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By [Karen Gardner](#) - News-Post Staff

Blues singers don't usually ply their trade in schools, but the Blues In Schools program introduces students to an American art form that hasn't gotten a lot of academic appreciation.

This Sunday, May 23, the Bentz Street Raw Bar will host a day of blues music dedicated to raising money for the Blues in the Schools program. Local and regional blues musicians will play continuously from noon to midnight.



Every spring, blues musician Fruteland Jackson spends two days in Frederick schools singing and talking the blues. "He does this all over the country, all over the world," said Steve Norris, a founding member of the Frederick Blues Society.

Jackson brings his program to two schools a day, and so far has performed in front of eight Frederick County high schools and four middle schools. Next spring, four more middle schools will get the assembly.

"He mixes music with a history of the blues," Norris said. "He talks about the progression of W.C. Handy, the St. Louis Blues, Robert Johnson, and he shows how today's music, from rock 'n' roll, rap and country are all based on the blues."

Jackson, 50, grew up in Chicago the son and grandson of cotton pickers from the south. He doesn't remember Jim Crow, nor did he ever hop on a boxcar, but he heard stories about the cotton-picking experiences of his sharecropper ancestors, and has a thriving blues musical career.

Since 1991, he's been visiting schools from elementary to college to talk about the blues, from its start about 1850 and how it evolved through the years. "I give them the tree branch history about how the music of today came from the blues," he said.

Rock 'n' roll is basically blues to a faster beat, he said. R&B is a mixture of blues and jazz.

He tells the kids blues allows them to express themselves in a way that doesn't tolerate rage or anger. When he's talking to children, he keeps the topics clean. He introduces the youngsters to the music of Leadbelly, the prolific early 20th-century author of "Goodnight Irene" who also wrote many children's songs.

"Leadbelly was the B.B. King of his day," Jackson said. "He was the first blues singer to go mainstream." Among the scores of recognizable songs he wrote is "Rock Island Line."

With the older students, Jackson talks about Delta blues, Chicago blues and St. Louis blues, about Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, and about the evolution of music. Calypso music, for example, metamorphosed into reggae and then into ska.

Fruteland is Jackson's given name. He was named after his grandfather, who spent 70 years of his life as a preacher. "I come from a family of preachers and teachers," he said.

Although his background is in music and theater, he found teaching workshops came naturally. "I give them simple definitions," he said. "Blues is the facts of life expressed musically."

As a child, he wasn't interested in the blues, even though his family played it. "I heard their music, but I was a Motown child," he said. "But the seeds were planted. When you grow older and get your heart broken a couple of times, those simple songs take on new meaning."

Jackson spends about half his time on the Blues in the Schools program, which is funded through grants and fund-raisers including the one at the Raw Bar. He started doing Blues in the Schools back in 1991. When he's not teaching workshops, he's singing the blues. Jackson performs at blues festivals, including the Chicago Blues Festival and the W.C. Handy Blues Festival, and at blues clubs.

He also works with music students. He tells them that the blues are a good way to enter into music performance, because it requires only three chords.

Blues in the Schools has spread to Europe. Jackson has made several trips to France to educate students there about the blues. Blues is very popular in France, he said. He is one of four or five musicians who teach Blues in the Schools.

He started doing the program when asked to talk to college students in Charleston, S.C., in 1991. He put together a lecture on the difference between country blues and city blues, and his new career was born. He estimates he talks to 50,000 students in his workshops annually. Some of his musical workshops are for adults.

"Blues music simply mirrors what's going on in society," he said. During the lectures, Jackson plays a little banjo and mandolin, and introduces the youngsters to the early minstrel songs.

He also suggests that his audiences experiment with listening to different types of music. "I encourage them to listen to public radio," he said. "Do they know what they like, or do they like what they know?"

Jackson has paid his dues in the blues world. He may have an e-mail address and a Web site, but he has earned the respect of other singers. At the last W. C. Handy Awards, sort of the Grammy's of the blues world, Jackson was nominated for best acoustic album. He lost to Buddy Guy, which he thinks is an honor in itself. Jackson won a W. C. Handy Award in 1997 for his participation in Blues in the Schools.

He has co-written a book on the history of the blues and a book on how to play the blues.

At the school programs, Jackson encourages the children to write their own blues song. "I tell them 'Sing about something you know about,'" he said. He helped students at a middle school in Iowa write "The Cold Dry Dog Food Blues," written from the perspective of Sam, the dog belonging to one of the students.

"I woke up this morning,

(When) I heard the front door slam

I found a note,

It was from my dog Sam

He said he was leaving

That he had nothing' to lose

But a real bad case of

Cold Dry Dog Food Blues."