

For some kids, blues are pretty cool news

By Sean D. Hamill
Tribune staff reporter

After listening to pianist Barrelhouse Chuck, 3rd grader Kailey Dreyfus wondered why she never had heard about the blues.

"I didn't know any of those famous ... names, like [Clarence] 'Frogman' Henry and Leroy Carr," said Kailey, 9, a pupil at Braeside Elementary School in Highland Park. "It was like they were keeping a secret from us."

During a two-week program that culminates with a blues festival Friday at the school, Kailey and 260 schoolmates in kindergarten through 5th grade played, sang and learned about the blues.

The program is the idea of Steven Dolins, owner of The Sirens Records blues label. His daughter is a 2nd grader at Braeside.

Dolins had heard about a similar program at a Chicago school and wanted to bring blues education to his daughter's school.



Tribune photo by Jim Robinson

Barrelhouse Chuck performs at Braeside School in Highland Park Wednesday as part of a blues education program.

"This is a well-to-do neighborhood, where you don't hear much blues and where even my daughter, who hears blues all the time, mostly listens to Britney Spears," said Dolins, who also works full-time as a

computer science professor at Bradley University in Peoria.

"But growing up, I knew about these guys ... and I thought maybe we could bring

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some of that here."

He took his idea to Braeside music teacher Linda Sayers, who thought it was perfect for her school. She rounded up \$2,400 from the Illinois Arts Council, the Braeside PTO, and the community group Yeah Highland Park to fund the program.

"There's just something about blues that's easy for kids to respond to," said Sayers, who is on maternity leave.

Her substitute, Virginia Sandstrom, said the pupils responded well, making it easier to introduce the cultural part of the lesson.

"What I see it doing for the kids is giving them a foundation and showing them the roots of American music," she said.

Last week the Braeside students learned from blues guitarist Eric Noden, who plays primarily jug band music and country blues guitar. The students played along with spoons, a washboard, even a washtub bass.

Barrelhouse Chuck, whose name is Chuck Goering, kept eight 30-minute classes enthralled Wednesday by teaching tunes like "Ain't Got No Home" and "How Long, How Long Blues."

"I was very glad no one was trying to tell me about rap music compared to the blues," said Goering, who lives in Libertyville. "The kids took it all in. It's like they aren't spoiled by the garbage [music] of today."

He also discussed the history of some blues artists, including Carr, Albert "Sunnyland Slim" Luandrew and Surreal "Little Brother" Montgomery.

Invariably, after he explained most were dead, a small hand would shoot up and a 3rd grader would ask: "What did he die of?"

The question prompted a stark answer from Goering, since many died from alcohol problems or drug overdoses.

"It's a very damaging thing to do," he said. "It kills you."

Bleak, maybe, but part of the blues.

"I didn't know about the blues before, but I really like it," said Samantha Goldman, 9, a 3rd grader. "I listen mostly to pop music, but I might try to get some [blues albums]. I liked the songs."