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Students Learn The Blues

By Kate York, kyork@mariettatimes.com

Marietta students have learned many songs in music classes over the years, but today may mark the first time they're learning one that's sole purpose is to be "the kind of song you play sitting on a porch by yourself."

But that's exactly what Chicago blues legend Fruteland Jackson has planned.

Jackson, who is wrapping up a two-week art residency this week at [Marietta Middle School](#), has been teaching more than a dozen middle school students how to play the blues, leading up to a performance Friday night.

For many of the students, the Blues in the Schools after-school workshops have provided their first real exposure to Jackson's kind of music.



Sixth-grader Hannah Beals, 12, already knew how to play the guitar, but not the way she has in the past week.

"Blues sounds different and the way you play it is really different," Beals said. "I think it's a cool thing to listen to because it's what they played in the olden days."

In Monday's workshop, Jackson taught students how to use a slide so they could practice the "poor man's distortion" to create a unique blues sound.

"You hit the note and you give it a little shake," he told students. "It's the way we used to do distortion in the old days before we had boxes that would do it for us."

Jackson has been conducting Blues in the Schools programs across the country since 1992, with more than 50,000 students already participating.

Learning to play music helps students build their self-esteem, fosters self-expression and develops higher-level thinking skills, said Steve Wells, vice president of the Blues, Jazz & Folk Music Society, which coordinated the Blues in the Schools program locally.

"We believe that when you get young people excited about music, you get them excited about life," Wells said. "The power of musical instruction to help students in mathematics, problem solving and critical thinking is well-documented."

The lessons are about teaching concentration as much as music, Jackson said.

“What we’re really trying to do is get the brain to concentrate on something for four or five minutes and not let it go,” he said. “You have to put yourself in a bubble.”

Sixth-grader Summer Erb, 12, who has been learning to play the harmonica, said preparing for Friday’s concert has been a challenge.

“I had never played before,” she said. “It’s hard just getting the notes right.”

The student band will perform Friday at the school before classmates and teachers and again Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Washington State Community College, in a concert open to the public.

The students practiced “Let the Good Times Roll” with their student singer Monday, saving today as a day to learn the song best suited for a performance on a porch, with no audience to entertain.

Cory Louive, 14, an eighth-grader at [Marietta Middle School](#), said he’s nervous about the concert but has gained at least one thing from his time spent learning to play blues on the bass.

He had never been a fan of blues music before, Louive said.

“Now I am,” he said.

●Where: Washington State Community College’s Graham Auditorium.