

The Blues Are The facts of Life

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By JOHN STEWART March 5, 2003

Staff photo by Chris Horobin

Fruteland Jackson taught the students at Hillside Senior Public School a thing or two about the blues recently.

Leadbelly dropped by Hillside Senior Public School auditorium Wednesday to sing the *Midnight Special*.

W. C. Handy strummed the *St. Louis Blues*. Bo Diddley did a quick little blues shuffle.

Chuck Berry speeded things up to create some rock 'n roll. Berry sang — appropriately enough — *School Days*. (Hail! Hail! Rock 'n roll. The feeling is there, body and soul.)

The heroes of the blues were out in full force for the nearly 700 Grade 6-8 students who jammed into the auditorium to take a crash course called Blues 101.

The teacher was Chicago-based acoustic blues artist Fruteland Jackson, the man who recreated the personas of so many of the great blues masters.

Starting with some of the surviving field hollers and work songs of 150 years ago, Jackson and his guitar, and his trusty rhythm foot, conducted a trip back in time, with stops along the way to sample the country blues, the Delta blues, a the Chicago blues and just about any other blues you care to name.

“The blues are the way things are, not the way you’d like them to be,” said Jackson, a renowned educator who visits some 50,000 students annually through school programs. “The blues are the facts of life. Sometimes life is happy and sometimes life is serious. But whatever life is, that’s what the blues is,” he told students.

The oral historian and winner of the 1997 W. C. Handy award for “Keeping the Blues Alive” demonstrated that the honor was not misplaced.

“All the musical styles stand on the shoulders of the blues,” he told students. “If you trace anything back far enough — rhythm and blues, jazz, rap or hip hop — you’re going to find the blues.”



Fruteland (named for one of his grandfather's friends of the same name) is a musician first and an educator second, he said in an interview. In fact, he records on Toronto's Electro-Fi label.

He was brought to Hillside through the Toronto Blues Society and a grant from an Ontario Trillium program. Music teacher Brian Hawryluk is a member of the Blues Society. He plays in an all-teacher band called The Blackboard Blues Band. When he heard Jackson was available to come to the school, he jumped at the chance to provide, "a very meaningful experience that enriches the curriculum." Not only that, he got to hear his favorite music during school hours.

After Jackson's guided tour of the Blues Hall of Fame, he tested some Hillside students and found they'd learned their lessons well.

Two student volunteers came up on stage at the end of the hour-long show and, if they didn't exactly wail the blues, they did a fair approximation.

James Melville sang those "I Had Noodles For Breakfast and I Ate Them with Chopsticks" blues.

Nick MacNeill, sporting a fresh cast, lamented his condition with a particularly woebegone version of the "I Broke My Leg, I Broke My Leg — Real Bad" blues.

As the auditorium of pre-teens giggled in unison, Jackson's message had been received: "the blues is just the way things are."