

\*All About the Blues Series



# A Brief History of Blues in the Schools Programs in Chicago

"TRY, TRUST, and TRIUMPH

## **Blues in the Schools Programs in Chicago A Brief History**

By Fruteland Jackson

[Blues in the Schools](#) (BITS) programs, as defined by the [Blues Foundation](#) of Memphis, Tennessee, are multicultural, interactive music education programs providing students with oral history or music instructions on blues music. BITS education programs promote a deeper appreciation and greater awareness of blues music as an original American art form through lecture/performance workshops or artist-in-residence classroom environments. BITS programs supplement the music curriculum in local school districts by involving the talents, resources, and benefits of established professional artists and teachers with students in social studies, language, arts, music, art, and drama classes.

An artist residency is an interactive, hands-on approach to exposing students to blues music that includes music instruction, oral history lessons, and maintaining a journal or notebook. (Artist residencies may last from one week to a month and end with showcasing the students at school auditoriums or other public places.) The student notebooks contain information on their instruments (maintenance and accessories) and additional relevant information. Students are encouraged to complete a book report. Students learn to play 12 bar blues on acoustic guitar, harmonica, or song. Songwriting workshops are the third option for student involvement. The sponsor is provided a syllabus with goals and a timetable.

Local musicians are enlisted to assist with the final student showcasing. An artist residency program allows students to understand an unexposed part of American culture better. In communities with little racial diversity, extensive interaction with an artist of color will provide an opportunity to break down racial barriers and biases. By working collaboratively to perform new musical skills, students have the opportunity to develop self-esteem, creative thinking, and self-expression.

This program is an opportunity for students better to understand a part of American culture differently from theirs. A mentorship relationship emerges between the presenting artist and the students. The transmission of culture from one generation to the next occurs through oral history and music instructions, culminating in a final showcase performance. Blues in the Schools program offer students an opportunity to participate in an integrated, hands-on learning experience that explores music, language, poetry, and art related to blues music on a deeper level.

## **A Brief History Continued**

Many of the struggles represented in Blues music arise from economic hardship and desire for a better life. Learning about blues music allows students to learn about those social challenges and relate them to similar struggles within their heritage.

During the early 1990s, the at-risk inner-city students in middle school grades became the target group for a school district-wide study in Charleston, S.C., under Ms. Mary Feldman of Charleston, South Carolina. She provided a platform for eight Chicago-based blues artists to hone their presentation skills in the classroom for several years. Since that time BITS, programs have become organized, and the inclusion of teaching standards was adopted. Today, the BITS program's popularity reaches students from all walks of life, class, and background. It prevents violence in our schools and urban inner-city neighborhoods in a program called "trading handguns for harmonicas." BITS programs are presented in juvenile detention facilities rendering positive remedial effects.

The Blues Foundation of Memphis, Tennessee, has established the "Keeping the Blues Alive" award (KBA) to annually recognize individuals whose active support, promotion, and presentation of BITS programs at educational institutions and other venues in the U.S. and abroad. Since the beginning of the 21st century, BITS programs' popularity has blossomed in the US, Canada, and Europe. The Blues Foundation maintains a formal registry on their website for artists and educators who conduct BITS programs.



## Pioneers

"The blues are the roots of all American music" – Willie Dixon



Willie Dixon pioneered Blues the Schools programs in Chicago, Illinois. He is called the "spiritual godfather" of BITS programs. Dixon was an American blues musician, songwriter upright bass player who played with his day's leading guitar players. Dixon was born in 1915 in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He became a composer, producer, session musician, and talent scout for the Chess Recording Company. Willie Dixon did more to define the style and content of amplified Chicago Style

Blues than his contemporaries.

Willie Dixon conducted the first BITS program at the Amos Alonzo Stagg Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois, in 1970. He introduced multi-instrumentalist Lucky Peterson to the students and established *the concept of* music education through BITS programs. Willie Dixon began his program with a *call and response* guiding principle that has become a hallmark ritual opening of Blues in Schools presentations in Chicago in Willie Dixon's remembrance.

Call and Response credo:

(call) Why are we here? (response) To sing and play the Blues.

(call) What is the Blues? (response) The Blues are the facts of life.

(call) Why is the Blues important? (response) The blues are the root, history, and culture of American music.

Willie Dixon established The Blues Heaven Foundation, located in the former Chess Rerecording Company building, Chicago, Illinois. This foundation offers instruction on publishing and copyright law and helps blues musicians and their heirs collect and recover royalties.

Will Dixon wrote such hits as Hootchie Cootchie Man, Wang Dang Doodle, My Babe, The Seventh Son, Back Door Man. I Can't Quit You Baby, Little Red Rooster, Spoonful, and hundreds of other songs Willie Dixon passed away on January 29, 1992.

## Pioneers Continued

Under Willie Dixon's inspiration, the Chicago blues community has produced several BITS program artists who have established their unique approach to presenting BITS programs. Several are recipients of the Blues Foundations, Keeping the Blues Alive award ("KBA"). Other early pioneers of Blues in the Schools programs would follow Willie Dixon's example by broadening the educational component (oral history) with an emphasis on music instruction and production include:

- Dr. Jimmy Lee Tillman is a musician and orchestra director and early pioneer of BITS programs. A protege of Willie Dixon, Dr. Tillman, appeared in a feature story in the Illinois Arts Council Newsletter. He began his BITS program on October 12, 1976, at the Richard Byrd Elementary School. Near the former Cabrini-Green public housing projects in Chicago and later March 23, 1984, Martin Luther King Jr. High School of Chicago. Under Dr. Tillman's direction, students composed songs and produced a studio recording. Dr. Tillman included live blues artists in his presentations, along with visual aids, tapes, and records.



- [Billy Branch](#) is a musician, actor, writer, bandleader, pioneering harmonica techniques to improve fast learning and a stalwart of BITS programs as a protege of Willie Dixon and bandmate for six years. Billy Branch is an award-winning harmonica player and KBA recipient. According to Billy Branch, his BITS programs began in Chicago. Branch gives 1978 as the year his BITS program began. His interactive program emphasizes oral history and music instruction on the harmonica and other instruments involving his band members known as the "Sons of Blues." Billy Branch has presented BITS programs to countless students during his career. The music instruction component of BITS programs was initially piloted by Billy Branch and other Chicago blues musicians at Grant Elementary School in Chicago in 1988.



## Blues in the School Programs Expand

Other artists would emerge in the early 1990s in similar footsteps while refining the programs to include teaching standards, alternative teaching methods, photography, art, and storytelling. This group includes:

- [Frutelnd Jackson](#) is a Chicago native and an acoustic guitarist, oral historian, and storyteller. He began his BITS program in 1992. Jackson presents lectures/performances and artists in residency and is a recipient of the KBA award. Jackson reached his one-millionth student in 2010 Greensboro, N.C.



- [Katherine Davis](#) is a Chicago native and a jazz/blues vocalist. Davis began her classroom BITS programs in the early 1990s. Davis represents blues music from a woman's view, emphasizing vocal instruction, covering the Classic Female Blues Singers' era, and presenting annual student showcases at the Stone Scholastic Academy of Chicago and the Chicago Blues Festival.



- [Fernando Jones](#) is a Chicago native and a blues guitarist and bandleader and music director of blues music at Columbia College, Chicago, IL. He is the founder of Blues Kids of America Blues Camp, held annually to provide music instruction and fellowship to young music students for a week at Columbia College in Chicago. Jones is a KBA recipient.



- [Eric Noden](#) resides in Chicago and has regularly presented BITS programs in the Chicago Public Schools. His BITS program emphasizes music instruction and student showcases. His most notable contributions were at the Stone Scholastic Academy of Chicago and the Chicago Blues Festival. Eric Noden Plays plays guitar and keyboards.



These artists represent a growing corps of Chicago blues artists committed to keeping blues music alive in mainstream generations. Four of the above artists are featured on \*Big City Blues Magazine Feb/March 2001 issue with blues legend David "Honeyboy" Edwards (1915-2011). The Honeyboy Edwards Fund bears his name and supports blues education programs through scholarships.

## **The Chicago Blues Community**

Other significant past and present contributors, facilitators, and educators include Kay Jones, Barbara Turkin, Barry Dolins, Ralph Metcalf Jr., Cookie Taylor, Koko Taylor, Shirley Dixon, Marie Dixon, Bruce Iglauer and Alligator Records, Michael Frank and Earwig Music, Jeneene Brown-Mosley, Debbie Parks, James Fraher, and Sterling Plumpp. Special mention Doug Baz, photographer.

Other contributing artists include Buddy Guy, Roy Hightower, Carl Weathersby, Mose Reutus, Melvin Smith, Nick Charles, Les Getrex, Frank Donaldson, Lurrie Bell, Jimmy Walker, Nellie "Tiger" Travis, Hound Dog' Taylor, Butch Dixon, Twenty-First Century Rhythm and Blues Band, Tyrone Davis, Prince James, Bobby King, James Porter, Inna Melnikov, Bonni" Barrelhouse" McKeown, Eddie Shaw, Fernando Jones Band, Erwin Hefler and the Blues Kids of America.

Other contributing Chicago institutions, contributors, and supporters include Grant Academy, Buddy Guys Legends, Stone Scholastic Academy, Reevis Elementary School, DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago Public Schools, Blues Heaven Foundation, Chicago School of Blues, Nancy Jefferson Alternative School, Columbia College, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago Department of Special Events, Chicago Public Library, Illinois Institute of Technology, City of Chicago Colleges, Urban Gateway, Illinois Arts Council, National Endowment for the Arts and Ford Foundation. There are countless unnamed supporters that space would not allow us to add.



## **The Remedial Effects of BITS and Evaluation**

When students can work with professional artists, it enhances a student's ability to express themselves and learn new skills. BITS programs create opportunities for students to use their innate abilities and talents. BITS programs supplement music education curricula and provide a counterbalance and fun way to channel deep emotions and vent stress or feeling alienated. BITS programs address many of our middle school children's at-risk problems between 3:30 PM and 5:30 PM if left unattended through singing, songwriting, and learning to play instruments. Our goal is to enhance students' aesthetic perception and creative self-expression and develop a sense of musical heritage. The remedial effects of BITS artist residency program:

- Breaks down social barriers. (teaches tolerance)
- Brings about cross-cultural understanding. (past and present)
- Creates Blues culture.
- Prevents violence.
- Develops self-esteem. (removes self-doubt)
- Enhances literacy both academically and socially.
- Enhances student's creativity.
- Helps develop aesthetic judgment.
- Improves school attendance. (decreases dropout rate)
- Increases thinking and problem-solving ability.
- Measures music potential and self-accomplishment.
- Instills a sense of pride.
- Provides career opportunities. (commercial and entertainment industries)
- Provides education and entertainment.
- Valuable teaching tool for students with special needs. (Physically, emotionally, and challenged)
- Works well with students from all walks of life.

BITS programs are evaluated regularly by BITS artists and teaching staff from the student selection to the final student showcase. The student grading includes attendance, active interest, study habits, and practice, and the ability to work towards a common goal in a group setting. These BITS program evaluations have been judged and measured by third-party interest groups and school districts as "making a difference" in student life's social enrichment.