

# Blues in the Schools Programs

By Frutelard Jackson

(A brief History)

[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 and/or music instructions on blues music. B I T S education programs are designed to create 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 curricula in local school districts by involving the talents, resources and benefits of established professional artists and local teachers. Particularly teachers of social studies, language arts, music, art, dance, and drama classes.

Blues in the Schools *artist in residency* programs offer the opportunity for students to learn about and better understand a part of American culture they are not otherwise exposed to a mentorship relationship is created between the artist and the students and the transmission of culture from one generation to the next takes place with music instructions culminating into a final showcase performance. Blues in the Schools program offers an opportunity for students to participate in an integrated, hands-on learning experience that explores music, language, poetry and art on a deeper level. Some of the struggles that the Blues represent arise from economic hardship and struggle for a better life. Learning about blues music gives students the opportunity to learn about those struggles and relate them to similar struggles of their own heritage.

During the early 1990's more focus was placed upon the *at risk* or *inner-city students* in middle school. As BITS programs became more organized teaching standards were adopted. Today, by popular demand BITS programs have expanded to include students from all walks of life, class and backgrounds. Blues in the Schools programs also have been shown to be an effective tool in preventing violence in our schools and neighborhoods with such programs as *Trading Handguns for Harmonicas* in urban areas. B I T S programs who been presented in juvenile facilities due to its remedial effects.

The [Blues Foundation](#) of Memphis, Tennessee has established the "Keeping the Blues Alive" award (KBA) to recognize individuals who support, promote and present BITS programs at educational institutions and other venues in the US and abroad. Since the beginning of the 21st century the popularity of BITS programs has blossomed in the US, Canada and Europe. The Blues Foundation maintains a formal registry for presenters of these programs.

## Pioneers

The first known organizer of Blues in the Schools programs in Chicago, Illinois was legendary American blues musician and songwriter [Willie Dixon](#) (1915-1992), Willie Dixon was one of the most influential blues artists in the second half of the 20th century. Willie Dixon played the upright bass with most if not all the best blues musicians of his day. He was a prolific composer, producer, arranger, session musician and talent scout. Dixon did more to define the style and content of amplified Chicago Style Blues than any of his contemporaries.



Willie Dixon established the [Blues Heaven Foundation](#) located in Chicago, Illinois, to help blues musicians and their families understand U.S. copyright laws and how to collect or recover royalties from their music. Dixon is heralded as the “spiritual godfather” of Blues in the Schools programs by conducting the first BITS. [Willie Dixon’s BITS](#) program began in 1970 with the world’s first Blues in the Schools presentation at Amos Alonzo Stagg School on Chicago’s south side. Dixon brought blues musicians to the classroom, such as multi-instrumentalist [Lucky Peterson](#) instrumentalist Lucky Peterson, establishing the concept of music education through BITS programs. Dixon’s classroom workshop’s call and response introduction are still heard in many BITS programs today: Call and Response

Why are we hear? To sing and play the Blues.

What is the Blues? The Blues are the facts of life.

Why is the Blues important? It is the root, history and culture of American music.

Under Dixon’s inspiration Chicago’s blues community has produced many BITS program presenters, supporters and promoters as well as recipients of the [Blues Foundations](#) “KBA” award .

Other early pioneers and presenters of Blues in the Schools programs would follow Willie Dixon’s example that would broaden the educational component (history) with an emphasis on music instruction, production and oral history include:

[Dr. Jimmy Lee Tillman](#), musician (percussion) and orchestra director and early pioneer of BITS programs. Dr. Tillman appeared in a feature story in the Illinois Arts Council Newsletter where he began HIS BITS program October 12 ,1976 at the Richard Byrd Elementary School (first pilot 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 made a studio recording. Dr. Tillman included live blues artists in his presentations along with visual aids, tapes and records.

[Billy Branch](#) is a BITS pioneer in Chicago. He is a musician (harmonica) and bandleader. Branch is a Grammy Nominee, Blues Music Award and [KBA recipient](#). According to Billy Branch his BITS programs began in Chicago. Branch gives [1978](#) as when his BITS program was conceived. His interactive program emphasizes oral history and music instruction on the harmonica and other instruments involving his band members the [“Sons of Blues”](#).

The music component of BITS programs was 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 1990's in similar footsteps while refining the programs to include teaching standards, alternative teaching methods, photography, art and storytelling. This group includes:

[Fruteland Jackson](#) is an acoustic guitarist. He began his BITS program in 1992. Jackson presents lecture/performance as well as artist-in-residencies. Jackson is a [KBA recipient](#).



[Katherine Davis](#) a Jazz/blues vocalist. Davis entered the classroom in the early 1990's. Davis held a perspective of blues from a women point of view with an emphasis on vocal instruction and student showcases at [Stone Scholastic Academy](#) of Chicago and [The Chicago Blues Festival](#) and in Charleston, SC.

\*[Fernando Jones](#) is a Blues artist. He is founder of Blues Kids of America. Blues Camp held annually to provide music instruction and fellowship to young music students for a week free of charge held at Columbia College in Chicago. Jones is a [KBA recipient](#).

[Eric Noden](#) is a Blues artist. BITS programs around the country with an emphasis on Jug Band music instruction and student showcases at [Stone Scholastic Academy of Chicago](#) and [The Chicago Blues Festival](#).

These artists represent a growing corps of Chicago blues artist who are committed to keeping blues music alive within the mainstream culture for future generations. Some of the aforementioned artist were featured on the cover of a [\\*Big City Blues Magazine Feb/March 2001](#) issue along 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 (retired), Ralph Metcalf Jr., Cookie Taylor, [KoKo Taylor](#), Shirley Dixon, Marie Dixon, [Bruce Iglauer](#), [Michael Frank](#) (Earwig Music Company Founder), Jeneene Brown-Mosley, Debbie Parks, James Fraher, and [Sterling Plumpp](#).

Other contributing artist include: [Buddy Guy](#), Roy the Rhute Doktor 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, [David "Honeyboy" Edwards](#), Bonni "Barrelhouse" McKeown, [Eddie Shaw](#), Erwin Hefler.

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 Public Library](#), [Illinois Institute of Technology](#), City of Chicago Colleges, Urban Gateway, [Illinois Arts Council](#), [National Endowment for the Arts](#) and [Ford Foundation](#).

## **The Programs**

Blues-in-the-Schools programs are presented primarily through lecture/performances or artist residencies (music instructions). The use of visual arts (art, photography and dance in combination with BITS programs). Also, any blues performance that exposes students to blues music for the first time fits a basic definition of BITS program.

Through song, lecture and discussion, high school and middle school students will *travel back in time* to search the roots of this music and its impact on the world. Its historical importance and cultural significance will be explored and celebrated. Blues music will be introduced. A lecture /performance is designed to reach the greatest number of students. It may include the origins of blues music from its early beginnings including field hollers, work songs, etc., to its current popularity is discussed in a class period or one-hour program that includes Q and A and a singing workshop. Basic definitions of blues music are provided and biographical information on individuals who performed or helped blues music to develop and evolve. Lecture/performances are tailored for classroom activity or in conjunction with other programs or school curriculum, e. g., history, social studies, music, etc.

B I T S programs presented in an artist residency environment provides an alternative approach to education providing discipline, tolerance, self-esteem, self-confidence and the ability to work in a group setting for common goal. Blues in the schools is a powerful force to help young people thrive during early adolescence by stimulating their intellectual skills and talents and increasing their motivation and focus. Also, satisfying emotional needs that students no longer feel alienated and absenteeism at school diminishes.

An artist residency is an interactive hand on approach to exposing students to blues music using music instruction and history lessons. Artist residencies may last from two weeks to a month and usually ends showcasing the students at school auditoriums, civic centers or music festivals. Students maintain a notebook (journal). The notebooks contain information on their respective instruments (maintenance and accessories) Students learn to play a 12-bar blues on guitar, harmonica or through song. Students who prefer not to play an instrument may attend songwriting- workshops.

## The Remedial Effects of BITS and Evaluation

Presenters of BITS programs have learned that the opportunity to work with professional artists enhances a student's ability to express themselves and learn new skills. Blues in the schools programs creates opportunity for students to use their innate abilities and talents. These programs supplement music education curricula as well as providing a counter balance and fun way to channel deep emotions and venting stress or feeling alienated. B I T S programs address many of the problems facing our middle school children Through the use of song, songwriting and learning to play instruments, we endeavor to enhance a student's aesthetic perception and creative self-expression and a sense of musical heritage. Other remedial effects and benefits include:

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

BITS programs are evaluated on an ongoing basis by management from the selection of the students to the final student showcase. Student grade level, teaching standards, attendance and the ability of students to reach a common goal in a group setting are monitored. An organized B I T S program conducted and tested in [Charleston](#) and [Columbia, South Carolina](#) and other cities have created a template for monitoring has won praise across the country student progress under the directorship of Mary T Feldman in 1993 who specifically targeted Chicago blues musicians to implement her program. These evaluations were praised as "making a difference" in the social enrichment of student lives.



*Harmonicas*

*Blues in the Schools Artist Residencies*



*Trading Handguns for Harmonicas Program*