

View online at <http://blues.gr/profiles/blogs/an-interview-with-blues-activist-debbie-bond-a-musician-with>



main / activities **interview**

[All Blog Posts](#) [My Blog](#) [+ Add](#)

**An Interview with blues activist Debbie Bond, a musician from Alabama with deeply flavored in the blues**



Posted by [Michael Limnios Blues Network](#) on April 26, 2016 at 12:30pm

[View Blog](#)

*"Definitely the whole cathartic soul medicine of the blues is what pulled me in. The emotional healing that the music can do for you."*

## Debbie Bond: Sweet Blues Alabama

Singer, guitar player and songwriter Debbie Bond has been paying her dues in the Alabama backwoods for over 30 years backing many traditional Alabama blues musicians in the US and Europe, including Jerry Boogie McCain, James Peterson, Eddie Kirkland, Sam Lay, Little Jimmy Reed, Willie King and more. She is a blues activist and founded the award winning Alabama Blues Project, a nonprofit that promotes and preserves Alabama blues. In recent years she has turned to fronting her own band and performing her own music. Her immersion in the blues has deeply flavored her guitar playing, soulful voice and original song writing, yet her sound is contemporary and original, incorporating soul, blues, rock, jazz and even country influences. It was through Willie King that she met British keyboard/ harmonica player Rick Asherson and they soon formed a musical and life partnership, including getting married on Freedom Creek with Willie King as their best man!

*(Debbie Bond / Photo by Robert Sutton)*



Born in California, her family moved to Europe when Debbie was eight years old. In 1979, Bond moved back to the US and settled in Alabama where she worked with many of the blues masters, sharing her band with the late, great Johnny Shines. Inspired by Johnny Shines, Bond co-founded the Alabama Blues Project to promote and preserve the state's blues heritage in 1995. With the Alabama Blues Project, she performed many "Blues in the Schools" programs and showcase concerts, often with Big Bo McGee. More recently, Debbie has been performing with other notable and talented Alabama blues women in the state, such as Carrolene Shines (daughter of Johnny), SharBaby, Rachel Edwards, Sweet Claudette, and B.J. Miller. After years of immersion in Alabama blues, Debbie is now focusing on her own original music and released the albums *Hearts Are Wild* (2011) and *That Thing Called Love* (2013). **Debbie Bond's fourth studio new album, *Enjoy The Ride* (2016) was recorded in The Shoals** by the great Billy Lawson (FAME, Muscle Shoals Sound), with assistant Jerry Masters (FAME, Muscle Shoals Sound). The result is a fine collection of songs, infused with that big fat, warm and soulful Muscle Shoals sound. The record is a mix of souly originals and traditional Alabama blues paying homage to some of Debbie's mentors – Willie King, Eddie Kirkland and Jody Williams.

[Interview by Michael Limnios](#)

*Photos by Debbie Bond's archive / All rights reserved*

**Debbie, when was your first desire to become involved in the blues & who were your first idols?**

I was young living in England when I became aware of the blues! Early idols were people like, B.B. King, Bettie Wright, Ann Peebles, Wilson Pickett, Howard Tate – a lot of the soul/blues musicians. Bonnie Raitt had to be my forever all time favorite – and of course Janice Joplin/Koko Taylor/Buddy Guy. I really love so many! The truth is that it has never been purely straight ahead blues. I love American music of all kinds – but definitely the blues is in my roots and has affected my music – but so has the soul people – and the cross over artists like Bonnie Raitt and Maria Muldeur.

**What does the BLUES mean to you and what does THE BLUES offer you?**

It is powerful emotional healing music. It lifts your spirits. People who don't know have a stereo type idea it is depressing music...they got it wrong. Definitely the whole cathartic soul medicine of the blues is what pulled me in. The emotional healing that the music can do for you. Letting out your blues through music lifts your spirits – dance out your blues! My parents split when I was quite young, we moved around a lot...I had the blues as all humans do... and the music soothed my soul. Willie King, who I played guitar for the last seven years of his life used to call the blues “medicine for the soul.” And that's sums it up. The people who invented the blues, African Americans, lived the hardest of lives – came out of slavery with nothing – and out of nothing created the blues – lived in extreme poverty and injustice and a partied - they created one of the most wonderful original musical styles – that changed the world's music. Hand made their first instruments. Despite their own African music being banned in America – their memories of African music blended with European folk music and created the blues. The music



isn't about being down trodden... it's about overcoming – facing life, truth, life, and what's going down...look it in the face, and singing about it... you know the blues tells our stories. We don't have the same stories now but we have our own stories...the blues keeps evolving. No one will ever play it again like the old guys/gals... we didn't live their lives. We don't want to go back to the world they lived in – a life of poverty and racism – but it gave birth to that amazing early blues. The blues has been so much part of my life – I feel so lucky to have that – it's meant I have been amerced in this southern blues culture and the originators of the music. My own music is influences by this but it is original and tells my story.

### **How do you characterize the sound of Debbie Bond?**

It is hard to describe my sound! I think my music has lots of diverse influences – I hear the soul, jazz even some country influences. My lyrics are contemporary and true to my life – come straight out of my life experiences. My time with very traditional blues musicians (Johnny Shines, Willie King, Eddie Kirkland, Sam Lay and many more...) really affected my sound –especially my guitar playing. But I can't help sounding like a white girl – so people compare me to Bonnie, Maria Muldaur,... Those comparisons are very kind but really I sound like me...not anyone else. My music lately is very influenced by my current partner in life – Rick Asherson – who is an amazing piano player/harp player. So his piano sound really has affected my sound! I also have been able to write some love songs finally! Never could before so that must mean something! Rick has a very New Orleans piano sound...we aren't too far away from NO – I have ALWAYS love that sound – I love horns...so it is an interesting gumbo – an interesting soup!

### **What do you learn about yourself from the Rock n' Blues music and culture?**

Early on “rock n' blues” music culture touched my heart and soul and I knew it was something I wanted to pursue that would be my life. The blues is healing music. I was bluesman Willie King's guitar player for the last seven years of his life and he described the blues as “medicine for the soul” – and it's true. Music is magic and helps transcend life's challenges, expresses emotions and connects us as humans to each other - on this planet with all its challenges. As a musician your music expresses who you are, helps you express deeply personal things that





perhaps only your closest friends would otherwise get to know and share. It puts you in touch with another mysterious dimension. You have to take risks and leaps - overcome fear and doubt and have a whole lot of faith. On the other hand, in the very worldly business of music and being a working musician, we are pushed to find out what we are made of and capable of - as we keep growing and pushing our limits as artists and performers. In this DIY cyber space driven music business, we are our booking agents, promoters, as well as musicians. Yes you learn a lot about yourself.

**What has made you laugh from “Enjoy the Ride” sessions and what touched (emotionally) you from your new album?**

My husband calls some of my songs “Dharma songs.” They are very autobiographical to say the least! Every song, my own songs as well as the covers - I have lived. They all touch me emotionally – or I wouldn’t sing them. They heal my soul and make me feel better – and those that relate to the messages feel the same. I think the Wishbone Song definitely made me laugh the most! At first I could hardly sing it without breaking down in giggles. It is about unrequited love and falling for womanizing men. I found I had a wishbone where my backbone should be! It’s hard to sing “Too much hoochie coochie made my backbone slip, too much boogie woogie – got a dislocated hip!” and not laugh. People LOVE this song. But I have to stay I found new levels of meaning in Eddie Kirkland’s heart break song “Rainbow.” Surprisingly in the studio in the midst of recording it I found myself expressing some layers of anger that I definitely put into the song - I hadn’t felt before!

**Why did you think that the Muscle Shoals music continues to generate such a devoted following?**

The Shoals, like Memphis, is known for its warm, fat and juicy soul music. Wow, they say there is something in the water up there and I do wonder about the singing river! In this rural Alabama region there is such a strong, long-standing community of extraordinary and top of the line songwriters, engineers, session musicians and studios – music business people who have decades of experience of working, supporting, performing, touring writing and producing with some of the greatest music of our times – and iconic songs. People don’t often realize that “The Shoals” is a quad city area of four tiny towns Muscle Shoals, Florence, Tuscumbia and Sheffield. It appears a quiet unassuming Alabama backwater while behind the scenes there is this thriving music community. Muscle Shoals Sound, Fame, Wishbone are some of the better known studios. However, there are many studios producing amazing music, rock, country and of course legendary blues and soul music. It is scary the stuff that has come out of there and continues to! Among the artists who have recorded there in the past are Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, Mavis Staple, Cher, Paul Simon, the Staple Singers, Dylan, Rod Stewart, Joe Cocker, Bob Seger and Linda Ronstadt. The Rolling Stones recorded “Brown Sugar” and “Wild Horses” in 1969 and Lynyrd Skynyrd worked there.

A lot of the sound had to do with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section — Barry Beckett, Roger Hawkins, David Hood and Jimmy Johnson. They got their start working for Rick Hall at

Fame Recording Studios in Muscle Shoals and with Atlantic Records vice president and producer Jerry Wexler. But there is so much more and continues to be. For a time Malaco Records was located here and songs like Johnny Taylors "Last Two Dollars" was recorded there. The old studios are being refurbished and used and new studios opening up. Currently, the Nuthouse Recording studio, for example, is producing Grammy winning projects. There are 50 plus studios in the area. We recorded at the newly opened Big Star Studio run by veteran engineer, producer, songwriter, multi instrumentalist, Billy Lawson. Billy has worked at all the major studios in the shoals area and in Nashville. We love Billy – he is a super talented genius - we were thrilled with the results - that warm fat soulful sound the area is so famous for.

*Photo by Tony Negri, Rome Italy*



*"It is powerful emotional healing music. It lifts your spirits. People who don't know have a stereo type idea it is depressing music...they got it wrong." (Photo: Debbie, John Sinclair and Willie King)*

Which was the best moment of your career ..and which was the worst?

I have to say, that playing with Willie King at the Cognac Blues Festival was one of the best moments of my career – and touring with him in Italy at the Parma Roots and Blues Festival – and through Switzerland too – playing with Willie in Juke joints and the King Biscuit Festival here in the United States. What a huge honor and privilege it was. He was an amazing man and musician – I feel like I learned so much from him both musically and personally – still applying my lessons now! Then again – playing with Willie King in Bettie's Place, a back woods juke joint was so amazing! Now are some best moments too – the fact that I am building my own fans who love my original music...that means the world to me.

Being paid with bad checks... seeing the racism here. I got sacked from music house gig, fired from a band for speaking out about racism. It has been hard juggling my desire to play music and survival. I didn't have the support of my family early on – (over time that changed now and it is accepted now the path I have chosen). I had to survive doing all kinds of work...was a house painter for many years to support my music habit! Many times I have thought I must be crazy, and was very conflicted but kept trying to follow my heart. But I am SO thankful now I have. I definitely struggled economically and personally to be where I am now. I don't regret it a bit. I love what I do and have had so many adventures. I just got the blues bug and it wouldn't let me be!!! You have to love playing music more than anything. It isn't easy – you have to be hard headed – When I was a house painter to support my music career – that wasn't too easy...learning to put my own band together...Getting paid in bad checks, taking people to court



*"I think my music has lots of diverse influences – I hear the soul, jazz even some country influences. My lyrics are contemporary and true to my life – come straight out of my life experiences."*



early on in order to get paid...that was no fun but make some funny stories later. A special memory of those kinds of events was the time we opened with Johnny Shines for Roy Buchannon. The promoter wasn't going to pay us! I explained the situation to Roy Buchannon and he refused to go on stage in Birmingham until me and Johnny Shines got our pay check! There was a near riot in the theater before the finally the promoter brought us our money!

### **From whom have you have learned the most secrets about blues music?**

Probably Willie King was the one who taught me the most. He was all about the groove with the band in the moment. Being in the moment. There is the song – but there is the magic of the groove – the message of the music. You got to mine the groove – dig in and find the magic of the moment. He was such a generous spirit. So down to earth. He was very unpretentious. He loved people. I try to practice in my own way a lot of what I learned from Willie King.

### **Are there any memories from Johnny Shines which you'd like to share?**

Johnny was also a kind and generous spirit to young musicians too – he loved the blues/music. Man he must have quit the music business so many times in frustration...but kept him coming back. I saw him play to empty rooms and give it his all. He liked to say "The most fun he ever had there were only two people in the room." He kept performing until he couldn't anymore. He loved to make people laugh. My band backed him and played the last gig he ever played, at our local legendary dive called the Chukker, before he went into the hospital. Johnny Shines was a die-hard musician...to the end. When he was in the hospital not long before he died. His leg was amputated...he was planning his come-back. He was also formally uneducated but very intelligent. He was reading "in Search of Robert Johnson" by Peter Guralnick on his deathbed. I was so happy he hooked up with Kent Duchane at the end...as a duo they could travel easily – both loved to fish and enjoyed each other's company. Johnny never wanted to quit playing. Of course he wished he had done better financially. He stayed taking courses at the local jr college to the end – small engine mechanics (to fix lawn mowers etc. – and upholstery repair – to mend car upholstery. He said "Debbie you always have to have something to fall back on." On one hand I was so proud of him and his determination to be a man and take care of himself and his family. ON the other hand it hurt me to see a legend like him struggling to survive financially in his old age.



**How did you first meet Johnny Shines and what kind of guy was the late great Johnny Shines?**

We heard that Johnny was living near us, in 1981. We heard he was living in Holt, a suburb of Tuscaloosa. Me and my guitar-playing boyfriend - at the time - went and knocked on his door! Johnny invited us in and was so warm and hospitable. We had a cassette tape of my first blues band The Kokomo Blues Band that we played him. He must have been pretty desperate to get out there...we were all very green



*(Johnny Shines and the Kokomo Blues Band / Photo by Mike McCracken)*

musicians at the time. But he wanted to get together and play! We were thrilled of course. We got together - and started to perform together regularly - and did so off and on until he passed away in 1992. I was "just a singer" (played guitar at home but not in the band) at that time...so it was my band that backed him. I opened for him and sang with him. Johnny was pretty discouraged by the music business...but he couldn't leave it alone. He loved it so much. He later hooked up with Kent Duchane - and other musicians in the area - throughout the time and played a lot with them too. Kent was a very good match for Johnny. They could travel simply together...the two of them got on very well and they both loved to fish. I always heard stories of how rough and tough Johnny was early in his life. But I never saw this side...he LOVED to clown, make jokes, tell stories about the past.

**What advice Johnny Shine gave you and which memory makes you smile?**

We celebrated Thanksgiving together one year.... The local incredible Archibald's BBQ joint smoked a turkey and we feasted, partied and jammed in our old ramshackle house in the woods. I will never forget that night. We all had a ball. I guess the advice I remember most was always giving it your all - always make your next show better than the last - no matter how small the audience or who responds to your music. It was mind blowing to me to do shows here with so few people coming out to support someone like Johnny...of course there would good shows too with lots of people!

**If you could change one thing in the musical world and it would become a reality, what would that be?**

I would make music more accessible to children. We have been presenting award winning blues in the schools programs since 1995 and can't believe we are still struggling to keep music and

arts education in schools here in Alabama! I know this is a struggle all over the world. We do programs all over and I am shocked how many schools have no music or art.

**I wonder if you could tell me a few things about your “studies” with Big Bo McGee**

Big Bo was such a character! He too had a very rough reputation but always was a big teddy bear to me!!! Loved animals and children. Loved to laugh – chew tobacco. He had knife scars on his neck from fights. He died a violent death. Was stabbed to death. My experience with him was all about the music. He had a huge voice and played the hell out of a harmonica. He learned to play harmonica from his



*. (Photo: Debbie Bond & Big Bo McGee)*

grandmother. Played the same juke joint nearby where Big Joe Williams and others would come – over the line in Mississippi. A complete product of Alabama blues culture...and a testimony to its richness. He had a huge heart...and his voice would make the hairs on your neck stand up! I NEVER got tired of hearing him play – and I must have done a 100 shows with him. I loved Big Bo. People said he was rough and tough... and some people were scared of him. He did have big knife scars on his body from fights. But he was like a big teddy bear to me. I mainly only saw his good side – he loved kids and animals – to me he was a gentle giant – but I guess I was blind. He was the real deal bluesman. A true bluesman...always gave it his all. Said every show has to be better than your last. I must have heard him play over 100 times and never got sick of it. He never sang a song the same way twice. He had a big booming voice and blew the hell out of his harmonica. He was a big ugly guy but the women fell for him as they are prone to do for bluesmen! He claimed to have over 30 kids... and I wouldn't be surprised if it was true! Sadly, he died a violent death.

**Would you mind telling me the most vivid memory from Eddie Kirkland?**

Eddie and Willie had so much in common but also very different. Musically they had a lot in common and it really makes me ponder that Alabama blues sound. They both started off on one string guitars...taught by local Alabama blues musicians – and ended up with a very original funky electric improvised sound. They loved to improvise and jam in the moment... Mine a groove. Anyway, that aside they were very different characters. Eddie loved to travel and play more than anything else in the world...he stayed on the road and died on the road. He kept an old beat up

American car on the road anyway he could...even had it set up with a TV. He slept a lot of the time in the car. Carried a gun. He would show up to a gig a day early just to make sure he arrived in time. A true "road dog." Always, had his turban on his head, earring in his ear he was the "gypsy of the blues". He would play the hell out of the guitar...with own techniques, fingering and style – so funky and original were his grooves. It would take a minute (and more!!) to figure out what exactly he was doing. He would kick off the song with a basic groove... and you would have to jump in and hit the ground running! His voice reminded me a lot of Hendrix. He was rough and tough but actually very sweet and encouraging mentor...always said you got to pick up and play your guitar every day no matter what! He had such a powerful on stage presents...even though he really wasn't a big guy! It really seemed so unfair – that Eddie worked SO hard on his music and played so much and NEVER got the recognition he deserved. Eddie was from Dothan Alabama – I met him in the Attic Bar in Detroit where he lived for a long time. It was such a dream come true to meet him. I always loved his music. He moved back to live in Columbus Georgia – not too far away. I got to work with him quite a bit...doing blues in the schools and performing. We got an apprenticeship award from the State of Alabama and State of Georgia – for me to study with him! In 2011 he were supposed to play a festival in Dothan in his honor...he knew it was planned but he passed away early that year on the way home from a show in Florida. Another legend gone.



*"I love the improvisational aspect of the music, the interaction with the audience when you know they feel it and share the experience. Somehow our lives reflect our common human experience...and when that locks in there is a mysterious magic that I live for." (The late great bluesman Eddie Kirkland with Debbie Bond / Photo by Silvia Serrotti)*



### **...and your most vivid memory from the bluesman Willie King?**

Willie King on the other hand had very little ambition. HE LOVED to play – it meant just as much for him to play a back yard party or Betty's juke joint...as to play a big festival like the King Biscuit festival. He would play with the full band the Liberators – with bass and keys, drums and maybe a horn player – or just him and Willie James, his drummer and permanent side kick! They would do small gigs all the time in-between the bigger shows we did together. It was all about the music, the vibe and spreading peace and love. He was all about the message of his music. They called him the Bob Marley of the blues, with his messages of universal love, peace and social justice...and great music to dance to. His songs could last for 20 minutes or more...just start jamming and go into that other trans world. I loved that. Making up songs, words in the moment. He had a particular music vocabulary. I really needed to study his unique sound and music for a while before I felt I could do it justice. He was always very encouraging pushing and encouraging me. I was Willie's second guitar player but he always insisted I play lead. I loved singing background vocals for him. Some of my favorite memories were playing in Betty's juke joint. Everyone dancing. He wrote, It Takes a Good Woman at Bettie's Juke Joint on Mother's day. He was such a sweet spirit! He got famous, or at least well known despite himself. He could have been even more successful and well known...but he just wasn't that ambitious. He loved going and playing in Europe when he finally decided to go – and was totally amazed by the experience – how well he was treated and how much they loved his music. But he was always happiest "back home in the woods" and couldn't wait to get there. To sit out on Freedom Creek at night on his land in rural Alabama looking at the stars and listening to the wind through the trees! I love singing Willie King's songs these days and doing a tribute to him.

### **How do you describe Debbie Bond's philosophy of blues?**

I really just have to do my own thing and try not to worry and compare myself...I can't be anyone else! When my music turns people on of course that makes me feel so good. My old CD "Hearts Are Wild" had received 90% rave reviews...which is a thrill...but of course not everyone is going to like it. So I have to put my heart and soul into my thing and leave it there! Do my thing – can't do no one else's – Big Bo McGee (who was a local bluesman I played with for many years – and toured Europe) said that one... Learned that from the old blues guys. It is so important to be in the moment...I love the improvisational aspect of the music, the interaction with the audience when you know they feel it and share the experience. Somehow our lives reflect our common human experience...and when that locks in there is a mysterious magic that I live for.



**Do you have any amusing tales to tell from Jerry McCain, James Peterson, Sam Lay, and Little Jimmy Reed?**

All of these guys were/are great showmen (Little Jimmy Reed is still alive and doing his thing – I do shows with him every once in a while. All these three love to dress up in their fancy suits – go out in the audience – the invention of wireless systems worked for all three! Glitzy dudes! Jerry with his diamond in his tooth and playing through his nose, Little Jimmy Reed with gold teeth ... James playing the guitar behind his back! These guys knew how to put on a show. Sam Lay likes to tell jokes



about women...but has managed to stay married to the same lovely lady for decades! Seeing her in the audience rolling her eyes is always an amusing memory.

**Some music styles can be fads but the blues is always with us. Why do think that is? Give one wish for the BLUES**

The blues is powerful emotional music about the deeper sides of life. It was created by African Americans who went through the hardest of times – it is so cathartic. So it spread like wild fire around the world...and transformed the world's music. You don't play the blues for money – it isn't exactly a career path! Here in Alabama – despite the economy the blues is alive and kicking. SO much blues talent. Musicians are struggling – not making much more than they did 30 years ago. The blues keeps changing...there are so many great talented musicians all over the world playing the blues. That's one of the things that the internet has really brought home – SO much good blues all over the planet. My one wish for the blues is that the story of Alabama blues finally gets told!

**Tell me about the beginning of Alabama Blues Project, how did this come about?**

I moved to Alabama in 1979 and became so aware of all the great blues in the state that wasn't recognized. I co-founded the ABP informally in 1995. In 2002 my British keyboard/harmonic playing musical partner and husband I grew the organization into a non-profit. I have always been so split between my own music and this important project! Through the ABP we have created all kinds of blues education programs – in-school and after-school, workshops and talks for adults. I also have an archive on Alabama blues I created. We retired from the running the ABP to spend more time on music...but still doing some Blues in the Schools, educational events,

and consulting. The organization continues to thrive and we are helping from the wings...while we focusing on our own gigging and promoting our CD.

### **What is the impact of Rock n' Blues music and culture to the racial, political and socio-cultural implications?**

It would of course take a book to answer this! I think Rock n Blues has definitely been a force to help wake people up and a force of change – particularly in the sixties! However, music can also just reinforce the status quo – which I think is true of a lot of pop culture and mainstream commercial music. I loved working with the late, great Willie King because he was a force of change – he was very political. His songs talked about people getting together, social justice, and loving each other. Ironical that that is radical stuff! He liked to have a diverse band, black and white and having a woman in the band! He wanted to demonstrate himself what it meant to be able to live and work together and spread love by example. He was known as the Bob Marley of the blues because his songs talked about oppression and civil rights issues. He came from severe poverty and extremely racist rural Alabama community. He would have had every right to be very angry and use his music to reinforce division. But Willie's music spread love peace and understanding. Willie would sing his songs to anyone who wanted to hear. He played to rich, poor, black and white ... even to the Klan... and he sang the same songs ... and he got through to people in a very powerful way. We sure do miss him, he was the real deal and the world still needs his message for sure. He had a song called "Terrorized," he sang before 9/11 – about what it is like to be black in American - powerful stuff. I have always admired people who could effectively write songs that communicated these deep issues well. Willie King did. The nearest I have come to trying to tackle such topics is my song "Start With Love" on my new album. It is about world peace. I am an incorrigible idealist and still hope for a world where we could trade our swords for shears!



©Larry O. Gay

*"I really just have to do my own thing and try not to worry and compare myself...I can't be anyone else! When my music turns people on of course that makes me feel so good." (Debbie Bond and Rick Asherson with Alabama Blues Project's van / Photo by Larry O. Gay)*

What the difference between Alabama blues and others local scenes, what characterizes the sound of Alabama blues?

This is complex question...which there is probably no clear cut answer. The story of Alabama blues is yet to be really told. There is definitely a strong piano tradition - early boogie-woogie definitely has strong origins in Alabama - with musicians like Pine Top Smith, Cow Cow Davenport, Walter Rolland...and current great piano players - like Chuck Levell the keyboard player for the Rollin Stones from Tuscaloosa Alabama. There was a very early blues guitar tradition. After all Robert Johnson made his great break through (when he was supposed to be selling his soul to the devil) learning guitar from Ike Zimmerman - an Alabama blues guitar player from Grady Alabama. If you don't believe me check it out! Once there were records and radio of course there was commercialization of the music that meant everyone could hear each other. Nevertheless, if you listen to Willie King, James Peterson, Eddie Kirkland there is a really funky soulful blues sound - you hear in Alabama blues! This is where this music comes from. That makes it different. This is Alabama's indigenous music - heart and soul.

## What advice would you give to aspiring musicians thinking of pursuing a career in the craft?

Don't quit your day job – have something else you can do to make a living. I was a house painter for many years. I will never forget. Johnny Shines was always taking courses and getting new skills until he died. He learned to fix lawn mowers, fix upholstery at the local junior college – age 72. He would tell me you always have to have something to fall back on! But of course that is really sad that someone of Johnny's stature was always worried about survival. There is something wrong that he had all those recordings out there - and his legendary talent – and was still struggling to live. There are so many jokes about musicians "What's the definition of a musician without a girlfriend? - homeless." Behind so many great musician men is a woman with a "real" job keeping the home fires burning. I have always been married to a musician...and two paychecks are so much better than one...you double your money on a gig. Then again I have always had a wide range of things I could do to fall back on. I know it's different if you are on a higher rung of the ladder. But those guys/gals have to really work hard on the road. That's no an easy life. A musician said to me recently "You really have to love music because it doesn't always love you." But the truth is I would never trade my life for someone else's....it has been an amazing adventure...I just couldn't face the usual choices of expected career paths – this has been an amazing adventure and I have loved it.

There is no clear road for a blues musician...you have to follow your heart and do the best you can to survive and keep your shit together on all fronts...finding a partner who is supportive and you can find a happy fair balance at the home front too! In the end I think you become a musician because you can't stop yourself. There is no choice...no matter how much you fight it – you just have to do it! It is really such a sad statement about the world that art is so undervalued. I know so many GREAT talented blues musicians who can't get enough work to pay the bills have a really hard time...no health insurance etc. When all is said and done – what's remembered of a culture is its art...shame it's not supported more than it is. Right now here in Alabama blues musicians are struggling to make what they made 30 years ago in local bars...back then you could get a beer for a quarter or a dollar! They are charging a whole lot more now for drinks – yet trying to get bar owners to charge cover charges or give decent guarantees is really hard. There are of course wonderful club owners who are exceptions to this...who love, respect and help support the blues and the musicians. And thank God for the Blues Foundation it has made a big difference. I hardly play bars anymore – few and far between– we are finding new venues to play – and of course festivals. To make a short story long... play music because you love it and have to.





*"I would make music more accessible to children. We have been presenting award winning blues in the schools programs since 1995 and can't believe we are still struggling to keep music and arts education in schools here in Alabama! I know this is a struggle all over the world. We do programs all over and I am shocked how many schools have no music or art."*

**From the musical point of view is there any difference and similarities between: bluesman & blueswoman?**

Mmm not sure how to answer that. The blues is all about life experiences so being a woman or man you are going to sing about your prospective life experiences...though they can often sing the same songs from their own point of view! And of course we are all human beings underneath it all – black or white, male or female, old young, Greek or American. That is the cool thing about music how it connects us all. I am on one hand amazed there aren't more female blues musicians. But that is certainly changing. There are more and more guitar players...instrumentalists as well as great singers. That is particularly true in Europe! So many guitar slinging females!!!! It is so good to see that!

**What does to be a female artist in a “Man’s World” as James Brown says? What is the status of women in music?**

“You can’t prove that by me” Aretha replied to this statement and recorded it at FAME studio in Muscle Shoals! Yes, well it is still mainly a man’s world yet things have come a long way. I think the mainstream commercial music world is still quite backward when it comes to images of women. However, blues women have always blown those stereotypes from the beginning. Blues women with strong, self reliant characters have trail blazed the way - running their own businesses, writing outspoken songs, running their own bands, playing instruments and defying the odds of mainstream America. Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, born in Alabama and raised in Georgia, is such a great example. One of the early blues musicians, she ran her own traveling tent shows and bought and ran her own theaters in a very racist and sexist world. Women like Bessie Smith in the 1920s defied stereotypes and pushed the boundaries of traditional female roles as being quiet, passive, demure damsels by fronting their own bands and telling their stories - no holes barred – and declared themselves royalty ! We have come a long way and there are so many great female guitarists now, like Bonnie Raitt, Susan Tedesky, Deborah Coleman – lots in Europe too. On the other hand the music and even the blues business is still odd. Festival promoters sometimes treat us like a novelty acts and feel they have done the job when they have one woman booked on their festival lineup!

In the state of Alabama right now there SO many great blues women! I love it. We have a strong sense of sisterhood, support each other and do shows together a lot. I love being part of the blues women showcases we do. Here in Alabama, I have worked a lot with [SharBaby](#), Elnora Spencer, Rachel Edwards, Carrolene Shines, and more! I love it we are playing the Sisters Of Soul and Blues Festival in England this summer – all female fronted bands! I have to say from the beginning I have had very little resistance and nothing but positive support from male blues musicians in my life. I was mentored and encouraged by some of the finest – Johnny Shines, Eddie Kirkland and Willie King. I was shy about my guitar playing and they all pushed me to do better. Willie King in particular always pushed me to not just play rhythm but also work on my lead playing. I love that and I am forever grateful. My wonderful musician husband Rick Asherson (keyboard, keyboard bass, harmonica, vocals and guitar) has been the same. Truthfully, without their encouragement I wouldn’t be where I am at today, out there doing my music at this level! Yes, it is still very male dominated world ... have to say, growing up with brothers, I like hanging out and being one of the boys (LOL).



*"In the state of Alabama right now there SO many great blues women! I love it. We have a strong sense of sisterhood, support each other and do shows together a lot. I love being part of the blues women showcases we do." (SharBaby & Debbie. Photo by Robin McDonald)*

What experiences in your life make you a GOOD musician and songwriter? How do you get inspiration for your songs?

Song writing is both talent, a skill, a craft and art form. Something you work and play at. Some songs just flow out and others need work and time. I love song writing. I find if I give it time and space songs flow out! You have to have an attitude of non-judgmental play to get the song going. But perfecting and arranging them polishing them take time – and discernment! You have to write about things you have been through – they have come from an authentic place! I love listening to people talk to get song ideas. Like my song, Drama Mama - I was talking to my girlfriend and we agreed that someone we knew was such a drama mama...then I decided to write the song...though we agreed there was a little drama mama in all of us! I think listening to LOTS of music over the years helps. Getting the feel for good song structure. I love to write – don't know how great my songs are but it makes me so happy when people like them and moved by them!



Let's take a trip with a time machine, so where and why would you really want to go for a whole day?

I would love to go back and travel with Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey on one of their Southern tent show tours. I would love to have a chance to see first hand the rural Alabama blues scene through the 1920s. There were juke joints, house parties – deep blues throughout Alabama. They packed the TOBA theaters in Selma, Bessemer and Birmingham – toured the Alabama coast packing houses in Mobile. There is much untold history – someone needs to tell the story of Alabama blues. Maybe I will before I leave the planet.

What is your “secret” music DREAM? Happiness is.....

I guess it ain't no secret...I hope and dream to keep on growing musically and feeling like I am growing as a performer. Happiness is the magic that happens between me, the band and the audience – when people seem sincerely touched by my music – dance and have a good time. Happiness is keeping all aspects of my life together...happiness with my home, my man, my music...friends family and my community the great spirit of love behind it all. I toured and played behind other people – quite successfully. I would love it if I could reach the same level of success with my own music!



*"The blues is all about life experiences so being a woman or man you are going to sing about your prospective life*



**Which is the most interesting period in your life and why?**

I do think I have lived a pretty unusual and interesting life! I hope everyone feels that! I really have pursued my dreams. Every step of the way has been an adventure. Looking back is always easy – and easy to romanticize – getting to play and hang out with so many older traditional blues musicians has been amazing. Living in Africa and traveling so much as a child. Of course behind the scenes have been my own heartaches, loneliness, and serious personal challenges! But that is life and the blues...I would change a thing. I do feel like, so far, with time, life only gets better ...with more understanding, clarity, wisdom, strength, healing, forgiveness, less fear, more courage and confidence – certainly life is getting better. SO maybe I am now, I am entering the most interesting part of my life!!! It seems ironic but it does seem like life, like a good wine, gets better with age. Just hope I can stay healthy enough to enjoy it and keep traveling and playing music!

**Which of historical blues personalities would you like to meet? How you would spend a day with Memphis Minnie?**

Wow, Big Mama Thornton would be one early blues personality I would like to have met! I would ask her about her early life in Alabama – and traveling with Diamond Tooth Mary on the early tent show circuit! She might be a bit scary from what I hear! I would try to meet her early in the day before she had a chance to drink too much whiskey! Ma Rainey would also have been amazing to meet- what a pioneer and business lady of the blues! I would spend the day having a guitar lessons with Memphis Minnie!

**Any final comments and message for the Greek blues fans?**

Thank you for asking all these probing and interesting questions. I hope I get to come and play in Greece before too long! A secret dream would come true if I had the opportunity to come play in Greece! Thank you for all you are doing spreading the word about the blues!

**[Debbie Bond - Official website](#)**

