions. Keep track of people you interview: age, gender, region. Ask questions like: Do they remember how they learned the song? How many verses do they know? Do all versions end the same way? Chart a graph, produce a podcast, design a web page, or write a report about your research. Include your thoughts about why so many people know the song and the legend.
- **Research different types of ballads.** Ballads are songs that tell a story. They became popular in the late Middle Ages in Western Europe and the British Isles. Examples include traditional and broadside ballads of the British Isles and the Mexican American corrido. Share your research in an oral report and play examples that you find.
- **Research work songs** such as field hollers, track-lining songs, chanteys, and labor movement songs. Write a work song about a contemporary occupation. Remember, being a student is an occupation.
- **Investigate local folk legends and heroes in your family and community** and write a ballad about them. Ballad stanzas are often four lines long, and the lines have the same number of syllables. You may include a chorus but not all ballads have a chorus. Borrow a tune from a song you know or make up a new tune. Share ballads in a class sing-along.

Social Studies

Regions

(Grades 6-12) **Research the economy, agriculture, industry, and settlement patterns of the Appalachian Mountain region, the Piedmont, and the Coastal Plain.** Then research the music of each region. Describe how you think the culture and music of the Piedmont compare with and differ from that of the Appalachians or the Coastal Plain in an oral report or essay. Use music to illustrate your points.

Geography, Mapping

(Grades 4-8) Find the Piedmont region on a map and compare the landscape with the

Appalachian Mountain region and the Coastal Plain. **Create a relief map** to show your findings. Combine this map with an activity studying the people who live in these places.

Culture, Folklife Studies

(Grades 3-8)

- John Cephas recalled many house parties with live music, dancing, and food from his childhood visits in the Piedmont region of Virginia. **Describe the parties that you go to**—music, dress, dance styles, behavior of boys and girls, food, and rituals. Interview older people about the parties they attended when they were your age. Compare results in class in presentations. Play recordings of the music of both age groups.
- Read the transcript of the interview with John Cephas and think about what you would like to learn by interviewing a family member or neighbor about personal or musical traditions. [Use the Local Learning Interview Tips and Resources to prepare.](#) Use what you learn in the interview to find musical examples and produce a podcast featuring your interviewee and his or her music.
- John learned to play guitar from his Aunt Lillian, a cousin, and records. He also practiced a lot. ***What things have you learned to do or make from family or friends?*** What things have you taught? Make a list and describe how this experience differs from how you learn things in school. Then share your observations by drawing a picture, writing a short essay, or demonstrating your skill.

Visual Arts

Portraits

(Grades 3-6)

- While listening to John Cephas’s version and other versions of the song “John Henry,” draw or paint a portrait John Henry or someone else hard at work.
- Think about the characteristics of a hero. Draw or paint a portrait of a hero in your community or family. How can you highlight their heroic traits?
- Ask your school librarian to collect picture books about John Henry. Compare and contrast the styles of the artists who have illustrated them (see Resources). Have a group conversation, gathering opinions about which image best describes the story of John Henry.

Music

History

(Grades 6-12)

- **Research major regional blues styles** such as Piedmont, Delta, Texas, and Chicago. How do settlement and migration patterns influence the blues style? Choose one style and find recordings of songs that display characteristics of that region. Play a sample to share in an oral report on what you have learned.

- **Choose a Piedmont musician to research** online, in the library, or by interviewing older people in your family or neighborhood. Use music samples to share your findings in a class presentation. In addition to John Cephas, you can research any of the following: Blind Boy Fuller, Rev. Gary Davis, Blind Blake, Big Chief Ellis, Elizabeth Cotton, Etta Baker, John Jackson, and the duo Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

Materials and Inspiration

(Grades 5-12) In this performance of “John Henry,” Phil Wiggins’s harmonica imitates train sounds—sometimes a mournful train whistle, and other times the chugging of the wheels along the tracks. In many traditions, musicians look to ordinary sounds for inspiration and material. Use an audio recorder to document various sounds in your environment—including sounds of people, animals, and objects. Try imitating these sounds using instruments that you play. Can you find appropriate ways to incorporate some into songs that you know? Perform some of these with a group or your class.

Texture and Instrumentation

(Grades 5-12) Listen to John Cephas’s “John Henry.” *What instruments do you hear? How many singers do you hear? What kinds of sounds do the instruments make?* Some sounds that Cephas and Wiggins coax out of their instruments might sound unusual. *Which sounds that you hear differ from the “usual” sounds that instrument makes?* Although “John Henry” isn’t strictly a blues tune, this performance does fall within the Piedmont blues tradition. Piedmont blues are characterized by layering different sounds, rhythms, and textures. Each layer is distinct, yet the music always seems to work well as a whole. *What two textural layers does John pinpoint?*

Vocabulary

a cappella
acoustic guitar
ballad
blues

harmonica
hero
house party
improvisation

legend
Piedmont region
synchronize
work song

Resources

Books

Bastin, Bruce. *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*. University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Epstein, Dena. *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Pearson, Barry Lee. *Virginia Piedmont Blues: The Lives and Art of Two Virginia Bluesmen*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

Multimedia

The [Blues Classroom](#) is a PBS web site that highlights Delta blues, not Piedmont blues, but it

provides useful and interesting information and activities.

Blues House Party, features Piedmont musicians playing during a house party at the home of bluesman John Jackson, including John Cephas. Available from [Multicultural Media](#), \$29.

[Celebrating the Life of John D. Cephas](#) is a memorial web site.

[Jim Crow History](#) is an extensive web site with many resources and lesson plans related to the long era of racial segregation in the U.S. known as Jim Crow.

NEA National Heritage Fellowships 1982-2007, produced by Documentary Arts, 2007. John Cephas narrates the DVD-Rom for this beautiful publication featuring over 300 traditional artists. Order it free from the [NEA Folk Arts Program](#).

Smithsonian Folklife Festival web site features Cephas and Wiggins performing “[Dog Days of August](#).”

Cephas and Wiggins Recordings

Let It Roll. Marimac Recordings (1985)

Dog Days of August. Flying Fish (1986)

Walking Blues. Marimac Recordings (1988)

Guitar Man. Flying Fish (1989)

Flip, Flop, and Fly. Flying Fish (1992)

Cool Down. [Alligator](#) (1996)

Homemade. [Alligator](#) (1999)

Shoulder to Shoulder. [Alligator](#) (2006)

Richmond Blues. [Smithsonian Folkways](#) (2008)

“John Henry”

Johnson, Guy Benton. John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend. 1929.

Levine, Lawrence. “The Hero vs. Society: John Henry to Joe Louis.” In Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Lomax, Alan. The Folk Songs of North America. Doubleday, 1975.

Nelson, Scott Reynolds. Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Books for Students

Cohn, Amy L. From Sea to Shining Sea: A Treasury of American Folklore and Folk Songs. Scholastic Inc., 1993.

Keats, Ezra Jack. John Henry: An American Legend. Dragonfly Publishers, 1987.

Lester, Julius. John Henry. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, Dial, 1994.

Nelson, Scott Reynolds. Ain’t Nothing But a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry.

National Geographic Children’s Books, 2007.