

Sonny Terry



Lesson Plan

OBJECTIVE: *To better understand and appreciate the contributions of Sonny Terry to the history of North Carolina and the United States.*

Social Studies Objectives: 9.02

Social Studies Skills: 1, 2, 3, 5

Language Arts Objectives: 1.03, 1.04, 2.01, 5.01, 6.01, 6.02

Resources / Materials

- Biographical sketch
- Internet access (optional)
- *Activities* page
- Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians

Procedures

- Students will read and discuss biographical sketch of Sonny Terry either as a whole class or in groups. Reading can also be done independently.
- Students will complete *Activities* page as designated by the teacher.
- Students will complete one or more projects in the “Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians” as designated by the teacher.

Evaluation

- Student participation in reading and discussion of Sonny Terry
- Student performance on the *Activities* page
- Student participation in the “Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians”

Bibliography

“Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry:”

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<http://www.island.net/~blues/sonnyter.html>

Dahl, Bill. “Sonny Terry.” *The All Music Guide*.

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<http://www.oafb.net/once168.html>

“Masters of Blues Harp Sonny Terry.”

Masters of the Blues Harp. 10 March 2003.

<http://www.celticguitarmusic.com/harmsterry.htm>

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<http://www.io.com/~tbone1/blues/ECblz/sonter.html>

Sonny Terry



Biographical Sketch

A Greensboro, North Carolina, native, Sonny Terry was the best-known harmonica player from the southeastern United States. He was born Saunders Terrell on October 24, 1911, and learned how to play the harmonica from his father. Two separate accidents blinded Sonny in his youth, and the harmonica became his best friend. “In them days I just as soon died—except for my harmonica,” he remarked.

Terry was forced to rely on his music to make a living. He worked for a white group of musicians when he was 14 and picked up blues songs from other musicians. He played on street corners or in tobacco warehouses in Raleigh and Durham. In 1934, he began playing with other musicians, including Blind Boy Fuller and Gary Davis. Terry’s recording career began in 1937, when he and Blind Boy Fuller traveled to New York City to record for Vocalion and the American Record Company. In 1938, he performed at New York’s Carnegie Hall at the “From Spirituals to Swing” concert.

Terry met guitarist Brownie McGhee in 1939, and McGhee became his duet partner. Terry and McGhee moved to New York City in 1942, at the invitation of the Almanac Singers, a folk group. Sonny Terry also performed in the 1946 Broadway production of *Finian’s Rainbow*, which ran for one thousand performances, and in the play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. By the 1950s, Terry and McGhee were performing outside of New York City and recording for several labels. By this time, Sonny Terry was one of the best known and most successful blues harmonica players—known for his “whoopin” southeastern style. He and McGhee were popular throughout the sixties and were regulars at folk and blues festivals. They produced a number of recordings until the mid-1970s, when personal differences separated the two musicians.

In 1975, Terry told the story of his life and his harmonica techniques in a book, *Sonny Terry’s Country Hits*. He also performed in the movie, *The Jerk*, in 1979. By the early 1980s, Terry retired from his active schedule and only rarely performed. He recorded “Whoopin” in 1984. In 1985, his harmonica sounds were heard on the soundtrack to the Oscar-winning movie, *The Color Purple*. Sonny Terry died in 1986, eight months before he was inducted in W.C. Handy’s Blues Hall of Fame. Sonny Terry is remembered as one of the greatest harmonica players of all time.

Sonny Terry



Activities

Personal Response

Do you think that Sonny Terry's blindness contributed to his success as a musician? Explain.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain Sonny's quote, "In them days I just as soon died—except for my harmonica."
2. List other musicians with whom Sonny worked.
3. Trace Sonny Terry's musical career.

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Explain the terms by using context clues and/or by using the dictionary.

1. harmonica
2. rely
3. duet
4. inducted

Creative Responses

1. Select one of the activities from the "Menu of North Carolina African American Musicians" to complete.

2. NCFMP: Sonny Terry played the blues with the wailing sounds of his harmonica. If possible, listen to some of his music. Why do you think it is called "the blues?" What does this musical genre have to do with the history of African Americans and their efforts to achieve freedom and equality in North Carolina? Discuss these questions with your classmates and then decide how you would depict the blues in the NC Freedom Monument. You may draw, use clay, or consider choosing a single graphic symbol.

Sonny Terry



Activities ■ Answer Key for Teachers

Personal Response

Do you think that Sonny Terry's blindness contributed to his success as a musician? Explain.

Responses will vary but can serve as a springboard for discussion.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain Sonny's quote, "In them days I just as soon died—except for my harmonica."

Sonny meant that if it was not for his harmonica that he may not have survived his blindness.

2. List other musicians with whom Sonny worked.

Musicians included the following: Blind Boy Fuller; Gary Davis, and Brownie McGhee.

3. Trace Sonny Terry's musical career.

- Learned to play the harmonica as a child
- At 14, he worked for a white group of musicians and picked up blues songs from other musicians
- Played on street corners and tobacco warehouses in Raleigh and Durham
- 1934: played with Blind Boy Fuller and Gary Davis
- 1937: recording career began in New York City with Blind Boy Fuller
- 1938: performed at Carnegie hall
- 1939: met guitarist Brownie McGhee, who became his duet partner
- 1942: moved to New York and began recording
- 1946: performed in *Finian's Rainbow* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- 1950s: performed with McGhee outside of New York City and recorded for several labels
- 1960s: popular and regular at folk and blues festivals
- Until mid-1970s: produced recordings with McGhee
- Mid 1970s: separated from McGhee
- 1975: published book, *Sonny Terry's Country Hits*
- early 1980s: retired from active schedule
- 1984: recorded "Whoopin"
- 1985: played harmonica in movie soundtrack, "The Color Purple"
- 1986: Sonny died; inducted into W.C. Handy's Blues Hall of Fame

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Explain the terms by using context clues and/or by using the dictionary.

1. **harmonica** small wind instrument with a series of metal reeds that produce tones when air is blown or sucked across them. (Graphic will be acceptable)
2. **rely** to depend upon or trust
3. **duet** two performers
4. **inducted** placed formally in a society or group

Creative Responses

Responses will vary.