



## ***Things Ain't What They Used To Be***

**Music by:** Mercer Ellington (March 11, 1919-February 8, 1996)

**Text by:** Ted Parsons

**Arranged by:** Allan Grey

**Published:** Jalen Jazz

**Instrumentation/Voicing:** Jazz Band

**Broad Description & Type/Genre:** 12 Bar Blues

[JW Pepper](#)

Original Recording by Duke Ellington Orchestra

Vocal Recording by Ella Fitzgerald (1970)

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

**Text** *Got so weary of bein' nothin', Felt so dreary just doin' nothin'.  
Didn't care ever getting' nothin', felt so low, Now my eyes on the far horizon can see a glow  
Announcin' things ain't what they used to be.*

*No use bein' a doubtin' Thomas, No ignorin' that rosy promise;  
Now I know there's a happy story yet to come. It's the dawn of a day of glory: millennium  
I tell you things ain't what they used to be.*

**Composer** Mercer Ellington, only son of Edward Duke Ellington. Mercer became a more prominent writer during the ASCAP Boycott of 1941, when Duke's compositions weren't allowed to be recorded or performed on the radio, as Duke was a member of ASCAP. Mercer played trumpet in Duke's Band, although he had a love-hate relationship with his father (Kakutani, 1981). There is some evidence that the blues melody was written by Mercer and the original orchestration for the arrangement was done by Duke.

**The Composition Or other** *Things Ain't What They Used To Be* is one of the most popular tunes recorded by the Duke Ellington Orchestra, featuring Johnny Hodges on alto. There is a very smooth and nonchalant manner in which the solo develops that is a great model for young improvisors.

## ELEMENTS OF MUSIC:

**Form** This piece is a contrafact on the blues progression. A contrafact is a new melody that is written over a pre-existing chord progression. The arrangement follows a basic twelve bar blues head tune form with a couple of minor chord substitutions and alterations.

I7#9	%	%	%
IV7	%	I7#9	%
ii-7	V7	I7#9    bIII7	II7    V7

### **Introduction**

**Melody 1** Saxophones perform the melody in unison with harmonized trombones and piano interjections.

**Melody 2** Trumpet join the trombones with harmonized interjections.

**Alto Saxophone Solo** the written solo mimics Johnny Hodges introduction to the solo

**Trombone Solo** saxophone backgrounds

**Trumpet Solo** saxophone backgrounds

**Shout Chorus**

**Melody Reprise**

**Tag Ending**

**Melody** The entire melody has been transposed from Concert Db to Concert Bb, most likely for range and key familiarity issues with young musicians. The original melody starts from the fifth before moving to the root and major third, whereas this arrangement has an aspect of the major blues scale, Root, 2nd, b3rd, 3rd, 5th, 6th. The 2nd is generally omitted. The flat third ascends to the major third, as a leading tone, giving a very optimistic quality. The melody transposes up a fourth on the IV chord, which is a fairly standard alteration among blues tunes, giving the second phrase interest due to repetition, but with a harmonic twist. In returning to the root position of the melody, there is a Gb to F downward resolution, that grounds the breaking free of the melody.

Other melodies are hinted at in this arrangement, which play homage to the aural nature of jazz and the quoting of material from other musicians, as a musical joke. In measure 47, the saxophones are riffing on the opening lick to *Doxy*. The shout section at measure 71 features a harmonized quote of Count Basie's shout section on *Splanky*, before returning to the arrangers ideas.

In the final reprise of the melody, the 9th and 10th measures are repeated twice, once a half step higher and then back to the root position. This further creates a sense of forward motion and optimism.

**Rhythm** The concept of the eighth note triplets are initially set up in the drum set fill in the first measures. The eighth note triplets dominate the first two beats of the melody, providing a forward moving momentum. The melody enters on an off beat, giving the phrase a

rhythmic feel of a drumset set-up. Two Quarter Notes on Beat 3 and 4 emphasize the heavy backbeat giving a solid sense of pulse and setting up the syncopation by anticipation in measure 2 of the blues melody. There is a moment of diminution in measure 9 of the melody, where 3 eighth notes are reduced to repetitive triplets, again giving the feeling of moving forward, as 'things ain't what they used to be'.

**Harmony** Ellington's original harmonic structure is an alteration on the blues utilizing a I7#9 chord (elements of minor and major together in the same sound), but only over the I chord. It's interesting that this harmony has a clash between the major third and the sharp 9, but given how the rest of the chord is surrounding this clash, the tension in the chord sounds pleasing to the ear. Also if the note is voiced in a different register, it creates a completely different affect; almost as if changing perspective helps to understand one's own ideas. This doesn't happen on the IV chord of the blues. This is probably an incorporation of the melody into the harmonic structure of the piece. In this arrangement, the arranger utilizes a I9 chord without this alteration. The arranger also uses a lot of leading tone harmonies and tritone substitutions (E7 substitution over the Bb6/9) to move between the chords and further emphasize the slight shift of chromaticism.

**Timbre** The Rhythm Section is featured in the introduction, as can be a tradition in jazz style. The melody is stated in each instance with the saxophones in unison. This is contrasted with the brass timbre which functions primarily as a sharp accent, delineating the chord change. The background timbres are balanced with the saxophone soloist featured over brass backgrounds. The brass soloist are featured over the saxophone backgrounds.

**Texture** The texture throughout is primarily melody driven homophony, as with most modern jazz tunes. The melody is the main focal point (as with the improvised melodies of the soloists), and the surrounding accompaniment is in support of the melody. There is some aspect of polyphony with the call and response, between backgrounds and the soloists. However, it's primarily in Dixie styles that we see more elements of polyphony.

**Expression** In general the melody is performed at the forte dynamic level. Solo background choruses need to be performed soft so as to accompany the solo. Given the improvisatory nature of the piece, dynamic contrasts are an outgrowth of the musical expression of a soloist. Young musicians are to work on balancing across the ensemble as a soloist, but also as using dynamics as a vehicle for musical expression.

**Musical Selection** *Things Ain't What They Used To Be* is a great introduction to the music of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Not only is the melody accessible, but it follows a fairly standard blues melody progression. The optimism expressed in the melody, and in the lyric, is timeless.

**Additional Considerations** Although this piece can be played by any level of jazz ensemble, careful attention needs to be made to the level of the soloists, especially the independence of the pianist.

**THE HEART  
STATEMENT**

***The heart of the Things Ain't What They Used To Be is the resolution of ascending leading tones in the melody, inflecting a sense of optimism through times of hardship.***

**Introducing  
The Piece**

Introductory Quiz: [Are you an Optimist, Pessimist or Realist?](#)

**OUTCOMES:**

**Skill  
Outcome**

Students will perform simple patterns over the blues and be able to transpose these patterns to the fourth and fifth.

Strategies

1. Roots/3rds/7ths - Learn the Root movements of the Blues and the Third to Seventh Leading Tones. Use these as backgrounds for solo/duet sections.
2. Play/Learn/Memorize the MAJOR Blues Scales in Bb, Eb and F (Kinesthetic/Aural/Visual)
3. Jazz Lictionary Worksheets and Play-alongs (Visual)
  - a. [Shahoodle-da](#) (Visual)
  - b. [6-1 Lick](#) (Aural)
4. Everyone learns 'Things Ain't What They Used To Be' melody from a lead sheet (Aural/Visual).
5. Mirror - Improvise a two measure phrase and have a friend (or band) mirror it back, when you get good at two measure phrases, take turns with four measure phrases. [Bb Blues Playalong](#)
6. Conversation - Improvise a two measure question and have a friend respond as if responding to a question. When students get good at two measures, expand to four measure phrases. [Bb Blues Playalong](#)
7. Improvise using the Major Blues Scales (Aural)
  - a. iReal Pro Loops
  - b. Practice using [Bb Blues Playalong](#) in Google Classroom
  - c. Record using iPads
8. Student composed patterns (Visual)
  - a. Noteflight

Assessments

1. Performances of Jazz Lictionary patterns and Melody (informal)
2. Improvisation - Mirror & Conversation (informal)
3. Composition patterns in Noteflight (formal) and possibly recording performances of these patterns into Noteflight.

**Knowledge  
Outcome**

Students will examine the concept of a contrafact in jazz, classical, and popular cultures.

Strategies:

1. Axis of Awesome - What makes these songs similar? Pachelbel's Canon. How many tunes can we find based on this progression? Why do we gravitate towards these pieces? Familiarity of sound? It's easy to understand? How are the melodies different?

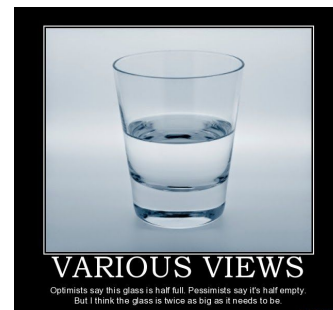
2. Other Contrafacts: Can we find other contrafacts? What are other contrafacts in life? Find a contrafact and share (take a picture of it, bring it in, write it out, etc). Examples: Rhyme schemes? Poems? Sonnets? Stories? Art?
3. Students will write their own contrafact over a simple blues progression using their own musical patterns. Form of the Blues AA'B (extra-credit if the can put the words from the affect into their contrafacts)

### Assessments

1. Discussions on Contrafact (informal)
2. Writing a contrafact (formal)

### **Affective Outcome**

Students will explore how a enduring through times of hardship, by maintaining an optimistic outlook, can develop a more positive sense of self and unity. (Building Community)



### Strategies:

1. Introductory Quiz: [Are you an Optimist, Pessimist or Realist?](#)
2. [Worksheets on Optimism](#)
3. [12 Short Stories on Optimism - Thinking it Through](#) (PDF Download)
4. Writing Blues Lyrics: How does expressing feelings help people deal? How does it help us relate to others? <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/intlyrics.html>
4. This is our Fight Song: 'I Can See Clearly Now' - Building Community through Overcoming Challenges, 'we shall overcome'.



### Assessments

1. Introductory Quiz (informal)
2. Written Blues Lyric/Poems (formal)
3. Notecards (informal)
4. Journals about something that students believe in. (informal)

### **10 Ways To Take Out The Piece**

1. Written by the only son of a famous composer, pianist and bandleader
2. Is a contrafact on a 12 bar blues
3. Based on the Major Blues Scale
4. Written during the ASCAP Boycott 1940-1941
5. Originally featured Johnny Hodges on the alto saxophone
6. Features the saxophone section playing a blues melody in unison
7. Utilizes the leading tone from the flat 3rd to the major 3rd
8. Promotes an overall sense of optimism, even though it was written towards the end of the Great Depression
9. Uses a Shahoodla Lick to begin the melody
10. Emphasizes the triplet subdivision of swing style from the Big Band Era

**Additional  
Concepts &  
Ideas That  
Can Be  
Taught With  
This Song**

Significant Recordings:

- Ellington Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzPgYo19AsQ>
- Live Ellington Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOePGV9Utrk>
- Ella Fitzgerald Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiKdnLNThyw>
- Count Basie Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyIVFPxzO5g>

Jazz Lictionary Recordings in Google Drive

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ISpG5n3gZ9sWAhaDvFk-iRRlknDAOMe>

Bb Blues Playalong

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwvjh2bFfK3STXJtazVaRW1BUUk/view?usp=sharing>

**NTS  
(note to self)  
and other  
Resources**

**Kakutani, Michael. Life As Ellington's Son Was Mostly Mood Indigo. New York Times. 1981.**

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/29/arts/life-as-ellington-s-son-was-mostly-mood-indigo.html>

**The Jazz Lictionary**

<https://www.thejazzlictionary.com/>

**Soundtrack to a Revolution**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_SiYbQ2DD8M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SiYbQ2DD8M)

**Checklist  
of Items  
Needed To  
Teach This  
Piece**

- Printed scores/parts
- 3rds/7ths Handouts
- Leadsheets
- Shahoodla Worksheet
- 6 to 1 Worksheet
- Journals, Pencils
- Notecards
- Noteflight Template
- Rubrics
- Writing Blues Worksheet

# Worksheets from 'The Jazz Lictionary'

**X Maj7, x7**

**"6" to "1":**

6 — 1 — 1 — 6 — 1

Track 3 – Latin Concert Bb, Eb, F, C  
Track 4 – Swing Concert Bb, Eb, F, C

**Example:**

BbMaj7 / Bb7

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

10

**X Maj7, x7**

**Shahoodia:**

Please note: Some of the Latin or Funk "Shahoodia" rhythms in the book are played with 8<sup>th</sup> notes instead of triplets. There's also a "5" before the "6" on the Latin track of "Shahoodia". Other licks have been adjusted slightly from Latin to Swing. Use your ears!

3 — 3 — 5 — 6 — 1

b3 — 3 — 5 — 6 — 1

Sha - Hoo-Da - La- Daht

Track 5 – Latin Concert Bb, Eb, F, C  
Track 6 – Swing Concert Bb, Eb, F, C

**Example:**

BbMaj7Bb7

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

Key: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Writing Blues Lyrics Handout

1. Choose a topic that reflects the mood of the blues.
2. Follow the formula below for the four lines of each verse of a blues song:

1<sup>st</sup> Line: State the problem.

2<sup>nd</sup> Line: Repeat 1<sup>st</sup> line.

3<sup>rd</sup> Line: State half of the solution (or consequence).

4<sup>th</sup> Line: State the second half of the solution (or consequence).

Example:

### The Homework Blues

I've got the homework blues 'cause my teacher always gives us a ton.

I've got the homework blues 'cause my teacher always gives us a ton.

And if I don't do my homework,

My parents won't let me have fun.

Notice that the 1<sup>st</sup> line has 16 syllables. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> line should add up to 16 as well. As a rule of thumb, however many syllables there are in the 1<sup>st</sup> line should be the same (or very nearly the same) as the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> line combined. Also, note that the last word of the 1<sup>st</sup> line rhymes with the last word of the 4<sup>th</sup> line.

While not all blues songs follow this exact formula, it is a way to get started. Listen to as many blues songs as you can and see if they follow the same formula. If they don't, what do they do differently?