Backwater Blues Lyrics Guide

Companion to the Backwater Blues Listening Guide | Flood MR 100 | Grades 6–12

How to Use This Guide

Read the lyrics as you listen to the music. Follow up with questions from the listening guide.

1. **Listen first** with the Listening Guide routine (no reading).
2. **Listen again with the lyrics** below.
3. **Mark the text:** underline places, circle water and weather words, and box words about work, relief, or leaving home.
4. **Discuss** using the "Think About" questions in the Listening Guide chapter listed for each song.

Playlist: Backwater Blues Lyrics Guide on Spotify

Note on transcriptions: Lyrics were taken from Genius.com or Spotify. Early blues recordings are hard to hear, so transcriptions vary. These lyrics are provided for educational purposes and are not intended to violate copyright.

Read the lyrics as you listen to the music. Follow up with questions from the listening guide.

Songs at a Glance

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14	Led Zeppelin "When the Levee Breaks" (1971 adaptation)	1971	Conclusion

1. John Lee Hooker "Tupelo"

Recorded: 1959	**Listening Guide:** Introduction

VERSE 1
[Spoken:]
Did you read about the flood?
It happened long time ago, in a little country town, way back in Mississippi
It rained and it rained, it rained both night and day

VERSE 2
The people got worried, they began to cry
"lord have mercy, where can we go now?"
There were women and there was children, screaming and crying
"lord have mercy and a great disaster, who can we turn to now, but you?"

VERSE 3
The great flood of Tupelo, Mississippi
It happened one evenin', one Friday evenin', a long time ago
It rained and it started rainin'

VERSE 4
The people of Tupelo, out on the farm gathering their harvest
A dark cloud rolled, way back in Tupelo, Mississippi, hmm, hmm

CHORUS
[Sung:]
Wasn't that a mighty time
Wasn't that a mighty time?
Wasn't that a mighty time
A mighty time, that evenin'?

VERSE 5
It rained, both night and day
The poor people that had no place to go, hmm,hmm
A little town, called Tupelo, Mississippi
I never forget it and I know you won't either

2. Bessie Smith "Backwater Blues"

Recorded: 1927	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 1

VERSE 1
When it rained five days, and the sky turned dark as night
When it rained five days, and the sky turned dark as night
Then trouble's takin' place in the lowlands at night

VERSE 2
I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my door
I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my door
There's enough trouble to make a poor girl wonder where she wanna go

VERSE 3
Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond
Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond
I packed all my clothes, throwed 'em in, and they rowed me along

VERSE 4
When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begin to blow
When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begins to blow
There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go

VERSE 5
And I went and stood up on some high old lonesome hill
And I went and stood up on some high old lonesome hill
Then looked down on the house were I used to live

VERSE 6
Backwater blues done called me to pack my things and go
Backwater blues done called me to pack my things and go
'Cause my house fell down, and I can't live there no more

3. Alice Pearson "Greenville Levee Blues"

Recorded: 1927	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 1

VERSE 1
I woke up this mornin', couldn't even get outta my door
I woke up this mornin', couldn't even get outta my door
The levee broke and this town is overflowed

VERSE 2
And you could hear people screamin' all over town
And you could hear people screamin' all over town
And [someone's/some was] callin' "Please don't let me drown"

VERSE 3
When the water was risin' and creepin' up in my door
When the water was risin', creepin' up in my door
I had a mind to leave, and I didn't know where to go

VERSE 4
They were rowin' little boats five and ten miles away
They were rowin' little boats, Lord, five and ten miles away
They were pickin' up people, didn't have no place to stay

VERSE 5
Livin' on the levee, sleepin' on the ground
Livin' on the levee, sleepin' on the ground
I'm gonna tell everybody that Greenville's a good old town

4. Lonnie Johnson "Broken Levee Blues"

Recorded: 1928	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 1

VERSE 1
I wants to go back to Helena, the high waters got me bogged.
I wants to go back to Helena, the high waters got me bogged.
I woke up early this mornin', a water hole in my back yard.

VERSE 2
They want me to work on the levee, I have to leave my home.
They want to work on the levee, that I have to leave my home.
I was so scared the levee might break out and I may drown.

VERSE 3
The water was round my windows and backin' all up in my door.
The water was all up 'round my windows and backin' all up in my door.
I'd rather to leave my home 'cause I can't live there no more.

VERSE 4
The police run me all from Cairo, all through Arkansas.
The police run me all from Cairo, all through Arkansas.
And put me in jail, behind those cold iron bars.

VERSE 5
The police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.
Police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.
And I ain't buildin' no levee, the planks is on the ground and I ain't drivin' no nails.

5. Charley Patton "High Water Everywhere"

Recorded: 1929	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 2

VERSE 1
Backwater at Blytheville, backed up all around
Backwater at Blytheville, done took Joiner town
It was fifty families and children come to sink and drown

VERSE 2
The water was risin' up at my friend's door
The water was risin' up at my friend's door
The man said to his women folk, "Lord, we'd better go"

VERSE 3
The water was risin', got up in my bed
Lord, the water was rollin', got up to my bed
I thought I would take a trip, Lord, out on the big ice sled

VERSE 4
Oh, I can hear, Lord Lord, water upon my door
You know what I mean, look-a here
I hear the ice, Lord Lord, was sinkin' down
I couldn't get no boats there, Marion City gone down

VERSE 5
So high the water was risin' our men sinkin' down
Man, the water was risin' at places all around
Boy, they's all around
It was fifty men and children come to sink and drown

VERSE 6
Oh, Lordy, women and grown men drown
Oh, women and children sinkin' down
Lord, have mercy
I couldn't see nobody's home and wasn't no one to be found.

6. Blind Lemon Jefferson "Rising High Water Blues"

Recorded: 1927	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 2

VERSE 1
Ooh, ain't got no mama now
Ooh, ain't got no mama now

It's over late last night
You don't need no mama no how

VERSE 2
Mmm, black snake crawling in my room
Mmm, black snake crawling in my room

VERSE 3
Some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon
Ooh, that must be the bed bug, honey
A chance can't bite that hard Has my sugar for fifty cents
She's a lemonade darling in the yard

VERSE 4
Mama, that's all right
Mama, that's all right for you
Mama, that's all right
Mama, that's all right for you
Mama, that's all right
Most any old way you do
What's the matter now?

VERSE 5
Oh, what's the matter now?
Sugar, what's the matter?
Don't like no black sugar
Wonder where my black snake gone
Wonder where this black snake gone
Black snake mama done my darling wrong

7. Walter Davis "Red Cross Blues"

Recorded: Early 1930s	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 3

VERSE 1

The Red Cross is helping poor people
Who cannot help themselves

The Red Cross is helping poor people
Who cannot help themselves

VERSE 2

I went down there this morning
They said they wasn't helping no one else

Uncle Sam's flag is painted
Painted red, white and blue
Uncle Sam's flag is painted
Painted red, white and blue

VERSE 3

If the Red Cross won't help us
What in the world is we going to do?

I spent all my money
Did not save a lousy dime
I spent all my money
Did not save a lousy dime

VERSE 4

I didn't ever think I would be worrying
People with these hard old times

So I will remember this
The longest day I live
So I will remember this
The longest day I live

VERSE 5

The Red Cross has told me
They did not have nothing to give
My little children were screaming

Crying, "Papa, we ain't got no home"
My little children were screaming
"Papa, we ain't got no home"

VERSE 6

The Red Cross has cut us off
Man, and left us all alone

8. Lead Belly "Red Cross Store Blues"

Recorded: 1940	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 3

VERSE 1
I told her no!
Baby you know I don't want to go
Justine I ain't goin'
Down to no Red Cross store

VERSE 2
She come down Justine, tell me I want to talk with
you in just a little while
Ain't you goin' down and fight for your wife and child?

VERSE 3
She come down here and she shook my hand
She said Daddy I want you to go down there and fight for me like a man

VERSE 4
She said the Red Cross people they treat you mighty fine
They mixing everything up with whiskey and wine

VERSE 5
She come down here talkin' to me about the war
I told her baby I ain't done nothing to go there for

VERSE 6
She come down here and she fell down on her knees
I said baby I have to look somewhere for your butter and cheese

VERSE 7
She said Daddy I just come down here to tell you so
You better go running down to that Red Cross store

9. Lonnie Johnson "South Bound Backwater"

Recorded: 1938	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 4

VERSE 1

I live down in the valley
People come from miles around
I live down in the valley
People come from miles around
Their little homes was washed away
They had to sleep on the ground

VERSE 2

Through the dreadful nights I stood
No place to lay my head
Through the dreadful nights I stood
No place to lay my head
But I was up on my knees
And the water had taken my bed

VERSE 3

I climbed up on the mountain
To find some place to stay
I climbed up on the mountain
To find some place to stay
Is the southbound water
Had washed my little valley home away

VERSE 4

The water was rolling down the valley
Just like a thunderstorm
Water was rolling down the valley
Just like a thunderstorm
Washed my little valley house away
There's no place I can call my home

10. Sara Martin "Goin' Down to the Levee" (also called "One Man Nan")

Recorded: 1923	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 4

VERSE

"One Man" Nan, a gal from Alabam'
Never loved but "Good Man" Sam
"Good Man" Sam slipped off the levee one day
Fell into the river, then he faded away
When "One Man" Nan got the news
She started down the road and sang these weary blues

CHORUS

I'm goin' down to the levee where the water's heavy
Gonna find my "Good Man" Sam
I made a vow when I got him that I'd never drop him
When he was in a jam
The very thought of Sam sinkin', that's my cup
It's gonna be my place to pick him up
I'm goin' down to the levee where the water's heavy
Gonna find my "Good Man" Sam

BRIDGE

"One Man" Nan, levee bound
Feet flip-floppin' on the ground
Ripped up trees, roots and all
Just like a cannonball
She outran her shadow
Left it far behind
Started runnin' sideways
Just to keep from flyin'
Folks for miles round about
Heard old Nanny shout

CHORUS

I'm goin' down to the levee where the water's heavy
Gonna find my "Good Man" Sam
I made a vow when I got him that I'd never drop him
When he was in a jam
The very thought of Sam sinkin', that's my cup
It's gonna be my place to pick him up
I'm goin' down to the levee where the water's heavy
Gonna find my "Good Man" Sam

11. Kansas Joe McCoy & Memphis Minnie "When the Levee Breaks"

Recorded: 1929	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 5 and Conclusion

VERSE 1
If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break
If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break
When the levee breaks, I have no place to stay

VERSE 2
Mean old levee taught me to weep and moan, oh
Mean old levee taught me to weep and moan
It's got what it takes to make a mountain man leave his home
Oh well, oh well, oh well, ooh-ooh

VERSE 3
Don't it make you feel bad
When you're trying to find your way home?
You don't know which way to go
If you're going down south, they got no work to do
If you're going north to Chicago

CHORUS
Ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, oh
Ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, oh

VERSE 4
Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
No, crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move, ooh-ooh

VERSE 5
All last night, I sat on the levee and moaned
All last night, sat on the levee and moaned
Thinking about my baby and my happy home, oh-oh

CHORUS
Ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, oh
Ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, ah, ah-ah, oh

VERSE 6
I'm going-
I'm going to Chicago
I'm going to Chicago
Sorry, but I can't take you, oh

VERSE 7

Going down, going down now
Going down, I'm going down now
Going down, going down
Going down, going down, ooh

REPRISE

I'm going down, going down now
Going down, going down now
Going down, going down now
Going down, going down, down, down, down, down now
Ooh, ooh

12. Thomas A. Dorsey "Levee Bound Blues"

Recorded: 1930	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 5

VERSE 1
I had a brown in my hometown
Sweetest as a gal could be
I love my gal with all my might
She didn't love nobody but me

VERSE 2
The other night a man named White
Come and stole my gal away
You know I'm feelin' down and out
And I've got the blues today

VERSE 3
Hey if you see my gal
Don't you tell her what I've done
I've got the blues
I'm gonna sing em all night long

VERSE 4
Now I'm forty years old today
And got no business feeling this way
When I get the blues you can hear me shout
Oh come on mama

VERSE 5
Now folks if you see my gal
Tell her that I'm gone
Feel like riding, it takes me all night long
Now back to the levee I'm bound

VERSE 6
I'm through with her yellows and browns
Now I'm going to the levee ca'
My gal done turned me down

VERSE 7
Now say folks, if you see my gal
Tell her that I'm gone
I feel like leavin', it takes me all night long

VERSE 8

> Now back to the levee I'm bound
> I'm through with her yellows and browns
> Now I'm going to the levee cause
> My gal done turned me down

13. Gene Campbell "Levee Camp Man Blues"

Recorded: 1930	**Listening Guide:** Chapter 5

VERSE 1
These contractors, they are getting so slack
These contractors, they are getting so slack
They'll pay you half of your money and hold the other half back

VERSE 2
There ain't but two men that get paid off
There ain't but two men that get paid off
That's the commissary clerk and the walking boss

VERSE 3
I see somebody coming down to the water trough
I see somebody coming down to the water trough
I know it ain't the contractor, it's that doggone walking boss

VERSE 4
A levee camp mule and a levee camp man
A levee camp mule and a levee camp man
They work side by side, and it sure is man for man

VERSE 5
A levee camp man ain't got but two legs you know
A levee camp man ain't got but two legs you know
But he puts in the same hours that a mule do on four

VERSE 6
I wouldn't drive no four-mule team
I wouldn't drive no four-mule team
For no doggone contractor I've ever seen

VERSE 7
Men on the levee hollering "Whoa Haw Gee"
Men on the levee hollering "Whoa Haw Gee"
And the women on the levee camp hollering "Who wants me?"

14. Led Zeppelin "When the Levee Breaks" (1971 adaptation)

Recorded: 1971	**Listening Guide:** Conclusion

VERSE 1

If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break
If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break
When the levee breaks, I have no place to stay

VERSE 2

Mean old levee taught me to weep and moan, oh
Mean old levee taught me to weep and moan
It's got what it takes to make a mountain man leave his home
Oh well, oh well, oh well, ooh

BRIDGE

Oh, don't it make you feel bad
When you're trying to find your way home?
You don't know which way to go
If you're going down south
They got no work to do
If you're going north to Chicago
Ah, ah, ah, hey

VERSE 3

Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
No, crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move, ooh

VERSE 4

All last night I sat on the levee and moaned
All last night, sat on the levee and moaned
I'm thinking about my baby and my happy home
Oh-ho

BRIDGE

Ah, ah, ah, ah-ah
Ah, ah, ah, ah-ah
Oh, oh

OUTTRO

Going
I'm going to Chicago
Going to Chicago

> Sorry, but I can't take you, ah
> Going down, going down now
> Going down, I'm going down now
> Going down, going down
> Going down, going down
> Oh...
> Going down, going down now
> Going down, going down now
> Going down, going down now
> Going down, going, dowdowdowdowdown, now
> Ooh, ooh