

CHARLOTTE **BLAKE ALSTON**



MASTER
STORYTELLER
& NARRATOR



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> BIOGRAPHY

CHARLOTTE BLAKE ALSTON

Master Storyteller, Narrator & Singer

Charlotte Blake Alston is a storyteller, narrator, librettist, instrumentalist and singer who performs in venues throughout North America and abroad. Venues are wide and include the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Smithsonian Institution, the Kimmel Center, the Women of the World Festival in Cape Town, South Africa, prisons, detention centers and a refugee camp in northern Senegal.

She breathes life into traditional and contemporary stories from African and African American oral and cultural traditions. Her solo performances are often enhanced with traditional instruments such as djembe, mbira, shekere or the 21-stringed kora. In 1999, Charlotte began studying the kora and the West African history-telling traditions of Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Guinea Bissau. Her teacher was the highly respected Senegalese griot (jali), the late Djimo Kouyate. She has recently resumed her studies with Malian Virtuoso Yacouba Sissoko.

She brings her stories and songs to national and regional festivals, schools, universities, museums, libraries and performing arts centers throughout the United States and Canada, as well as local and national radio and television. Her repertoire is wide-ranging and programs are adapted to any grade level or age group.

In 1991, Charlotte became the first storyteller to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra on both their Family and Student concert series. Since 1994, she has been the host of "Sound All Around"; the orchestra's preschool concert series and continues to appear as a guest host and narrator on family concerts. For 6 seasons, Charlotte hosted "Carnegie Kids", Carnegie Hall's Preschool concert series and has been a featured artist on the Carnegie Hall Family Concert Series in NY since 1996. She has been a featured teller at The National Storytelling Festival, The National Festival of Black Storytelling, and at regional festivals throughout North America and abroad. She has been a featured artist at both the Presidential Inaugural Festivities in Washington, DC and the Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Children's Inaugural Celebrations in Harrisburg, PA. In addition to her solo performances, Charlotte performs with her brother, world-renowned jazz violinist, John Blake, Jr. and his band in *Tellin' On The Downbeat: A Program of Storytelling And Jazz*. In *Fiddlin' With Stories*, Charlotte and John perform as a duo featuring violin and kora, in a program that celebrates the role of stringed instruments in African and African American culture. She has collaborated with numerous instrumental ensembles as well the Opera Company of Philadelphia, Opera North and the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company. She has been a featured narrator for several orchestras and conductors including The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Orchestra of St. Luke's, The Cleveland Orchestra, the Saint Louis Symphony, the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. She represented Carnegie Hall in 2003 when she hosted a series of concerts in Miyazaki, Japan with the Eddie Arron String Quartet and fellow storyteller, Motoko. Currently, she performs as both pre-concert artist and host of Carnegie Hall's Family and Education Concert Series. In addition, she served as a host for Carnegie Hall's Community Sing-Ins.

Charlotte's narrative voice can be heard on documentaries including *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*, *The Peddie School*, and *Crosstown*. In the PBS documentary *Safe Harbor*, producers proclaim her "strong, steady voice is like a lantern in the darkness". She has narrated two shows at the Franklin Institute's Fels Planetarium – *Under African Skies* and *Stars of Wonder*. She herself was featured in the award-winning documentary *Family Name* that aired around the country on PBS. Kinocraft Media Productions converted her *Martin Luther King Storypoem* to video format for educational distribution. She is the narrative voice for a series of training videos produced by Global Media Health. Her stories can also be heard by downloading the *Tales2Go* application for the iPhone.

Ms. Alston has produced several commissioned works for orchestras and opera companies including original narrative texts for *Carnival of the Animals* and *Scherzade*. More recently she has been engaged as a librettist for the Philadelphia Orchestra and The Commonwealth Youth Choirs.

Charlotte has received numerous honors including the prestigious Pew Fellowship in the Arts. She was selected as Philadelphia Magazine's "Best of Philly" and was the recipient of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Artist Of The Year Award (The Hazlett Memorial Award), which recognizes individual artists "for excellence in the Commonwealth." She holds two honorary PhDs and received the "Circle of Excellence" Award from the National Storytelling Association.

Charlotte was one of four Americans selected to perform and present at the first International Storytelling Field Conference in Ghana and was a featured artist at the Second Int'l Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. In the summer of 2005, she was the sole American selected to perform on a main stage at the STIMMEN:Voices Festival in Basel, Switzerland and The Cape Clear Island Festival in Ireland. In 1996, she was the Director of "In the Tradition..." the 14th National Festival of Black Storytelling. She is a recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award bestowed by the National Association of Black Storytellers.

> PROGRAM OFFERINGS

Whether or not she accompanies a story with a thumb piano, djembe or 21-string kora, Charlotte Blake Alston's most powerful instrument is her melodic and mesmerizing voice. It is with that primary instrument that she breathes life into ancient and contemporary tales. In this electronic age, Charlotte does what stories have achieved for thousands of years and engage the imagination, underscore human commonalities and reiterate life lessons gained from centuries of human experience. All programs draw on the rich source of stories, songs, games and rhythmic elements that are hallmarks of the African and African American oral traditions. Program content/story choices are geared to each age group.

School and Public Programs

(School Programs are 45 minutes in length, Family Programs are 60 minutes in length. Adult Programs are generally 75-90 minutes with no intermission.)

STORIES AND SONGS IN THE ORAL TRADITION

For hundreds of years throughout the African continent, people gathered and told stories. The tradition may be the strongest in the West African countries of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea and Mali where history was preserved and is still passed down orally through the words and music of the griots or jalis. Stories were the way the beliefs, mythology, cultural identity, history, and shared community values of a people were taught and preserved. The tradition continued when Africans were brought to America. Charlotte selects from her wide repertoire of stories and songs from the African and African American oral traditions. Adapted to suit Elementary, MS, HS audiences. (45 min.) Family audiences (60 minutes).

COME TELL WITH ME!*

This program of stories and songs is geared specifically for my youngest story listeners. All stories and songs include lots of audience participation. Come ready to clap, sing and help tell the stories! *While toddlers are welcome at public programs, please note that the performance is not geared to children younger than 3 years old. PreK-2nd Grade (3-7 yr-olds) (Length: 30-40 min).

EHSOTI: STANDING ON TRADITION

Long before the written word the history, traditions and cultural values of African people were passed down orally. When Africans were brought to the Americas, the storytelling tradition continued. These traditional tales and songs are the foundation upon which many of today's African American storytellers stand. The stories continue to strengthen, sustain and bind a community with a shared American experience. But that human experience is woven into the larger story that is the common, shared history of all Americans.

Charlotte Blake Alston grew up in the segregated 1950's in a family, neighborhood and church community that valued, maintained and celebrated their unique traditions and legacies. While her community was maligned from the outside, she was spoon-fed its cultural riches from the inside. This backdrop, enhanced by a special relationship between father and daughter, became the soil that produced the storyteller she eventually became.

Charlotte will share an evening of the traditional African and African American stories and songs that have become the hallmark of her repertoire interspersed with glimpses of those childhood influences that shaped her life. Come share this celebration of storytelling and oral tradition. Come share the power of the oral tradition.

This 75 minute program will be performed without and intermission. Stories will be announced from the stage.

> NARRATIONS / COMMISSIONS

Choir, Symphony Orchestra, Ensemble, Opera & Media Narration Includes standard repertoire, recently created and original texts

*Asterisk denotes commissioned work

Charlotte is frequently invited to perform with symphony orchestras as guest host, narrator, or storyteller. Her work with The Philadelphia Orchestra has been continuous since 1992 as a narrator for family concerts and host of *Sound All Around*, the orchestra's preschool concert series. She has served as a narrator and storyteller at Carnegie Hall since 1995. She has also been commissioned to write narrations for a number of orchestral works.



Narrations

Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock

Babar (Poulenc)

Capture

Carnival of the Animals - Saint-Saens (Versions: Ogden Nash, Peter Schickele, Original)

The Cricket's Cage

Come Sunday (*Original text, 2nd Movement of Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige*)

Excerpts of MLK Dream Speech to the Barber Adagio for Strings

The Fanfare King - for the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall for Musical Explorers concerts

God's Trombones

Jack and the Sleeping Musicians - for the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall for Musical Explorers concerts

Kabo Omowale: Welcome Home Child - Clearfield (Original Libretto)

King David (Singing City Choir)

A Lincoln Portrait - Copland

Margaret Garner: Concert Text - for the Opera Company of Philadelphia's concert version of Tony Morrison's full opera, *Margaret Garner*

Origin of the Bamboo Flute

Peter and The Wolf - Tchaikovsky

Positive Women: Susan - Vandervelde

SARAH, from Women of Valor - Clearfield (Spoken Text by Ellen Frankel)

Scheherazade - Rimsky-Korsakov (*Original Text for Movements I and 4)

The Firebird Suite - Stravinsky (Narrative text by Neal Gittleman)

The Good Raised Up – John Blake, Jr. (The Commonwealth Youthchoirs, Original Libretto)

The Incredible Flutist - Piston

The Life and Times of Richard Allen (Stage Production)

Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra - Britten

Vanqui: Concert text - for Opera North's concert version of John A. Williams' full opera *Vanqui*. (Concert narrated by Avery Brooks)

Organizations

1807 and Friends Chamber Music Ensemble

Allentown Symphony Orchestra

Ambassadors' Chorale and Ensemble

The Baltimore Symphony

Carnegie Hall Jazz Band

Chinese Music Ensemble of New York

The Cleveland Orchestra

The Commonwealth Youth Choirs

The Delaware Symphony Orchestra

Fels Planetarium: The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, PA

Huntingdon County Arts Council

Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra

Mt. Carmel Baptist Church Choir

The Memphis Symphony Orchestra

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra

The Opera Company of Philadelphia

Opera North

The Orchestra of St. Luke's

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

The Philadelphia Orchestra

POPG (Philadelphia Orchestra Percussion Group)

Saint Louis Symphony

Singing City Choir

Smithsonian Institution: Museum of American History

> COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM OFFERINGS

TELLIN' ON THE DOWNBEAT

Charlotte Blake Alston, Master Storyteller and the John Blake Jr. Jazz Quartet

Charlotte and her brother, renowned jazz violinist John Blake, Jr. have joined together to create a program combining the magic of storytelling with the compelling sounds of jazz. The central piece "How the Raccoon Got His Dinner" is a humorous adaptation of an African American folktale with each animal in the story identified by its own musical theme (a la "Peter and the Wolf.")

Also included in the program are engaging jazz renditions of familiar children's songs and other stories and monologues from Charlotte's repertoire. "Tellin' on the Downbeat" is a great way to introduce young people to jazz and to entice adults back into the magical and mythical worlds that reveal ancient wisdom through story.

John Blake and the band are also available for workshops in improvisation, composition, and Afro-American music history. Charlotte is available for her workshops as well.

"...extraordinary program...everything an artistic partnership should be — stories and music with bounce, character, verve and meaning. Terrific from beginning to end."
— Performing Arts Foundation, Wausau, Wisconsin

FIDDLIN' WITH STORIES

Charlotte Blake Alston, Master Storyteller and John Blake Jr. Jazz Violinist

This unique program taps the skills of both artists as musicians, storytellers and teachers and is designed to reach audiences of all ages. The performance celebrates the role of stringed instruments in African and African American culture and history. In both traditions ancient and modern instruments such as kora, xalam, bolong, ngoni, fiddle and banjo have been an integral part of the life of a community. Stringed instruments were played as history was recited or sung, when babies were named, when couples married, as the community celebrated or grieved. Stories, poignant and funny are blended throughout the program to instrumental accompaniment. Residency activities may include workshops in improvisation, the history of the violin in African and African American history and culture, integrating storytelling into the curriculum, African American dialect and more. Details available upon request.



> WORKSHOP OFFERINGS

**Workshops for Teachers, Tellers, and Interested Persons (unless otherwise noted).
Workshop length, 90 min. unless otherwise noted.**

Teachers/Teachers-in-Training:

READING, WRITING, SPEAKING & TELLING: SUGGESTIONS FOR INCORPORATING STORYTELLING INTO YOUR CURRICULUM

Whether it's stimulating ideas for writing, bringing history alive, enhancing auditory skills, expanding children's understanding of specific cultures or increasing appreciation for oral telling, storytelling is a readily accessible vehicle for classroom teachers. This workshop will explore some of the practical ways teachers can make use of storytelling in the classroom. 90 minutes.

General Audiences: Children, Families, Teachers (Adapted for Storytellers):

RHYTHM THIS AND MELODY THAT

Rhythm has always been an essential element in African and African American folk traditions including storytelling. As earth dwellers, we interact with and are influenced by rhythm from the moment of our conception. Charlotte shares her cultural rhythmic influences and invites you to explore the application of rhythm, music and song in stories and storytelling performance. The workshop can be adapted for children, families or storytellers. Length and depth vary according to target audience.

Schools (All Grades):

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: PRE OR POST-PERFORMANCE INTERVIEW

A special classroom visit in preparation for or as a follow-up to a performance or assembly program. All performance related questions are welcome including, but not limited to, questions about: folktales; animal characters; tricksters; voice changes; facial expression; body movement; instruments; difference between reading and telling a story; use of words in African languages; story choices; learning a story; where Charlotte finds stories; writing an original or historical story or poem; experiences in countries outside the United States; a story's country of origin; West African history, culture, traditions; family history/influences, and others.

Additional Workshop Options:

Additional workshops may be created in consultation with the presenter. The following are examples of possible titles and themes: What is a Civil Right? (5th to 8th grades), Africa is Not a Country (Elem/MS), Pick a Teller's Brain or Why in Heaven's Name Would You Choose to be a Storyteller? (post-concert Q&A), The Business Aspect of Free Lancing, Cross-disciplinary Collaborations, The Dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, African/African American Oral Traditions, Get out there and Market Yourself! (beginning tellers only).



> QUOTES

“Charlotte’s Performance was truly the jewel in the crown of our Women’s History Month celebration”

— *Leslie Stiles, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Commission for Women*

“Your storytelling displays a masterful simplicity that engages children’s imaginations, teaches them about African and African-American cultural heritage, and expands their vocabulary.”

— *Sheila Kerrigan, Coordinator of Education and Community Programs Duke Performances, Durham, NC*

“A joy to work with! Her dynamic narration [at Carnegie Hall with The American Composers Orchestra] was imbued with passion and musical sensitivity.”

— *John Morris Russell, Associate Conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra*

“Charlotte’s incredible presence and cleverness unifies audiences of all ages and backgrounds by drawing them in emotionally through her enchanting gifts of communication.”

— *Mark Laycock, Guest Conductor, The Philadelphia Orchestra*

“...your performance art gives the entire field of children’s performing arts more integrity.”

— *Sue Buratto, Education Director, Bass Hall and Performing Arts Fort Worth*

“Eloquent storytelling...”

— *The New York Times*

“Mesmerizing”

— *Shepherd College, WV*

“Superb, spellbinding...”

— *Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD*

“Powerful...”

— *Ted Kennedy*

“Impressive...”

— *Detroit Institute of Arts, MI*

“Enchanting, captivating, mesmerizing...Your storytelling talents were exceeded only by your ability to connect with diverse audiences on varying levels.” [Duncanson Artist-in-Residence]

— *Taft Museum, Cincinnati, OH*



> PAST PERFORMANCE VENUES

Buffalo State College	Buffalo, NY	New Jersey Performing Arts Center	Newark, NJ
Carnegie Hall	Lewisburg, WV	Oklahoma City Storytelling Festival	
Carver Community Cultural Center	San Antonio, TX	Scranton Cultural Center	Scranton, PA
The Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences	Charleston, WV	Sheasis Performing Arts Center	Buffalo, NY
Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park	Cincinnati, OH	Southern Ohio Museum	Portsmouth, OH
Diana Wortham Theatre	Asheville, NC	Tapestry of Tales	Portland, OR
Forest Storytelling Festival	Port Angeles, WA	Timpanogos Storytelling Festival	UT
John Drew Theatre	East Hampton, NY	Three Rivers Arts Festival	Pittsburgh, PA
The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts		The Music Hall	Portsmouth, NH
The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts		Victoria Theater	Dayton, OH
Longwood Gardens	Kennett Square, PA	Weber State University	Salt Lake City, UT
National Storytelling Festival	Jonesborough, TN		

> HONORS / AWARDS / ACCOLADES

Circle of Excellence (National Storytelling Network)

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Artist Of The Year Award (The Hazlett Memorial Award)

Pew Fellowship

Seton Hill College Honorary Doctorate

LaRoche College Honorary Doctorate

Philadelphia Magazine's "Best of Philly"

Zora Neale Hurston Award (National Association of Black Storytellers)

