



## HOT FLASH



### STUDY GUIDE

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## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main purposes of "Hot Flash!" is to tell the story of three women who were impassioned enough, dedicated enough, and talented enough to leave home and jobs when in their mid-40s to pursue their dream of playing music (in particular, blues music) as their full-time career.

"Hot Flash!" presents a story of courage and a story of talent. Aside from entertainment and the joy of getting to know these women, the film also intends to inspire viewers to be lead by their passion.

To deepen this inspiration and/or to get to know Saffire better, this study guide has been created. Further, this study guide will direct users to investigate the blues -- its form and its content. It is geared to college and high school levels and may be of specific interest in women's studies, music, and history courses.

The study guide presents three areas of information: 1) more about Saffire; 2) the evolution of Saffire's music; and, 3) the blues genre. These are followed by Discussion Questions and Specific Learning Exercises.

## **MORE ABOUT SAFFIRE**

To learn more about Saffire in general, you should visit Saffire's website:  
[www.uppityblueswomen.com](http://www.uppityblueswomen.com)

To learn more about the individual members of Saffire, their biographies, influences, photos, reviews, individual recordings, etc., you should visit the individual websites:

- Ann Rabson's site is [www.annrabson.com](http://www.annrabson.com)
- Andra Faye's site is [www.andrafaye.com](http://www.andrafaye.com)
- Gaye Adegbalola's site is [www.adegbalola.com](http://www.adegbalola.com)

## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY & DISCOGRAPHY

- 1978-83 Ann & Gaye perform together occasionally.
- 1984 Ann & Gaye gig as a duo at the Holiday Inn South in Fredericksburg, VA Earlene Lewis joins on bass and Saffire\*, the trio, is born.
- 1987 Saffire self-produces its first recording, "The Middle Aged Blues"  
Saffire meets Andra Faye at a blues camp in West Virginia\*\*
- 1988 Saffire goes full time -- incorporates, buys van & sound equipment; that fall performs at the W. C. Handy Awards (now the Blues Music Awards)\*\*\*
- 1989 Saffire records at King Snake Studio in Florida; that fall, signed by premier blues label, Alligator Records.
- 1990 First Alligator release, "Saffire – The Uppity Blues Women" (ALCD 4780)
- 1991 "Hot Flash," (ALCD 4796) (this & all future releases on Alligator)
- 1992 Earlene leaves the band and is replaced by Andra Faye, "BroadCasting" released (ALCD 4811)
- 1994 "Old, New, Borrowed & Blue" released (ALCD 4826)
- 1996 "Cleaning House" released (ALCD 4840)
- 1998 "Live & Uppity," recorded at the Barns of Wolf Trap, released
- 2001 "Ain't Gonna Hush" released (ALCD 4880)
- 2006 "Saffire - DeLuxe," a retrospective released (ALCD 5613)
- 2009 "Havin' the Last Word," released (ALCD 4927); Saffire's final concert 11/7

\* Saffire was originally named just "Saffire." Due to name confusion with a top 40s Latina singer, "Sa-fire," the name was appended to "Saffire – The Uppity Blues Women." The "uppity" part was taken from a slogan on a Saffire t-shirt.

\*\* The blues camp is part of a summer program that is conducted by the Augusta Heritage Center on the campus of Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia. Andra, Ann and Gaye attended as students but have been instructors in the program for quite some time. Students (from 8 to 80+) learn guitar, slide, piano, mandolin, vocal techniques, harmonica, etc. For info:  
[www.augustaheritage.com/blues.html](http://www.augustaheritage.com/blues.html)

\*\*\* The Blues Music Awards are sponsored by the Blues Foundation -- an organization committed to keeping the blues alive. To become a member and to learn more about the blues, visit [www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org).

Saffire also appears on several compilation CDs including recordings on Alligator's Christmas CDs. For more info on recordings by Alligator, visit [www.alligator.com](http://www.alligator.com). Saffire has acquired varied "lumps and bumps" during its 25 year journey. Some details can be found in postings on individual sites.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF SAFFIRE'S MUSIC**

The blues can be thought of as the poor person's psychiatrist. Moreover, the blues woman, with the heart of a woman, might be considered the poor woman's psychiatrist -- singing songs of advice, offering ways to cope with daily struggles, ways to live and not merely survive.

The classic blues women of the 1920s were the first to chronicle topics like prostitution, domestic abuse, alcoholism, infidelity, homosexuality, gender politics, prisons, racism, etc. They were the first to openly talk about sex--its joy and its pain. Many of these women were fiercely independent. Often they were comediennes – finding humor in the pain and ways to exorcise the hurt and humiliation. Sometimes they were the original "wild women" – deviating from the norm -- unashamed and unafraid to lay their souls bare, share their hearts and speak their minds. Saffire grows from this tradition.

Musically, the classic blues women introduced vocal techniques that gave drama and immediacy to their performances. They would cry, growl, yell, wail, syncopate, slide & slur, bend and break notes, improvise, phrase & rephrase to give added depth and texture in order to bring their stories to life. Saffire grows from this tradition.

While Saffire will tackle any kind of blues (Chicago style, Piedmont, jump blues, boogie-woogie, New Orleans style, etc.), its musical sound is unique -- it is acoustic and drum-less. It is piano based which is unlike most blues trios today. Classic blues was acoustic and often drumless & piano based.

Many of Saffire's "foremothers" are noted in one of the learning exercises that follows. Also, to get a better idea of the spirit of these women, read the article "Sharing My Sheroes." It is article #41 at [www.adegbalola.com/writings.html](http://www.adegbalola.com/writings.html).

## THE BLUES

The blues should not be defined as "sad" music. It is music of liberation -- whether to get the pain out or to assist in the shaking of one's butt on a Saturday night. It is about salvation -- not the after-life salvation of gospel music, but salvation right here, right now, salvation to get through another day. Often the lyrics find humor in the pain. Often we might cry, but it lets us know we are not alone in our tears.

From Wikipedia (the free encyclopedia) -- a general overview of the blues:

Blues is the name given to both a musical form and a music genre created within the African-American communities in the Deep South of the United States at the end of the 19th century from spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads.[1] The blues form which is ubiquitous in jazz, rhythm and blues and rock and roll is characterized by the use of specific chord progressions - the twelve-bar blues chord progressions being the most frequently encountered - and the blue notes sung or played for expressive purposes at a slightly lower pitch than that of the major scale.

The blues genre is based on the blues form but possesses other characteristics such as specific lyrics, bass lines and instruments. Blues can be subdivided in several subgenres ranging from country to urban blues that were more or less popular during different periods of the 20th century. Best known are the Delta, Piedmont, Jump and Chicago blues styles. World War II marked the transition from acoustic to electric blues and the progressive opening of blues music to a wider audience. In the 1960s and 1970s, blues evolved into a hybrid form called blues rock. In the 1990s, punk blues appeared as an outgrowth of punk rock claiming a direct Delta blues influence.

The term "the blues" refers to the "the blue devils", meaning melancholy and sadness; an early use of the term in this sense is found in George Colman's one-act farce *Blue Devils* (1798).[2] Though the use of the phrase in African American music may be older, it has been attested to since 1912, when Hart Wand's "Dallas Blues" became the first copyrighted blues composition.[3][4] In lyrics the phrase is often used to describe a depressed mood.[5]

For a more complete definition of the blues, visit:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues\\_music#Musical\\_form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues_music#Musical_form)

At this site, one will find information on blues':

1. Musical Form (including traditional chord progressions)
2. Lyrics
3. History -- the origin, pre & post war blues, 1960s, 70s, 80s to 2000s
4. Musical Impact
5. In Popular Culture

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were the careers of Andra Faye, Ann Rabson, and Gaye Adegbalola prior to Saffire's going on the road full time? Do you think their careers impacted their decision to become full-time musicians?
2. When Saffire went on the road in 1988, how do you think it affected their families? Their finances? Their community involvement? Their confidence?
3. When Saffire went part-time to full-time, what kinds of additional work, duties and responsibilities were required? Musically (e.g., equipment)? Financially (e.g., insurance, taxes)? Logistically (e.g., even something as mundane as pet sitting)?
4. In the film, it was noted that Saffire went into group counseling in order to keep the group together. What were some of the problems noted in the film? How were they resolved?
5. Saffire was glad to be signed by Alligator Records. Saffire's first recording was a self-produced cassette, but all other recordings are on Alligator. What is Alligator's importance to the blues world? What other artists are on Alligator?
6. What is the usual definition of the word "uppity" and how does it relate to Saffire? Why is it part of Saffire's name? What's uppity about Saffire?
7. Many songs presented in the film relate specifically to women/women's liberation. Name some examples and tell what issues are addressed. Blues is often thought of as "sad" music. How does Saffire's music alter this definition?
8. Often Saffire is accused of "male bashing." Do you feel that this comes across in the film? Do you feel this is true?
9. Time and time again, Saffire has been told that its music has been empowering, has gotten one through a divorce (or other rough times), has helped to find humor in painful situations. Since Saffire has been so supportive to so many, why has it not received greater recognition? Why no major TV opportunities? No Oprah? No Ellen?
10. In 2009, Saffire celebrated its 25th and final year with a CD release and extensive touring. Why do you think Saffire, as an entity, is ending? What future do you envision for the individual members?

## SPECIFIC LEARNING EXERCISES

1. Select one of the Saffire recordings. Listen from start to finish in one sitting, with "pure" ears. Select one song and print out/transcribe the lyrics. Tell how this song might empower the listener.
2. List at least 20 specific jobs that any band might need to do when pursuing careers as full time musicians.
3. Saffire has been influenced by and continues the tradition of many of the blues women of the 1920s and 30s -- the Classic Blues era. Research and listen to any of the following blues women and report on some of their specific recordings:
  - Gertrude "Ma" Rainey
  - Bessie Smith
  - Ida Cox
  - Sippie Wallace
  - Lucille Bogan
  - Victoria Spivey
  - Alberta Hunter
4. Based on the woman chosen in #3, describe one of her songs that might be similar in form and/or in content to a Saffire song.
5. Some other blues women who were influential to Saffire, but not part of the Classic Blues era, are listed below. Again, research and listen to any of them and report on some of their specific recordings:
  - Memphis Minnie
  - Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton
  - Ruth Brown
  - KoKo Taylor
  - Etta James
  - Rory Block
6. Most contemporary blues trios are guitar based, but Saffire is piano based. Ann Rabson has listed many of her piano heroes on her website. Visit [www.annrabson.com](http://www.annrabson.com). Select one of the pianists/selections, listen and report on this recording.
7. Andra Faye plays bass, mandolin, violin/fiddle, and guitar. The mandolin and fiddle give Saffire a unique "flavor" and a string band feel. Some of Andra's influences are Yank Rachell, Howard Armstrong and Rich DelGrosso. Locate a recording by one of these musicians, listen and report on the recording.

8. Gaye Adegbalola has written several Saffire songs that are often requested in concert. Some of her favorite writers are Willie Dixon, Denise LaSalle, and Jimmy Reed. As in #7 and #8, select one recording by one of these musicians, listen and report on the recording.
9. There are many different kinds of blues (see the Wikipedia information). This assignment is to write a 12 bar blues. Each verse should have two lines that are the same and a third line that answers/responds to the 1st two lines. Each verse should be complete within itself, should be able to stand alone (i.e., not need additional verses to give or clarify the meaning). Your blues will be even better if there's humor and/or double entendre.
10. Living Blues, Blues Revue, and Big City Blues are periodicals dedicated to the blues. One major e-zine is Blues Wax. Read one of these magazines.
11. The Blues Foundation is a non-profit dedicated to keeping the blues alive. The Blues Music Awards and the International Blues Competition are sponsored by the Foundation. Visit the website, [www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org), and describe either event.
12. Select one Saffire CD. Based on reviews (style and content) in the magazines above, write a review of the Saffire CD you selected.

**Special Thanks to Gaye Adegbalola for her generous help in the creation of this guidebook.**

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