



The Rich Heritage of Blues Motivates the Next Generation

By Anita Havens

As a fourth-grade language arts teacher and blues author, I have seen first-hand what a wonderful tool blues music and history can be to motivate young readers, especially reluctant ones.

When I published *That's Why We Sang the Blues* back in 2011, I shared a couple of the blues poems and authentic 1930s photographs with the students in my Mississippi history class. They were so fascinated with the old pictures and poetry they begged to stay beyond class time to recite them. I borrowed a karaoke machine, and we began to record. I gave up my planning period and they gave up their recess for the remainder of the year, about 10 weeks, and we recited, sang and recorded. I saw confidence build in these kids and their grades started to soar. You can visit their website at <http://poetrykids.webs.com> and hear them recite the poems.

I took an especially talented group to recite at the local fine arts fair. We also performed at the Double Decker Festival on the Oxford Square, and one child was invited to recite "Memories" for a group of visiting professors at the University of Mississippi. Their scores on the end-of-year state assessment (MCT) went up dramatically – some an entire level.

The school librarian was aware of my new approach, and found a workshop at the B. B. King Museum in Indianola, offered by the Mississippi Arts Commission, called "Mississippi Blues Trail Curriculum." According to its co-author Scott Barretta, "the curriculum is an 18-lesson plan that builds upon the content on the Mississippi Blues Trail markers, of which there are now more than 180. Each of the markers has more than 500 words of text, and the curriculum complements the specific information about

Davion and the Mississippi Cotton Blossoms recite from That's Why We Sang the Blues at the Oxford High School Fine Arts Fair. From left to right: Tanyah Milan, Layvoinna Mayweather, Znya Kihei, Davion Hall, Shanitra Bowen and Kiana Burt
Photo by Anita Havens

artists and locations. It does so by focusing on broader themes that connect many of the markers, including cotton, transportation and civil rights."

Barretta teaches a blues course at the University of Mississippi and hosts an award-winning radio show, *Highway 61*, also produced in Oxford. According to Barretta, "Dr. Mark Malone, a professor of music at William Carey University, contributed the content concerning technical issues about music, identified how the lessons fit into teachers' standardized testing requirements, and created exercises at the end of each lesson." The Mississippi Blues Trail Curriculum is free online at: www.msbluestrail.org/curriculum.

The Cincy Blues Society was one of the first to offer a Blues in the Schools (BITS) program in 1990. Chuck Brisbin is the coordinator for the program, whose main mission is to keep the blues alive. According to Brisbin, the BITS presentations by professional musicians last from 45-60 minutes. "In our presentations, we cover the history of blues; came over from Africa, settled in the Delta, moved to Chicago, then Texas, etc. Our presentations have grown in number over the last two years. 2014 totaled about 30 presentations...We also have a 'BITS band,' which is made up of students ranging from middle school to high school ages. These kids perform in Cincinnati, OH, at August Cincy Blues Fest and February's Winter Blues Fest." According to Brisbin, the band also performs in other places, totaling about eight events for 2014.

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Many blues artists are also dedicated to keeping the blues alive. Tas Cru was a 2014 recipient of the Keeping the Blues Alive award presented by The Blues Foundation in Memphis, for his work in blues education. He said, "To me, there is nothing more important that I do as a blues performer than blues education... Children in schools throughout the globe learn about their culture's artistic heritage and creative achievements. American children deserve to know about their culture's rich musical heritage that is the blues, and how the world has embraced it as a creative art form...I am blessed to have had so many opportunities to work with young and old across the country as we educate each other about what it is that makes us love the blues."

I am working with a former teacher and blues artist from the United Kingdom, Harmonica Dave Hunt. I will be writing the lyrics for his next few CDs, and we plan to involve my class in the writing process, the technology involved, and have them join on a YouTube recording or two. They are bubbling over with anticipation.

If you love the blues as I have come to, keeping it alive for future generations is important, maybe even an obsession. Keeping a thing alive involves teaching children to love and appreciate it. I have yet to encounter a child who does not absolutely love blues. However, there are far too many who have never heard a note of it played, even here in Mississippi.

"Education," Malcolm X wrote, "is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

I believe that America is ready for a music revolution. So, let it begin with our children, and let it end with the blues reigning supreme! Make a commitment today to educate at least one child about the blues! 🎵

Anita Havens is a fourth-grade teacher and author in Oxford, Mississippi, whose latest book, *That's Why We Sang the Blues*, is a collection of 1930s photographs of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Her grandfather was a sharecropper and Cherokee Indian, and she grew up hearing stories about the hard life that led to the birth of the blues.



Kiana Burt reads beside a blues marker at the Ole Miss campus in Oxford, MS
Photo by Anita Havens

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