
BLUES MUSIC
Online
DEBBIE BOND
&
The Alabama Blues Project
Seven Album Reviews Included

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WILLIE KING & THE LIBERATORS - © ROBERT SUTTON

DEBBIE BOND

By Art Tipaldi

- PHOTOGRAPHY © ADAM KENNEDY

Ask any blues fans to name the important blues locales and they will rattle off Mississippi, Texas, and Chicago. Debbie Bond has spent the better part of her adult life championing Alabama's blues roots. Her support of its people and places essential to the growth of the blues has opened the eyes of Blues Nation. Her founding of the Alabama Blues Project in 1995 has been the driving force behind her mission. But that is not all Debbie is about. She is an accomplished musician who has worked with Alabama's finest blues royalty, Johnny Shines, Eddie Kirkland, Little Whit and Big Bo, and most importantly Willie King. In addition, her nearly 20-year marriage to Rick Asherson has shared the Alabama blues legacy around the world. Her current release, *Blues Without Borders*, is a journey through the various musics Debbie has experienced. There is much to ponder and search out in Debbie's detailed observations.

Art Tipaldi: When did you first discover the blues?

Debbie Bond: I first heard the blues with I was about 11 years old in Sierra Leone, West Africa. My mother was a cultural anthropologist, doing her field research there. Besides stunning African music, Sierra Leoneans were listening to American blues and soul, and I heard it that way. I was blown away by this exposure to great music. Even at my school, they brought in the most amazing bands to play the end of term celebrations. WOW! I was hooked.

I got my first guitar when I was 13 and played my first performance on Sierra Leone TV - *The Go Go Show*. It was 1969 and their equivalent of *Soul Train*. There was only one TV station in the whole country. When I went into town to the market, little kids would joyfully run after me shouting, "Go Go Show!" Very fun first and last experience of that kind of fame! I first heard Wilson Picket and Percy Sledge there and ended up here in Alabama, near Muscle Shoals where that music was made. Strange how life works.

Art Tipaldi: Who were the first blues artists you were listening to?

Debbie Bond: I wasn't so conscious of distinctions between soul and blues. I wasn't even aware at the time who it was I was listening to. It was later, in England that I got to hear some American blues live and heard much more recorded music. I was in my first band there, we played R&B, and I was a background vocalist. My guitar-slinging boyfriend at the time, when I first attended university, had an extraordinary knowledge of American music, including blues and soul, and a record collection to match.

He gave me cassette tapes with loads of great American music to check out. I hung out in the amazing record stores at that time where you could listen to records before you bought them. I also heard Howlin' Wolf, Johnny Shines, and a lot of soul like Jean Knight, Shirley Brown, Dorothy Moore, and more. I also listened to the rocking/psychedelic blues of Jimi Hendrix (who died there in England when I was a teenager) and Janis Joplin.

We also went out to hear live music – B.B. King, Johnny "Guitar" Watson, and more. I loved this music. He also introduced me to Bonnie Raitt's music and took me to see her live in London at the Hammersmith Odeon. I was truly in love with this music and deeply touched by these experiences. It is only over time that I became more educated about blues history and who people were. I am certainly still learning.

I got to Alabama when I was 22, in 1979, really by accident, and I met Johnny Shines. I played him a cassette recording of my band, and he took me under his wing. He was very sweet and completely encouraging. My band, The Kokomo Blues Band, backed him locally, off and on (he was also gigging with Kent Duchane and a band with his new wife, Candy Martin Shines, and others) through the last ten years of his life. We played with Johnny on the last gig he ever played, at Tuscaloosa's "The Chukker," a local, storied dive.

- PHOTOGRAPHY © BRAD HARDISTY

Art Tipaldi: What was it about the blues that spoke to you?

Debbie Bond: I was hit by this powerful emotional music that came out of horrifically hard times, created by people of African decent here in America, coming out of conditions of slavery, later share cropping, violence, racism and injustice. If you don't feel the blues, you indeed have a hole in your soul. Without going into personal details, I had my own heartaches and demons to contend with and the blues helped me. Playing music soothed my soul and still does, while the funky grooves grabbed me and made me want to move.

I probably was mentored longest by the late, great Willie King. Willie called his blues "struggling blues." He said it was sent down to be a healing force, medicine for the soul. Willie demonstrated the power of intimately sharing our stories through the blues, helping us transcend and connect in our common humanity. Something so needed, more than ever.

Art Tipaldi: When did you first pick up your instrument?

Debbie Bond: I came from a musical family. My Dad was a preacher and, prior to their split, my mother sang and led the church choir. My mother said I sang before I talked. My dad's mother was a singer. After my parents divorced, our lives changed dramatically. Suddenly, our house was always full of people from all over the world. Parties were jam sessions. We had a piano, African drums, and people brought instruments. I played some piano but got my first guitar age 13, an acoustic one, and was hooked. At first, I played English, Irish, and early American folk music. I tried to play some blues, took a while to feel like I was getting somewhere with that!

DEBBIE BOND WITH WILLIE KING & THE LIBERATORS - PHOTOGRAPHY © DICK WATERMAN

Art Tipaldi: Can you explain the effect traveling with your mother to Africa had on your musical awakening?

Debbie Bond: Well, I think I touched on that above. Music was so much more part of daily life in Sierra Leone, and it really affected me. I remember going to jam with kids in the neighborhood I lived in. Everyone sat around in the compound and jammed on whatever we could get our hands on. Getting to hear wonderful live singing, harmonizing, bands with horns and electric guitars. High Life music was the popular West African style at the time for electric bands. Seeing the most amazing and wonderful dancing for the first time moved me too. I loved to dance! It was so freeing. I felt really free when I as part of that. My mother remarried a West African. He came to live with us in England and the influence of this culture continued. I was blessed by these experiences.

Art Tipaldi: How were those early experiences influential in your decades of work promoting blues and its artists.

Debbie Bond: From living in West Africa, I felt I had seen firsthand the connection between Africa and the blues. Also, how extraordinarily unaware Americans were about the rich diversity of African culture, language, music, and history. When I also saw how tragically overlooked Alabama's blues history was, I founded the Alabama Blues Project to do something about it!

We developed a blues curriculum and history lessons that always started with

SHAR BABY WITH DEBBIE BOND - PHOTOGRAPHY © ROBIN McDONALD

African roots. Despite the massive repression and suppression of African culture in the U.S., it still survived in food, language, visual arts, and music. It is so obvious to me – the Alabama Blues Project forced me to try to learn how to express that a little. I just couldn't believe why this Alabama blues music and history was – and is - so overlooked!

Despite all of this, the blues culture here continues to thrive beneath the radar. Thankfully, over time it is slowly becoming more recognized. Our "Blues in the Schools" programs always featured a traditional Alabama blues artist, like Eddie Kirkland, Sam Lay, Willie King, Carroline Shines (Johnny Shines' daughter), Shar Baby, Earl "Guitar" Williams and so many more! Alabama blues musicians have rarely received the recognition they deserve. I am very thankful for the efforts of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, our blues societies, the Blues Foundation, and so many more for supporting us in these efforts to support the states overlooked blues culture.

Musicians play the blues because they have to – this is the indigenous music from this region – and Alabama blues, past and present is a testimony to that fact.

Art Tipaldi: How are those experiences still guiding your mission.

Debbie Bond: I have been interviewing and collecting information on Alabama blues for 40 years. I am very driven to write what could still be the first book on the subject. If the pandemic continues and I can't gig, that's my next goal.

I guess being the daughter of a cultural anthropologist had its effect! I kind of rebelled against academia and wanted to make culture, not study it. But that urge is there

RACHEL EDWARDS AND DEBBIE BOND - PHOTOGRAPHY © ROBIN McDONALD

and I hope I am blessed enough to bring it to fruition. I am thankful to have passed the torch on and the Alabama Blues Project is thriving and continues the mission with an all African-American staff.

Art Tipaldi: In blues there is always such a deep focus on the roots in Mississippi, Texas, Chicago and other locales. Can you tell our readers about the importance of Alabama's blues roots.

Debbie Bond: I think I touched on this above. I cannot over-emphasize the unfortunate effects of the spin doctoring around Mississippi blues origins.

Mississippi deserves massive attention for its rich blues culture, and there are many books, articles, films, and museums celebrating Mississippi blues. But the story of the blues isn't one man inventing it on a front porch on a Mississippi plantation somewhere on the Delta and passing it on from there; it's much more interesting and complicated. For example, when the icon of Mississippi blues, Robert Johnson, made his musical breakthrough, he didn't simply sell his soul at the crossroads. It turns out he was woodshedding with a blues musician called Ike Zinnerman, who came from the Wiregrass region of Alabama!

All the southeastern states were important, including Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, North and South Carolina. Like perhaps all cultural developments, the blues evolved simultaneously across all these states, and probably more. The blues developed wherever there were Black communities living under Jim

DEBBIE BOND AND EDDIE KIRKLAND - PHOTOGRAPHY © SILVIA SERROTTI

Crow, with a past history of plantation slavery, massive exploitation, sharecropping and deep systemic racism

It is a dynamic story, in no strict order and includes vaudeville, guitar players, banjo players, diddley bows, fiddle players, piano players, string bands, jazz bands, horn players, jug bands, solo singers, street musicians, juke joint players, TOBA Theaters, tent shows, barrel-houses, honky-tonks, brothels, and, from 1921, records followed by radio. People traveled extensively very early on, all over the US, the Caribbean, Mexico, and even to Europe. I am thrilled to see writers deconstruct some of the mythology around Mississippi and Delta blues, and love a recent book demonstrating the huge influence of vaudeville on blues origins.

I have heard too many firsthand stories of our early blues culture to know that it was thriving here in Alabama from the beginning. Eddie Kirkland learned his chops from his juke-joint-playing stepfather near Dothan. Willie King's grandmother had jukes at her home in Alabama, where his mother met his juke-joint-playing father. Honey Boy Edwards describes in the 1930s traveling to Alabama to play the local blues and gambling joints.

Here's a perfect example of the popular Delta-centric view. When I was playing with Willie King's band, The Liberators, we often opened for Honey Boy, stayed in the same hotels and had lots of time to chat. That's when he told me the story of his hoboing to Northport, Alabama, playing juke joints in Gordo, Livingston, and other small Alabama towns, and how Tuscaloosa then had a thriving blues scene. He had a girlfriend there that he shacked up with for a while. He knew in detail these small towns and the geography of

where I now live. He described blues routes from Greenville, Greenwood, and Columbus, Mississippi, to Northport, Tuscaloosa, and Birmingham etc. in Alabama. He also said there was a Southern route through Mississippi to Alabama, which went through Jackson and Meridian, to Demopolis, Selma, and Montgomery, and then on to Columbus Georgia, etc. No one ever asked him about Alabama. I come across this all the time.

The tragic thing is so that many people who had this direct knowledge are no longer with us. I've read all of Honey Boy's biography and there was no mention of Alabama. If the questions aren't asked, the answers are never going to be found.

Just to name-drop some of Alabama's more prominent blues women stars over the years, there's Odetta, Big Mama Thornton, Dinah Washington, Lucille Bogan, and Ma Rainey, to name a few!

Mississippi has done a great job in promoting its outstanding blues history and heritage. But I think many people are simply mesmerized by the exotic stories of the Delta and have sadly neglected the part many other regions played in the story of the blues. This is surprising and deeply disappointing, especially because so many of these writers consider themselves scholars and academics of the blues. Thankfully, there are exceptions and the field has really been opening up in the last few years, but there are still no books on Alabama's blues culture. I hope I can set that right!

Art Tipaldi: I know about your work with the likes of Willie King, Johnny Shines, and Eddie Kirkland. Can you tell our readers about the importance of those men in the blues. Especially the importance of Willie's club.

Debbie Bond: Well, each one of these outstanding blues musicians deserve their own book! Many people only know Johnny because of his association with Robert Johnson, something he rightfully resented. He was a great, world-class, musician, guitarist, songwriter, and singer in his own right and with his own style. Of course, Robert was an influence, and they had many adventures together. The focus on Robert Johnson, who in fact was a small fish in his time (hence his records are rare, because few knew about him or bought his records) has perhaps meant that other great musicians are overlooked.

Eddie Kirkland, who played with John Lee Hooker, Otis Reading, and more, was also a unique, original singer, songwriter, and guitar player - outstanding. Both of these musicians were part of the cutting edge, creating the new blues music of their era in real time and leaving a lasting imprint on the music that came after.

Finally, Willie King. Where to begin. Willie was a wonderful singer, songwriter, guitar player, and performer. He called his blues "struggling" blues because he felt it was a way of communicating his people's story and history of oppression. He also knew that the blues was a healer, and that the juke joint was a place to come together and deal with the profoundly challenging human emotions that came out of that oppression. He had a song called, "Terrorized," before 9/11 that spoke to the trauma of generations of racism. He really wanted his blues to bring people together, people of all backgrounds, rich, poor Black and White. He wanted his band to be diverse so it would be a statement of that. His music had a message of unity, compassion, coming together. They called him "the Bob Marley of the blues."

We played every Sunday night at Bettie's Place. It wasn't a club but a one-room shack down a dirt road. A real deal Juke Joint, $2 admission, $1 beers, no guns, or gambling allowed. It wasn't Willie's but Bettie's place. I got the chance to meet the original "Bettie" who died shortly after I first got there, but the tradition she started continued with her family members, held together by Willie's great music and the community ethos of supporting and uplifting each other. Like so many of these real deal joints, it was originally run by a woman. Willie saw the importance of the juke joint as a gathering place where his blues music was

forged. He always told me, "You have to take the spirit of the juke joint wherever you go. If you can do that, you are sharing the spirit of the blues."

I am forever grateful and thankful for that experience. Willie always encouraged me and helped to develop my lead guitar skills. The last thing he said to me was "Keep on pushing." I guess I am. The sad thing about Willie is that he died just as he was just getting more widely known. He passed away in 2009 and I hope people check him out.

Art Tipaldi: What are some of the most important musical lessons about the blues these mentors taught you.

Debbie Bond: I don't think a day goes by and I don't think of things they shared with me and I am still learning to put into practice. To trust myself. Big Bo liked to say, "I can't be nobody else." a lot. I toured Europe with Little Whit and Big Bo and performed with them here in Alabama. Big Bo would say, "God don't make no junk, you got to trust yourself." To do my own thing, tell my story. So much I learned from Willie including the above, how to trust the spirit to improvise words and music. How to jam together. I learned that what you play is as important as what you don't play. Space is powerful. Make your guitar talk. Give it your all, whether there is one person in the audience or a thousand.

Johnny Shines was a big lesson in that. World-renowned, but rather taken for granted here in Alabama, he'd come back here from playing abroad and people just didn't know who he was. Music and the blues are about communing. It's about community. That's one of the things the pandemic makes so hard for us musicians. We thrive on community. We miss our peeps. Pick up your guitar every day (Eddie Kirkland instructed me). These are just a few things that ring through my mind from my mentors and I still strive to put into practice.

Art Tipaldi: Which female musicians were your inspirations? What did they teach you.

Debbie Bond: I love Bonnie Raitt. Hearing her helped give me permission to be a White girl in love with this music. Ann Peebles. I love her soulfulness, her phrasing, her songs, the arrangements, and instrumentation. Dorothy Moore, Denise LaSalle, I LOVE soul blues. I love crazy Janis. I love her freedom. Aretha Franklin, the queen of it all, has it all. I wouldn't dare compare myself to any of them. But I have learned and been truly inspired by them all. Having their presence and musical expression on the planet in my lifetime has truly blessed and inspired me. I met Bonnie through my association with Johnny Shines, I believe it was Dick Waterman who kindly connected us when Johnny was sick and in the hospital at the time.

Art Tipaldi: Your current CD is titled, *Blues Without Borders*. What is the overall story that recording tells? How do you keep the traditional elements of the blues alive in your contemporary songs.

Debbie Bond: I don't consciously keep traditional elements alive in my songs. Years of working with traditional blues musicians have molded who I am as a musician, and that's how the songs come out. I feel traditional and contemporary at the same time for sure. I feel the title, *Blues Without Borders*, is right for me on so many levels. I love soul, blues, jazz, Americana, even some country, and the songs I write have all those influences.

I also think that music is a universal language, and certainly that is true of the blues. The blues is world music, with its African and European/Celtic roots, forged in America and now spread the planet over. It is powerful, emotional music that expresses our human joy and pain and everything in between. It transformed the planet's music, giving birth to so much

great music today.

I want my blues to speak to that – our common humanity around the world. I sure wish we could just love and respect each other. So I have some songs that express that. Some social justice songs, a climate change song about how we need to love and respect Mother Nature too and this amazing planet we all live on. This small world we share that has limited recourses and works pretty good if we live in harmony with it. It is an abundant treasure if we don't just live in greed and for the short-term benefit of a few. There are songs about that too. Plus plenty of love and heartbreak songs. Stuff we all experience. We are all going through the same stuff all over the world.

Willie King used to say, "the blues is a feeling, – you have to look for the meaning in that feeling." It's not just a particular guitar lick or song structure, it is a felt sense of something very deep in humanity that we can share. It wouldn't make sense for us all to be trying to sound like the greats of the past but we can feel united to their spirit.

Art Tipaldi: Can you tell readers about the Alabama Blues Project? Its founding, its educational mission, why that school outreach is essential today, and what its plans for the future are.

Debbie Bond: We founded the Alabama Blues Project in 1995 to "promote and preserve the rich history of Alabama's blues culture through programs that educate and entertain." My partner at that time, Mike McCracken, a blues guitar player, and I spearheaded its founding. At that time, we had connected with Mary Feldman and Billy Branch's "Blues in the Schools" program out of Chicago. We were mentored by Fruteland Jackson and got deep in the trenches of blues education in the Birmingham City Schools.

I have always loved working with children. When the Chicago program left Alabama, we decided to forge ahead with the mission, focusing on Alabama blues heritage. We began our first program in the local Boys and Girls Club, and it developed over time into a kind of blues school, with weekly meetings, training a beginner, intermediate, and advanced band, lots of local performances and lots of interaction with some of Alabama's great musicians, including Eddie Kirkland, Big Bo McGee, B.J. Miller, B.J. Reed, Dr. Burt, Willie King, and more. We tried to immerse our students in the practice and appreciation of the blues, with a focus on Alabama. It was really good fun and the advanced band over the years has turned out some excellent blues musicians! The ABP went on to impact tens of thousands of children and adults over the years through programs in-school, after-school, at libraries, festivals, theaters and more.

It is still so important to pass on the significance of this musical tradition, teaching hands on instrument instruction as well as the history and significance of the blues as the roots of so much contemporary American and world music. We can never stop teaching this important history. Teaching about the blues you have to also teach American history - the good bad and the ugly. The blues came out of that and continues to come out of that.

I am thankful that the ABP has been passed along to a new staff who are all of African-American decent. It means so much to me and to see the organization thrive and grow in new directions.

Art Tipaldi: You are unique in the business in that you are a wife and husband (Rick Asherson) team celebrating a 20-year anniversary in 2022. How have you and Rick managed to create this special Alabama blues aura? What advice can you pass along to musical or artistic couples trying to figure out how to balance the career and a healthy relationship.

Debbie Bond: Great question! Interestingly, tomorrow night we are doing a show with Alabama blues husband and wife team DieDra Hurdle and Keith Ruff, so perhaps we are not entirely alone in this!

I wouldn't have it any other way! It must be hard to leave a partner behind and go on the road, or to be the partner left behind. I've talked to quite a few folks about this, and some find it hard and others enjoy the space. Rick and I both love travel, love music, food, books, humor, and on and on, So it truly is a blessing and fun. It's work too! We have our own strengths and weakness and seem to balance each other pretty well.

Of course, relationships are work, but I dig that and learn a lot. I don't think it's for everyone, perhaps that's why there's so few. Being so constantly together in work and play can be challenging but if you can handle the inevitable difficult times, it can also be deeply satisfying. My previous husband was a blues guitar player, and we worked together all the time too, so this is all I have known. I don't think I would find it as much fun to be off touring on my own.

Finally, I would like to say that being with Rick feels like it's meant to be. To make a long story short, he is from London. We met through Willie King. Willie phoned me and said you got to meet this guy. In our first conversation we figured out that we went to the same college in England at the same time! In fact, he knew my guitar-playing friend mentioned above. Rick and I moved in together and were married on Willie King's land, Freedom Creek, a year later with Willie as our best man. We are coming up to our 20th anniversary. I am so grateful to Willie forever for everything, especially for sending me Rick.

There was a brief time in where I was flying solo. I did enjoy that too, but really enjoy the camaraderie and buzz of this joint creative effort. We work together, live together, travel together, and create together. It is wonderful to be able to walk into our music room and work on music together and live with most of the band. Rick plays keys, keyboard, bass, harmonica, and sings, so I get quite a lot of musical input. We write together too. Of course, we also need to go off and have some time to ourselves. Rick does an annual silent retreat, and I am sure that helps a lot!

Art Tipaldi: When you are not touring or recording, how much is music a part of your daily life?

Debbie Bond: We play or listen to music most every day together and/or separately. During the pandemic, we recorded and produced our new record, *Blues Without Borders*, which because of the circumstances was a surprisingly labor-intensive process. I listen to music a lot and we usually rehearse together, working on new or old songs most days. I don't know what I'd do without the joy, peace, and challenge of engaging with music.

Art Tipaldi: How does touring, recording, and writing help you both grow?

Debbie Bond: There is nothing like touring to keep you focused and in good shape personally, physically, and musically. It is demanding being on the road for sure. Luckily, Rick likes to drive (up to a point). Knowing every night that you are in front of a new audience, and you want to give them your very best. Keep it fresh. So, mixing up material – we have a lot now after 20 years of performing together! Touring keeps you on your toes because every venue and audience has its own vibe.

Live performance is also where our songs get "road tested." How something plays live informs and develops songs as they evolve. Trying to play them like it's the first and last time, even if it is the 100th!

Recording is a completely different side of the coin/polyhedron! It is a process where you crystallize where you are at a given time. You try, of course, to give it your all and then

work to present the original recording in the best possible way. We really learned a lot this time about the technology side of recording. I have to give huge credit to Rick for that. This record is the first that we fully produced ourselves from start to finish. We appreciated having that control of our own sound, and producing the mix as we really wanted to hear it.

Recording helps you sort out any wrinkles there may be in the song but I think that taking our tunes out on the road is what knocks the edges off and polishes their spirit.
- BMO