Dear Audience Member,

Welcome to the Williams Center for the Arts’ Family Series! On Saturday, March 3 at 2 p.m., you will attend a performance of Charlotte Blake Alston’s Songs and Stories in the Oral Tradition.

This Audience Guide is designed to support and enrich your enjoyment of the performance. It contains information about the artist and the performance you will see, and suggestions for discussions. You and your children can actively participate during the performance by:

- LISTENING AND USING YOUR IMAGINATION to visualize the characters and places in the stories the artist is performing
- OBSERVING the interaction between the artist and the audience
- THINKING ABOUT the values the stories communicate

We hope you find this Audience Guide useful. Following the performance, please join us in the lobby for refreshments and a chance to meet the artist. Thank you for coming to the Williams Center for the Arts. We appreciate your patronage!
Charlotte Blake Alston has a vast repertoire of stories, including:

- The River that Went to the Sky (Malawi)
- The Lion’s Whiskers (Ethiopia)
- The Story of Anniko (Senegal)
- Nyangara the Python (Zimbabwe)
- Thakane and the Nanabolele (Lesotho)
- Anansi’s Children (Ghana)
- Why the Tides Ebb and Flow (origin unknown)

Whether she accompanies a story with a thumb piano, mbira, shekere, djembe, or 21-string kora, Charlotte Blake Alston’s most powerful instrument is her mesmerizing voice. It is with that primary instrument that she breathes life into ancient and contemporary tales; stories that engage the imagination, underscore human commonalities, and reiterate life lessons gained from centuries of human experience.

The tradition of storytelling on the African continent may be strongest in the West African countries of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali where history was preserved and is still passed down orally through words and music. Stories were the way the beliefs, mythology, cultural identity, history, and community values of a people were taught and preserved. The tradition continued when Africans were brought to America.

Charlotte Blake Alston’s programs draw on a rich source of stories, songs, games and rhythmic elements. One type of story is the African “porquoi” tale. These are folk stories that make you think, “Hmm…” Offering creative and humorous ideas for natural phenomena and humans’ relationship with the universe, these stories provide the listener with food for thought. At the center of many of these tales are such familiar characters as Anansi the Spider from Ghana, or Sungura the Rabbit from Kenya. Not only may you find yourself asking, “What will Turtle do next?” you may also find yourself asking, “What would I do in that situation?” Hmmm…

Charlotte Blake Alston is a world-renowned storyteller, narrator, librettist, instrumentalist, and singer. Her performance career has taken her to festivals, schools, universities, museums, libraries, and performing arts centers throughout the United States, Canada, and abroad. She has also performed on national radio and television; at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; the Smithsonian Institution; the Women of the World Festival in Cape Town, South Africa; and a refugee camp in northern Senegal.

A featured storyteller at The National Storytelling Festival and The National Festival of Black Storytelling, Charlotte has performed at the Presidential Inaugural Festivities in Washington, DC, and the Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Children’s Inaugural Celebrations. In 1991, Charlotte became the first storyteller to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra on both their Family and Student concert series.

Charlotte Blake Alston 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 International Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. She is a recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award bestowed by the National Association of Black Storytellers.
ABOUT STORYTELLING

No one knows when the first story was actually told. The history of storytelling reveals that there were many types of stories—myths, legends, fairy tales, trickster stories, fables, ghost tales, and hero and epic adventures. Stories were told, retold, and passed down from generation to generation. Before humans learned to write, they had to rely on memory to learn anything. For this, they had to be good listeners. A good storyteller could easily find an audience, eager to devour every exciting bit of information in their stories.

Storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston follows in the centuries-old footsteps of the African griot (pronounced GREE-oh). What is a griot? In many West African cultures, the griot is a storyteller, musician, poet, and historian.

In ancient Africa, at the end of the day, the griot might summon the people of his village with a drum or rattle. As the villagers gathered round, the griot would tell wonderful stories, perhaps with dancing and songs. In some stories, creatures or people would deal with the mysteries of nature. Other stories would tell of everyday life. Still others came from the tribe’s history, perhaps describing great wars, thrilling hunts, or the births, marriages, and deaths of the tribe’s members.

Charlotte Blake Alston explains, “Many of these stories come out of the condition of slavery and our feelings of powerlessness. The stories use animals and people, and deal with the supernatural, the inexplicable. A lot are about underdogs who live by their wits.”

Griots still exist today in many parts of West Africa. Some of the most famous pop music stars of Mali, Guinea, and Senegal are griots who have transformed traditional songs into modern music. Charlotte studied with the highly respected Senegalese griot Djimo Kouyate.

Today, stories remain an important part of our culture. The influence of storytelling can be seen in all aspects of our lives—movies, television, books, music, religion, and art. Stories define our values, desires, and dreams. They can inspire, teach, and impart wisdom. In fact, many historians and psychologists believe that storytelling is one of the many things that define and bind our humanity. Humans are perhaps the only animals that create and tell stories.

THE VALUE OF STORYTELLING FOR CHILDREN

There are many advantages of storytelling for children, especially for preschoolers, kindergarteners, and young children. The stories we hear as children shape our view of the world. Most small children live their lives in a limited environment. Reading stories to children can show them far-flung places, extraordinary people, and eye-opening situations that expand and enrich their world. Storytelling can help make children aware of their own culture and roots, as well.

Children all over the world love listening to stories. They want to know more about their favorite characters and often try to emulate them. By telling your child stories that come with a meaningful message, you can instill qualities like wisdom, courage, honesty, and tolerance from an early age.

Storytelling enhances verbal proficiency and improves listening skills. The benefits children get from having stories read to them are greatly increased when parents talk and ask questions about the story as well. Simply asking them if they can remember what happened in the story or checking if they know what some of the more complicated words mean can really extend their understanding and vocabulary. More complex “inference” questions like, “why do you think this character did that?” help children think about and understand other people’s motivations.

Storytelling is as simple as reading a story from a book. If you don’t have that much time, you can always share a story from memory or talk about your own childhood.
What does a storyteller need in order to perform? How did Charlotte Blake Alston use her voice to differentiate between characters? Were you able to tell the characters apart?

What did you learn from the characters and situations in the stories? If you were a character in one of the stories would you have acted the same?

As an audience member, why was it important to use your imagination when you listened to the storyteller?

What is a “porquoi tale”?

In what ways did you actively participate in the performance?

What are some of the stories and characters you especially enjoyed?

Can you remember the names of some of the instruments that Charlotte played? How do you think the instruments enhanced the stories?

Describe one thing you learned about storytelling by seeing this performance.

Do you like telling stories? Perhaps you might try playing the role of griot for your family, classroom, or school. What kind of tales would you tell?