

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 curricula in local school districts by involving the talents, resources, and benefits of established professional artists and local teachers, particularly, social studies, language, arts, music, art, and drama classes.

A Blues in the Schools artist in residency programs offers students the opportunity to learn and better understand a part of American culture different 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 into 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 as it relates to blues music on a deeper level. The struggles that are represented in Blues music arise from economic hardship and a struggle 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 or 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, who provided a platform for BITS presenters to hone their skills. BITS programs became organized, and teaching standards were adopted. Today, by popular demand, BITS programs have expanded to include students from all walks of life, class, and background. Blues in the Schools programs also are a valuable tool in preventing violence in our schools and neighborhoods with such programs as Trading Handguns for Harmonicas in urban areas. 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 recognize individuals whose active support, promotion, and presentation of BITS programs at educational institutions and other venues in the U.S. 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 program in Chicago, Illinois, was a 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. He played the upright bass with the leading blues musicians of his day. He was a prolific composer, producer, session musician, and talent scout. He worked at the Chess Recording Studio. 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, in the former Chess Rerecording Company building; 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, including multi-instrumentalist Lucky Peterson, establishing the concept of music education through BITS programs. Dixon's classroom workshop's call and response introduction are still the cornerstones of Chicago BITS programs today.

Call and Response:

Why are we here? 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, Keeping the Blues Alive award ("KBA"). Other early pioneers and presenters of Blues in the Schools programs would follow Willie Dixon's example that would broaden the educational component (oral history) with an emphasis on music instruction, production, and oral history, 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, where 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 and 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." Branch has presented BITS programs to countless students during his career. The music instruction 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 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 an acoustic guitarist, oral historian, and storyteller. He began his BITS program in 1992. Jackson presents lecture/performances as well as artist 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 jazz/blues vocalist. Davis began her classroom BITS programs in the early 1990s. Davis represents a perspective of blues music from a woman's view, emphasizing vocal instruction, covering the era of the Classic Female Blues Singers, and presenting student showcases at the Stone Scholastic Academy of Chicago and the Chicago Blues Festival.
- [Fernando Jones](#) is a Blues guitarist and bandleader and music director 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](#) is a Blues artist and presents BITS programs in Chicago, 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. Some BITS program presenters are featured on the cover of *Big City Blues Magazine Feb/March 2001 issue and 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 Plump.

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, Erwin Hefler.

Other contributing Chicago institutions, contributors, and supporters include Grant Academy, Buddy Guys Legends, Stone Scholastic Academy, Reeves 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, workshops, or artist residency. Also, any blues performance that exposes students to blues music for the first time fits a BITS program's basic definition.

Through singing, lecture, and discussion, high school and middle school students will travel back in time to explore the roots of this music and its impact on the world. The historical importance of blues music is discussed in a lecture /performance, which reaches the most students. It may include blues music from its early beginnings, including field hollers, work songs, and other subjects in a class period or one-hour. This program 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. The lecture/performances are tailored for a classroom activity or in conjunction with other programs or school curricula that include history, social studies, and music.

BITS 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 a 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 whereby students no longer feel alienated and absenteeism in the school classroom is diminished.

An artist residency is an interactive, hands-on approach to exposing students to blues music using music instruction and history lessons. Artist residencies may last from two weeks to a month, finishing with a showcasing of the participating students at school auditoriums, civic centers, or music festivals. Students are encouraged to maintain a notebook. The notebooks contain information on their respective instruments, including maintenance and buying tips 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

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 the problems facing our middle school children. Through singing, songwriting, and learning to play instruments, we endeavor to enhance students' aesthetic perception and creative self-expression, and a sense of musical heritage. BITS remedial effects and benefits:

- 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 the 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 mentally 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 3rd party interest groups and school districts as " making a difference" in the social enrichment of student life.