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Alabama's Last Juke Joint: Keeping the blues alive in Birmingham

[June 24, 2019](#) [Spencer Rubin](#) [1 Comment](#) [Debbie Bond](#)

Bessemer, AL – Experiencing Gip's is a shock to the system. You are taken to another place and time. Driving through the dimly-lit, sparsely populated suburbs of Bessemer, it's hard to believe you're a 15 minute cruise from the blooming city of Birmingham. On the way we

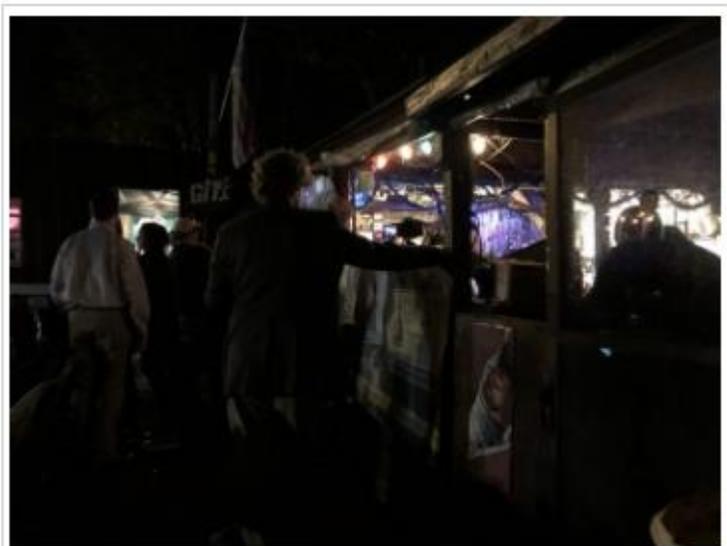
had passed a bar, parking lot overflowing with Harleys. Other than that quick burst of life, the town was dead quiet.

We enter a neighborhood, a tiny grid, bottle-necked down a side-street. I roll my Jeep around the tight bend onto Ave. C and descend the steep, creeping drive. I focus on finding a spot in the jammed grass lot, parking crooked and behind a tree. Suddenly we are in earshot of tonight's featured band, Debbie Bond, her husband "Radiator" Rick Asherson, Michael Cogan, and Marcus Lee. The band booms from a beckoning swath of trees. As we enter the property a cloud of smoke, brilliant white against the deep night, comes into sight, followed by the smell of char and pork drippings. Without thinking, I float into line. It quickly grows behind me. No one seems to mind Gip's son Keith deliberately dripping pork fat and gravy onto the burger of the lady in front of me – we had nowhere else to be.

This might be the last juke joint in Alabama, but at one time Bessemer was brimming with intimate gathering spots like Gip's. Though Gip's Place has always been a place where all are welcome, regardless of race, juke joints were traditionally black men and women's homes opened up to local black performers and guests on recurring nights of the week (Gip's is open every Saturday). Growing up in Alabama in the '30s, Gip and his parents would walk 3 or 4 miles to the local juke joints. In similar establishments, musicians like B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf launched their careers.

An Evening at Gip's

It's done here just as in the old days at the hundreds of juke joints around the south eastern United States. The folks who ran the venues hosted neighbors and friends and sold homemade moonshine, pig ear sandwiches, pig's feet, and other local favorites. We are sitting at one of four picnic tables in the backyard of Gip's home that he converted into a concert hall. He lives out of a trailer tucked in the woods and can often be found sitting at stage right, shaking his guests' hands and encouraging men and women to get up for a dance. He always has a smile on his face and a cup of that homemade moonshine in his hand.



The outside of Gip's. People are strewn about trying to get a glimpse of tonight's band.

I crack open an ice cold Muchacho, my favorite local beer (juke joints have always been, thoughtfully, B.Y.O.B.) and scarf down my slathered sausage with a blatant disregard for my lack of napkins. Stretching my neck to see through one of the three portholes in the wall, I catch my first glance of Debbie Bond. She is sporting a deep purple Fender Telecaster with a mother of pearl fret guard. The glow of the neon lights illuminates the never-ending walls of newspaper clippings and pictures. The lights reflect off Bond's fretboard, glinting in all directions. Her curly red hair flies about as she gyrates with the beat.

Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee," rings out, made famous by Janis Joplin. The Queen of Blues was an early influence of Bond's; they have an uncanny similarity. Bond sings with the raw passion that made Joplin famous, belting out to the intimate groupings of chairs and tables. The only sliver of open floor at the front of the room is alive with spinning dancers.

The band invites Sugar Harp onstage to play his harmonica. He has mastered the instrument. His hair and beard are gracefully graying, and as the notes bend through his fuzzy amplifier, I am again brought to another era. The raw, real, and unique atmosphere at Gip's is an intoxicating look into the mid-20th century American South. It is such a treasure, that in 2013 when the Bessemer town government sought to shut Gip's down due to noise complaints and traffic concerns, the greater Birmingham and international communities came together to save the joint. The story is discussed in the third episode of PBS's 2013 Reel South special. Throughout the episode, the viewer learns about Gip: the man, his place, the story of saving it, and the history of juke joints.

An Original Bluesman Meets Blues Activist

Henry "Gip" Gipson, "a gravedigger by day, party animal by night" — as described by his longtime caretaker, Ms. Bay — is almost 100 years old. He just had his 99th birthday party, and his place was packed from the stage to the end of his driveway. He's a man that people want to celebrate. In the PBS documentary, the film crew follows Gip out to the cemetery where he worked most of his life, it was his god-given destiny, he says. Well into his 90s, Gip was digging graves by hand to make a living. He also made wages playing his guitar across the United States. He opened his own juke joint in 1952, but it took a few years for it to become the place it is today.

While playing a gig in Hueytown, AL in 1957, Gip received a brutal beating. He was performing in a white establishment, and somebody didn't like how he interacted with a little girl. He subsequently traveled to Detroit, where he saw how well everyone, black or white, received Chuck Berry and John Lee Hooker. He was compelled to bring this spirit back to Alabama. Gip's became a place where anyone, no matter race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or gender, is welcome to open their hearts and minds to some good ol' blues music. He created a community of openness and appreciation. In an interview with

Bond, she tells me that “Gip sees the blues as a powerful love force, bringing people together in our common humanity.” That’s the creed Gip’s was founded upon.

Bond, born in California and raised in Europe, and Asherson, a UK native, have been playing Gip’s stubby stage for decades. Their backing band has also been performing here for years. Birmingham-born Lee was trained in the juke joint circuit. It has been 18 years for Bond, and she says that after moving here in 1979, Alabama became her proving ground. When she started, Gip’s was a place where he “mentored up-and-coming players and gave them a place to play.” It was a “drop in and play kind of place, where amateurs and professional blues players would do their thing.” Over time, she tells me, it has become professionalized; Gip has employees bringing in acts, who are eager to make the stop on a tour.

Gip’s admiration for Bond was formed due to her relationship with another blues legend, Willie King. She played second guitar for King’s Liberators until his death in 2009. Gip admired how the two players used their differences to work together and the understanding of blues music that Willie instilled in Debbie. Willie, like Gip, saw how “the spirit of the blues helps us transcend our human condition and come together.”

Bond and Willie were around when Gip wasn’t just a smiling face next to the stage, but a main part of the show. They quickly formed a relationship, playing together, and spreading awareness of Alabama blues. Bond says playing with Gip is raw and rustic, something I will never have the pleasure of witnessing. With his health deteriorating, it is hard to say if he’ll be around his place again any time soon. He is not here tonight, and, according to CBS 42, he has been checked into a nursing home. It is unclear what will happen after he passes away. Will his juke joint fade out of existence like so many others before his?

Bond and Willie often played at a juke joint called Bettie’s Place across the border in Mississippi. When Bettie passed, Willie took over. When Willie died, so did Bettie’s Place. Bettie’s Place’s decline followed in the path of so many legendary joints: The Hall of Blues, Smitty’s Red Top, Junior’s Place (Oxford American features a piece about Junior’s in their [Fall 2006 issue](#)), Club Teresa, and Jenny Bug’s to name a few.



Bond playing alongside Sweet Claudette at the Magic City Blues Festival in Birmingham, AL. Photo courtesy of Debbie Bond | debbiebond.com.

Willie's goal, according to Bond was to "carry the spirit of the juke joint to every show." He would constantly remind her that "if you could do it in a juke joint you could do it anywhere." These establishments didn't all afford the "family get together" style of Gip's, Sugar Harp recalls in the Reel South episode. In some places you had to be a man among men. He often witnessed fights and shootings. Gip's accepting, empowering atmosphere made his place an Alabama staple, an international destination. It is why hundreds showed up to support Gip at city hall when Bessemer tried to shut him down.



The Alabama Blues Project and the "Winds of Change"

There remain a few other places to catch the nostalgic vibe afforded by Gip's: Teddy's Juke Joint (Zachary, LA), Po' Monkey's (Bolivar Co., MS), and Redd's Lounge (Clarksdale, MS). These resilient juke joints and people like Debbie Bond are the only remaining connection to the unrefined, emotionally charged blues of yesterday. Bond has been working to spread appreciation for decades. In 1995 she started the Alabama Blues Project (ABP), a group of musicians who performed together and visited local schools to share the power of music with children and teens (Bond does this independently today). Still active, ABP's mission is "to preserve the heritage of Blues music as a traditional and contemporary art form through

interactive programs that educate and entertain.” They hold blues camps, host an after-school program, and frequently perform and put on community outreach shows and classes.

The ABP, which provides an outlet for at-risk youth and schoolchildren around Alabama, has received national recognition, garnering the prestigious presidential ‘Coming Up Taller Award’ and the Blues Foundation’s ‘Keeping the Blues Alive Award.’ The hands-on programs featured artists, who Bond often performed alongside professionally, including Willie King and Eddie Kirkland, as well as other strong, leading blues women like SharBaby, Sweet Claudette, and Caroline Shines (daughter of late, great Johnny Shines, part of Bond’s first band in the states). Bond and the ABP created a blues history curriculum that integrates into the Alabama state standards for American history, writing, and music and culminate with a live performance true to Alabama roots.

The ABP’s most popular workshop is the interactive “Introduction to the Blues,” program that tells the story of the blues “from its African roots, through sharecropping and the great migration to urbanization and electrification.” This program features a full blues band and welcomes groups of any size and age.

Through these programs and her music, Debbie opens her heart to others. She is a powerful leading woman, who sets an example for girls discouraged from pursuing music as a way of life. “Blueswomen have always been trail blazers,” she notes, “defining ourselves in strength and shedding definitions of beauty. We break the mold.” A performance is a leap of faith, and the vulnerability she offers in sharing her heart and soul intimately with strangers reinforces community. Music is a “heart to heart, soul to soul” connection, “scary as hell, but rewarding beyond belief.”

Her recent single “Winds of Change,” released after President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, shares Bond’s message to current and future generations: the winds of change are “blowing in the wrong direction.” Her voice quakes with passion, and “Radiator” Rick’s piano fills the song until his harmonica, oozing with the spirit of Delta blues, cries out in frustration. The song discusses history’s trend of repeating itself. It’s happening now, “no more destruction,” she urges, “we could be living in paradise,” practicing mercy, kindness, and love.

We have “a national problem,” Debbie tells me, “corporate greed, fear mongering, divisive lies, and bigotry are dominating the scene.” She fears for the future of democracy, social justice, and Mother Nature. If any place can take a stand, it is Birmingham, a daring dot of blue in a sea of red, in the heart of the battleground of the civil rights movement,



Cover art for Bond’s recent single, “Winds of Change.” Photo courtesy of Debbie Bond | debbiebond.com.

the place where Gip welcomed everyone during segregation. Gip's Place embraces the blues as a powerful, unifying force bringing together people from around the world. This is the message Bond spreads through her youth outreach and her music, "there is so much strength down here," she says "I still have a lot of faith."

You can catch Debbie in Birmingham, AL and throughout the South East or on her 2019 UK tour, taking off this July through November!

