



Study Guide  
Introduction to the Blues  
Alabama Blues Project

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Artistic Genre: Music

Performing Artists:  
Debbie Bond  
Rick Asherson  
accompanied by a Blues Band

# Alabama Touring Artist Program

presented by the Alabama State Council on the Arts

This Study Guide has been prepared for you by the Alabama State Council on the Arts in collaboration with the performing artist. Much of the vocabulary that is arts related is taken directly from the Alabama Course of Study, Arts Education. With an understanding that each teacher is limited to the amount of time that may be delegated to new ideas and subjects, this guide is both brief and designed in a way that we hope supports your school curriculum. We welcome feedback and questions, and will offer additional consulting on possible curriculum connections and unit designs should you desire this support. Please feel free to request further assistance and offer your questions and feedback. Hearing from educators helps to improve our programs for other schools and educators in the future.

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## Set up:

Artists typically arrive 60 minutes before their scheduled performance in order to set up. Please have the space available to the artist as soon as she arrives.

All artists will need some kind of setup prior to arrival. Please communicate with the artist to discuss needs. Before arrival, please make sure floors are clean, and any electrical hook ups are in place for the artist. If she has asked to use your amplification system, please have it ready for a sound test as soon as the artist arrives. Please provide a staff person to assist the artist with set up.

## Role of the Audience:

Although many students may not choose to pursue professional careers in the arts, many will choose to remain lifelong participants in, and learners of, the arts. A role that all students may play is that of an appreciative, responsive audience member. This role is one that has lifelong value to the learner as well as to the performer. Learning appropriate audience behavior is an integral component of all of the arts education areas. Positive audience qualities are part of the overall goal of *Achieving Excellence Through Arts Literacy*.

- Alabama Course of Study: Arts Education;  
2006

**What your students should know:**

Appropriate audience behavior includes sitting still and being very quiet during the performance. Audiences clap at the end of particular sections of the performance, or when they see something amazing that they want to tell the performer they really like. If a performer takes a bow, that is always a time to clap. You should not clap to music unless the performer asks you to clap. It is never appropriate to talk during a performance, unless in this instance the artist asks a question. We ask teachers and students to practice these rules of performance etiquette during the Alabama Touring Program productions.

**What to expect**

“Introduction to the Blues” is a 45 - 60 minute interactive musical presentation. Blues musician Debbie Bond leads her band in an educational performance that traces the history of the blues, from its roots in Africa and slavery times to the electric blues of the 1950s and beyond. While seated, the students will be asked to participate in singing, clapping and other percussion and a some students may be selected to “join the band” and perform songs.

### **Historical Background:**

The blues has its roots in West African culture and was created by people of African descent in the Southern states of the USA at the end of the nineteenth century. The influence of African music in the US, brought over by the slaves, survived through slavery and Reconstruction. Later it evolved to include many styles, from acoustic country blues to modern electric urban blues.

Before the Civil War, slaves struggled to keep their music alive. Native languages, African instruments and native religions were almost universally banned on Southern plantations. African melodic and rhythmic structures survived, however, through Christian spirituals and work songs. Call and response patterns used in the blues are also rooted in music traditions. All these influences greatly informed the creation of the blues and they continue to influence many musical styles today.

In post-slavery times, economically challenged African Americans with few personal possessions continued to expand their musical traditions. They created many home-made instruments, such as the “didley bo,” a one-stringed instrument, played by sliding a glass bottle along a wire. This simple instrument formed the early basis of modern slide or bottle-neck guitar playing. Other homemade instruments created from everyday household items included washboards, jugs, washtubs, washtub basses and cowbells.

Acoustic, “Country Style” blues music, created using home-made and other instruments, evolved all over the South, through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and beyond. With the Great Migration, the blues moved to Northern cities like Chicago and Detroit and became urbanized and electrified. The blues became the roots of many, if not most, American styles of popular music and impacted jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll, as well as country, rap, and hip hop.

Alabama has a rich blues history stemming back just as far as our neighboring Mississippi. Numerous important blues musicians come from Alabama, including Big Mama Thornton, Dinah Washington and W.C. Handy.



### Websites you might visit:

1. [www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom.html](http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom.html) : blues-oriented teaching materials, including background history, lesson plans and more.
2. [www.allmusic.com/album/big-blues-blues-music-for-kids-mw0000074788](http://www.allmusic.com/album/big-blues-blues-music-for-kids-mw0000074788) : child-friendly blues songs from
3. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxoGvBQtjpM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxoGvBQtjpM) : Big Mama Thornton (from Alabama) singing “Hound Dog” - a big hit for her 4 years before Elvis Presley’s version

### Curriculum Connections:

1. Music Education: correlate music in relation to history and culture
2. Music Education: understanding and performing rhythm patterns
3. Social Studies: describe the culture of African slaves in America

### Vocabulary:

1. **The Blues** - A style of music that originated in African American communities in the South of the United States around the end of the 19th century. It evolved as a fusion of African music and European folk traditions, incorporating spirituals, work songs and ballads. It is characterized by the call and response pattern, the blues scales and chord progressions, of which the twelve bar format is common. The blues is considered one of the first, and possibly unique, truly original American art forms. It is the roots of much of contemporary popular American music, including rock and roll, jazz, soul, country and rap.
2. **Call and Response** - A style of singing in which a melody is sung and responded to by one or more singers or players.
3. **Beat** - Pulse of the music.
4. **Rhythm** - Term that denotes the organization of sound in time; the temporal quality of sound.
5. **Measure** - Group of beats containing a primary accent and one or more secondary accents, indicated by the placement of bar lines on the staff.

6. **Syncopation** – shifting of the accent, by stressing normally unaccented beat or beats
7. **Backbeat of the blues:** a rhythm with four beats to each bar, with the emphasis on the second and fourth beats - 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4
8. **Bo Diddly Rhythm:** a five accent syncopated rhythm within a 4 count bar, named for blues artist Bo Diddley (1955). In its simplest form, the Bo Diddley beat can be counted out as a one-**bar** phrase as follows: **One** e and **ah**, two e **and** ah, three e **and** ah, **four** e and ah. The **bolded** counts are the accented beats.
9. **The Great Migration** - The Great Migration was a large movement of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West from 1916 through the sixties, which had a huge impact on urban life in the United States. Driven from their rural homes by unsatisfactory economic opportunities and harsh segregation laws, millions moved to cities like New York and Chicago looking for better opportunities. Unfortunately, migrants often faced poor working conditions and widespread prejudice in the North too.
10. **Sharecropping:** After the abolition of slavery, sharecropping emerged as the main system of farming on southern plantations. Both black and white farmers rented small plots of land to grow crops in return for a portion of what they grew, usually fifty percent, paid to the land owner. The system was often exploitative, keeping sharecroppers locked in a cycle of debit and poverty.

### **Suggested Activities to do before the performance:**

1. To provide context: Find the location of Africa on the map. Discuss the enormous diversity and rich culture of this continent and its more than 50 individual countries. Look at the route sailing ships must have taken from the West coast of Africa to get to the southern states of the USA.
2. Research the system of sharecropping throughout the southeastern states at the time the blues was born, which is generally thought to be a period between the end of the 19th Century and the start of the 20th Century. Discuss the cultural and economic features of those times and collect details about the living conditions of the sharecroppers.

3. Ask students to find out from their parents or grandparents what music they enjoyed from their childhood and after they became adults. Did they know about the blues and any particular blues artists in their communities? Find out if music was important to them and why? Share stories with classmates.
4. Research one or more of the important blues musicians from Alabama, such as Vera Hall, Ed Bell, Big Mama Thornton, Johnny Shines, Eddie Kirkland and Willie King, to name a few! Share interesting details about their lives with classmates.
5. Research W. C. Handy, the “Father of the Blues” who was born in Florence, AL. Discuss why W. C. Handy was named the Father of the Blues.

**Suggested activities to do after the performance:**

1. Conduct writing projects on a blues music theme. For example:
  - Write a blues song/poem in the blues format AAB. It may help to suggest a theme for the song/poem
  - Write a story about a traveling blues musician
  - Write a short essay about how blues music makes you feel
2. Create music (A music specialist will enhance these activities, but any teacher may lead these activities, especially with support from the internet – see suggested links above.)
  - Sing a blues song, perhaps one the students write themselves
  - Practice the backbeat of the blues and the Bo Diddley rhythm (see vocabulary). Try improvising rhythms, perhaps to the measure of each students name.
3. Create Visual Art:
  - Create a drawing or painting using a blues theme, such as illustrating a performing blues musician, or creating an art guitar. Include details in your artwork that you learned about during our performance. Write an artist statement explaining why you created this artwork the way you did?
  - Create an abstract work of art that reflects the pattern and timing of a blues rhythm (using the length of line or size of objects to illustrate time and pattern).

4. Conduct a research project on a well-known Alabama blues musician to be presented with images, music and details about the musician's life and style of music. Be sure to include why you believe this musician is so important to our Alabama history.
5. Include the story of the blues to enhance an exploration of the Great Migration. As millions of people left the southern states to go north, taking their working skills and music with them, explore how the music may have changed as people found better work, electricity, bigger audiences and more fame.

**Reflective Questions to explore with students:**

1. Now that you know more about "The Blues", why do you think this style of music is called "The Blues?"
2. Why do you think plantation owners allowed the slaves to sing, and to play music, when they were not allowed to keep other parts of their African culture?
3. What music do you like to listen to? What is it about that music that makes you want to listen to it? Can you describe the beat, the melody, the words that interest you?
4. How did the music ("The Blues") in today's performance make you feel? How is it different from other music you know? How is it similar? How does all music make you feel?
5. How might you create your own instruments to create blues music?
6. You learned today that even though slaves had very few possessions, they were still able to create wonderful music. Do you think that is still possible today? Is it possible for people to create new music in our time even if they have very little money? How would they go about it? What could they do? What supports exist in our own culture that could help someone become musicians?

7. Where do you hear music today? How and where and with whom have you experienced listening to music or even making your own music? How do you think opportunities for experiencing music today are similar to the opportunities people had to listen and play music during the birth of “the blues.” How do you think our times are different?

**Finally:** If you are looking for a writing assignment we love getting letters from students. Especially those that answer some of these questions.