

ALL ABOUT THE BLUES  
SERIES

BLUES IN THE  
SCHOOLS PROGRAMS

A BREIF HISTORY  
OF BLUES IN  
THE SCHOOLS  
IN CHICAGO

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

By Frutelnd 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 as a part of 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 other relevant information.

Students are encouraged to complete a book report. Students learn to play 12-bar blues on acoustic guitar, harmonica, or song. Songwriting writing workshops are the third option for student involvement. The sponsor is provided with a syllabus with goals and a timetable.

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

Blues in the Schools program offers 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. This program allows students to better 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.

## **A Brief History Continued**

Many of the struggles in Blues music arise from economic hardship and the desire for a better life. 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 became the target group for a school district-wide study in Charleston, S.C., under the leadership of 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 then, BITS programs have become organized, and the inclusion of teaching standards has been 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.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, BITS programs' popularity has blossomed in the US, Canada, and Europe.

The Blues Foundation of Memphis, Tennessee, maintains a formal registry on its website for artists and educators who conduct BITS programs. The Foundation has established the "Keeping the Blues Alive" award (KBA) to annually recognize individuals whose active support, commitment, promotion, and presentation of BITS programs at educational institutions and other venues in the U.S. and abroad are acknowledged.

## Pioneers

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



Willie Dixon is a pioneer of Blues the Schools programs in Chicago, Illinois. Dixon was an American blues musician, songwriter upright bass player who played with his day's leading musicians in Blues. He 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 any of 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 in the former Chess Recording Company building in Chicago, Illinois. This Foundation offers publishing and copyright law instruction and helps blues musicians and their heirs collect and recover royalties.

Will Dixon wrote hits such as Hootchie Cootchie Man, Wang Dang Doodle, My Babe, The Seventh Son, Little Red Rooster, Spoonful, and 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, including:

- Dr. Jimmy Lee Tillman is a musician and orchestra director and an early pioneer of BITS programs. A protege of Willie Dixon, Dr. Tillman, appeared in a feature story in the Illinois Arts Council Newsletter, where he began his BITS program on October 12, 1976, at 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 studio recordings. Dr. Tillman included live blues artists in his presentations and visual aids, tapes, and records.



[Billy Branch](#) is a musician, actor, writer, bandleader, and early pioneer of BITS programs. A protege of Willie Dixon, 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. Billy Branch and other Chicago blues musicians at Grant Elementary School in Chicago in 1988 initially piloted the music instruction component of BITS programs.



## 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:

- [Fruteland Jackson](#) is a Chicago native, 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 in 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, a blues guitarist and bandleader, and a 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 is a guitarist and keyboard player. Eric presents BITS programs in Chicago Public Schools emphasizing music instruction and student showcases at the Stone Scholastic Academy of Chicago and the Chicago Blues Festival. Norden has presented BITS workshops and residencies to scores of students in Chicago.



These artists represent a growing corps of Chicago blues artists committed to keeping blues music alive within the mainstream culture for future generations. Four of the above artist are featured on the cover of \*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 to Doug Baz, photographer, NY.

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.

The remedial effects of the BITS artist residency program: 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. We aim to enhance students' aesthetic perception and creative self-expression and develop a sense of musical heritage.

- 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 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. 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. The student grading includes attendance, active interest, study habits, practice, and the ability to work towards a common goal in a group setting.