

UPDATED AND EXPANDED THIRD EDITION

blues

TRAVELING

The Holy Sites of Delta Blues



Steve Cheseborough

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THIRD EDITION

Steve Cheseborough

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To my mom

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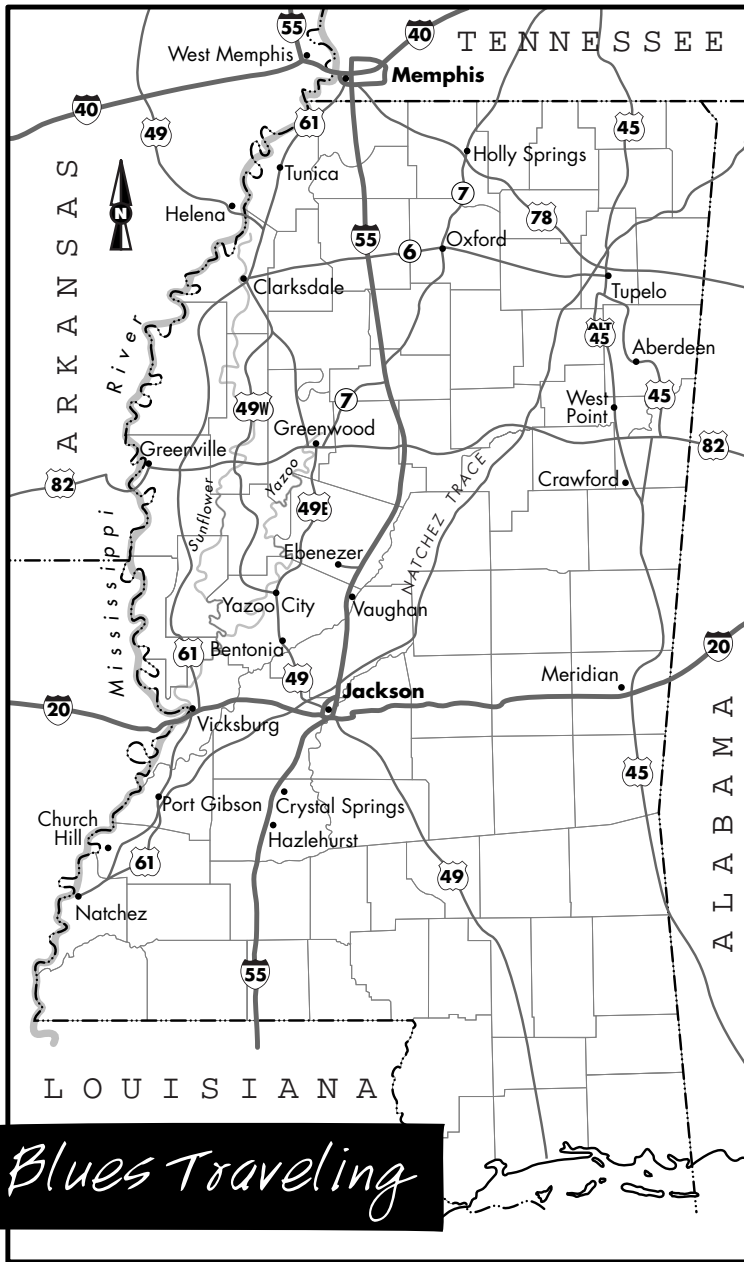
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blues
TRAVELING



chapter 1

LOOKING FOR THE BLUES

Is the blues still a vibrant tradition as we listen and explore in the twenty-first century? Or is it fading away?

Let's ask George Messenger, the trim sixty-eight-year-old who owns Messenger's Pool Room, the café his grandfather opened more than a hundred years ago on Fourth Street (now Martin Luther King Avenue), the heart of Clarksdale's black community.

"There were businesses all up and down this street," Messenger says, thinking back to his childhood. "On Saturday night the whole area was crowded, food was cooking—barbecue, fish, tamales. The sharecroppers would come into town to have a good time. But the cotton harvester and the casinos ruined business."

The mechanized cotton harvester took away the sharecroppers' work, sending most of them up North for factory jobs. And, more recently, the casinos took away what was left of the Saturday night good-time crowd. And meanwhile, the end of rigid segregation gave black people alternatives to hanging out in jook joints.

"I think the blues is dead, myself," Messenger says. "The blues got started because of the way things were. People were held down. A black person was over here, pushed down. They didn't have nothing else to do but moan."

Still, Messenger doesn't mind the new interest in blues. "It brings people here," he says. "If it hadn't been for the rich white people to talk about blues, and the blues museum, there wouldn't be anything even to talk about anymore."

Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, blues musician and owner of the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, also has seen the local customer base dry up.

"There were eight jook joints in this town and they all used to be full," Holmes says. "Then the interstate came through and people moved to the city. And on the farms, the two-row machinery got upgraded to eight-row. That put people out of work. The jook joint and the general store both are almost gone."

Rather than cry silently about the loss, Holmes does his best to keep both the blues and the jook joint alive. Every day, after working his day job as a school truant officer, he opens up the sixty-year-old jook joint his parents established. His friends and neighbors come in nightly. "This is the nucleus of the community. Always has been," Holmes says. "After a funeral or a church revival, people come here."

These days, travelers who are familiar with Holmes's recent recordings or the town's blues history sometimes augment the local crowd. Holmes doesn't sit around wondering if the blues is still alive. He just gets out his guitar and plays, after making sure everybody has a beer.

Blues Traveling through History

Perhaps the first "blues traveler" in Mississippi was the Harvard archaeologist Charles Peabody, who dug up an Indian mound near Clarksdale in 1901–1902. He looked up from the ground and took careful note of the local black workers' songs.

As Peabody reported in an article he wrote for a folklore journal, the workers sang almost constantly during the day and as they relaxed in the evening. They sang hymns, ragtime pieces, and (what most interested Peabody) "improvisations in rhythm more or less phrased, sung to an intoning more or less approaching melody." The lyrics of those songs were "'hard luck' tales (very often), love themes, suggestions anticipative and reminiscent of favorite occupations and amusements." If that wasn't the blues, it

certainly was close. Among the verses he recorded in his notes are some that have become familiar blues lines:

*They had me arrested for murder
And I never harmed a man*

*The reason I loves my baby so
'Cause when she gets five dollars she give me fo'*

Some have not entered the blues lexicon:

*Old Dan Tucker he got drunk,
Fell in de fire and kicked up a chunk*

*Oh we'll live on pork and kisses
If you'll only be my missus.*

According to Peabody's description, the guitar accompaniment also sounded like the blues—"mostly 'ragtime' with the instrument seldom venturing beyond the inversions of the three chords of a few major and minor keys."

In 1903, W. C. Handy, an Alabama-born, African American band musician who had been touring the country for years, settled in Clarksdale to lead an orchestra of black musicians. Handy's first exposure to the blues happened soon after that, while he was waiting for a long-overdue train in the Tutwiler depot:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.

It certainly did. A few years later, Handy would publish "The Yellow Dog Rag" (which he would rename "The Yellow Dog Blues"), incorporating that line. And he would become known as the Father of the Blues for pieces like that one and "The St. Louis Blues" and "The Memphis Blues"—songs written in standard notation, arranged for bands, and published nationally as sheet mu-

sic, based on what Handy heard from anonymous guitar-plunking Mississippians like the man in the train station.

Handy's compositions spurred the first blues craze. The word "blues" became nationally known and identified with the twelve-bar, AAB (sing line, repeat line, answer with rhyming line) format—a format that does not apply, by the way, to much of the very real blues of Charley Patton, Skip James, Fred McDowell, R. L. Burnside, and dozens of other genuine down-home blues artists, past and present. But even today, if you ask a rock, pop, or jazz musician to play the blues, that standardized format is what you will get.

The next blues craze began in 1920, when bandleader-composer Perry Bradford persuaded the Okeh record company in New York to make the first recording of a black blues singer. That first recorded singer was not a scraggly, self-taught, guitar-toting southern man of the sort Handy had heard in Tutwiler, though. It was Mamie Smith, a well-dressed woman with a professionally trained voice, singing before a full orchestra. Smith's voice is smooth, lacking what we now consider bluesy effects. Still, blacks who were hearing such a sound on records for the first time were thrilled. It was a huge hit. Smith's recording would be followed by those of other sophisticated blueswomen, or "Classic blues" singers, as they are known, eventually including the great, rougher-voiced Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

It wasn't until the mid-twenties that the companies would record the kind of person Handy had seen in Tutwiler and whom we still consider the quintessential blues singer: a self-accompanied male singer. Among the earliest were the banjo-playing (and not scruffy at all) Papa Charlie Jackson of New Orleans, the southeastern guitar virtuoso Blind Blake, and the most popular and influential of them all, the Dallas street singer Blind Lemon Jefferson. Jefferson traveled widely, recorded prolifically, and became the first superstar of the country blues. He showed record companies that there was lots of money to be made in recording male, rural, southern, self-accompanied blues singer-guitarists. So the companies combed the South, auditioning everyone of that description they could find and giving the promising ones tickets to recording studios in the North. Soon they hastened the process

by sending the recording equipment south and setting up temporary studios in hotel rooms.

They found the richest mine of bluesmen—and a few blueswomen—in or near the flat, fertile cotton lands of the Mississippi Delta: Charley Patton, Son House, Willie Brown, Louise Johnson, Skip James, Tommy Johnson, George “Bullet” Williams, Rubin Lacy, Memphis Minnie, Kansas Joe McCoy, the Mississippi Sheiks, Kid Bailey, Bukka White, Robert Johnson, Mattie Delaney, Geechie Wiley, Ishmon Bracey, Mississippi John Hurt, William Harris, Eugene “Sonny Boy Nelson” Powell, and many others. These musicians went to Memphis or all the way up to Chicago or Grafton, Wisconsin, to sing and play for a few bucks and the chance to become immortal. As producer Frank Walker said of those sessions: “You might come out with two selections or you might come out with six or eight, but you did it at that time. You said goodbye. They went back home. They had made a phonograph record, and that was the next thing to being president of the United States in their mind.”

Commercial country-blues field recording peaked in the late 1920s. By the thirties the record companies, hurt by the Depression, were releasing records only by proven artists, most of whom were southerners transplanted to Chicago, such as Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, and Tampa Red. But down in Mississippi, people continued to play the down-home blues in jook joints and on street corners, even if they weren’t making it onto record as often.

The blues just might have been born in Mississippi. On the other hand, it might not have. The first blues may have been played somewhere else in the rural South. There are early reports of blues in east Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, and even Missouri.

What is clear is that the blues, since its beginnings, has always found a home here. Mississippians have always made up a large proportion of all blues singers and an overwhelming proportion of the finest blues singers. That includes the whole Chicago blues scene from the 1930s to the present—nearly all its stars have been Mississippi-born. And that is true of both the prewar acoustic period and the later electric period, when Mississippians like Muddy Waters, Elmore James, B. B. King, and Little Milton set the standard.

Mississippi was more rural and agricultural, with a greater concentration of cotton planting, than other states. And it had a large, poor, strictly segregated black population, which was overwhelmingly rural and working in agriculture. In other words, Mississippi has long been more southern than the rest of the South, and that goes double for the Mississippi Delta, which has been dubbed “the most southern place on earth.” So the conditions that fostered the blues throughout the South were intensified in Mississippi, especially in the Delta.

When people speak of the delta of a river, they usually mean the area where it washes into the sea or a lake. But the Mississippi Delta is hundreds of miles upstream, in northwest Mississippi (it has a mirror image in northeast Arkansas, but “the Delta” usually refers just to the Mississippi side, and that’s how we’ll use it here). It’s a flat, leaf-shaped expanse of seven thousand square miles, with the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers on its curved sides and Memphis and Vicksburg at its tips.

Thousands of years of Mississippi River floods left the Delta with a thick, dark layer of fertile topsoil. In its natural state, the Delta was a jungly place full of swamps, large trees, vines, and animals. Nineteenth-century settlers quickly perceived its economic value, however. The area was cleared, and it became first a huge lumber camp and then a huge cotton plantation. Both the lumber and the cotton operations were labor intensive, as was the building of levees to protect the settlers and their farms from the regular, gargantuan floods. So tens of thousands of blacks were brought in to work the Delta—first as slaves and later as levee gangs, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or transient day laborers from the hill country.

Today, the Delta is a sparsely populated, generally quiet place. But back in the twenties and thirties, before the mechanization of agriculture, its fields and now-sleepy towns were alive with people. The crowds and the money attracted musicians (many Delta blues artists were actually born in the hills) who interacted, competed, and innovated. As ethnomusicologist David Evans has explained, the Delta, despite its rural nature, functioned like an urban area, pulling in people from widespread places with diverse musical traditions. In this environment, the famed Delta blues developed.

Outside the Delta, Mississippians also played the blues. The

North Mississippi hill country is home to a droning, hypnotic variety of blues exemplified by Mississippi Fred McDowell, Junior Kimbrough, and R. L. Burnside, among others, as well as to related traditions including African American fife-and-drum bands. The state capital, Jackson, has long been an important recording center, with plenty of live music as well. There and in nearby towns, Bo Carter, the Mississippi Sheiks, and others practiced their smoother blues styles. Bentonia is the birthplace of Skip James and Jack Owens, two artists with styles so similar to each other's yet distinctive from anyone else's that some scholars consider the town a unique blues "school." Jimmie Rodgers, the white singing brakeman whose yodeling versions of black blues songs were the start of country music, came from Meridian, in east-central Mississippi. And Memphis, Tennessee, has always attracted Mississippians, among them musicians who played on Beale Street and heavily influenced that city's sounds.

Mississippi blues reemerged as a national phenomenon in the 1940s, after the young Mississippian Muddy Waters caught the train north, bringing his slide-guitar-driven music style with him. His collaborators and competitors who also made the trip included fellow Mississippians Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Rogers, Big Walter Horton, Elmore James, Jimmy Reed, and Otis Spann.

The image of Muddy Waters leaving Mississippi and taking the blues with him is a powerful one, but it is not quite true. For one thing, when he arrived in Chicago, the blues was already there—although he did usher in a harder, electric version of it. And, for another thing, Mississippians didn't stop singing the blues after Muddy left.

Popular attention focused again on Mississippi blues—not just on its Chicago outpost—in the folk and blues revival of the 1960s. Young white northerners went south to scout out the old blues records of the twenties and thirties and, in some cases, the old people who had made them. Son House, Skip James, and Mississippi John Hurt were among those found alive and well enough to enjoy new performing and recording careers late in life.

That blues boom faded out soon enough. But there would be yet another in the '90s, kicked off by the re-release of Robert Johnson's complete output as a double-CD box set that turned out to

be a smash hit. That set was the first, and still the only, million-seller by an original country-blues artist. A few years later, the Robert Mugge film *Deep Blues* showed that there still were down-home Mississippi blues artists in real life, not just on old records. Other developments include *Living Blues* magazine moving its offices from Chicago to Oxford; new blues record companies setting up shop in Mississippi; a bunch of new and revitalized Mississippi blues festivals and blues museums; the publication of this book, making it easier for blues fans to come visit; the worldwide popularity of North Mississippi Hill Country Blues and rock-based spin-offs; and the state itself putting up blues markers all over the place. Finally, Mississippi blues was enjoying a renaissance—even in Mississippi. And it still is.

But that doesn't mean the Mississippi blues is the *same* as it was in 1929—or 1969. For one thing, you just don't hear much of the complex, solo, acoustic-guitar style that characterized Mississippi blues of the prewar period, except maybe in the hands of a young revivalist in Memphis or Oxford. But then you might hear such a revivalist in Seattle or New York, too. Don't expect to hear a Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, or Memphis Minnie playing on a corner or in a jook joint in Mississippi.

Yes, blues in Mississippi, as elsewhere, generally means electric blues. But even electric blues, sadly, is not easy to find. The best way to get your fill of live music is to schedule your visit around a blues festival. Besides the music at the festival, many local clubs, which otherwise use jukeboxes or deejays, will schedule live performances. When it's not festival time, look for live blues at clubs in the bigger towns and at concerts. Many of the old country jooks have closed or converted to recorded music only.

The physical remains of the old-time blues, such as ever existed at all, also are precarious things. Blues singers were mostly rambling sorts who didn't leave behind much in the way of estates, memoirs, letters, or other personal papers or belongings. They left their music, fortunately, and some sketchy details of the particulars of their lives. So you might not find the house where your favorite blues artist grew up or the joint where he first played your favorite song.

On the other hand, looking at things in a different way, there is much to see. The blues world hasn't changed as rapidly as the rest

of the country—in fact, in many ways it hasn't changed a whole lot in the hundred years since the blues began. There are still cottonfields, shacks, and barbecue spots. There are courthouses and jails where defendants—many of them poor and black—receive some kind of justice. There are the roads, narrow, twisting, dark, and poorly marked, leading through fields, woods, and more fields, past cotton gins and over creeks. There are trains. And there is always the river—the Big River, the continent's Main Drain, with its boats, birds, fish, fishermen, levees, and bridges, its precious silt, its threat of flood.

There are old storefronts and depots, in front of which the crowds gathered on Saturday afternoons to listen to Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, or another of the hundreds of blues singers, most of them unrecorded and now unknown, who sang their hearts out as they passed through. And there are places where people still laugh, dance, drink, and listen to the blues.

This book will help you find what *is* left in the Mississippi blues world. And it will help you remember and visualize what is gone and to pick up clues from the songs, the landscape, and literature. Let's go.

State Blues Markers

After a hundred years of ignoring its blues heritage, the state of Mississippi has embarked on an ambitious, million-dollar project to place signs all over the state, marking sites with connections to the blues.

The signs are dark blue, distinguishing them from the green state historic markers. (There are a few green historic markers at blues sites, predating this project, including W. C. Handy's home in Clarksdale and the turnoff to John Hurt's hometown, Avalon.) And they include a lot of detail: the front side has a few sentences of text, similar to a historic marker. But the flip side, vinyl-covered, has photos and much more text in small print, like a magazine page. Later signs might include high-tech features such as music and GPS data.

The state plans to place 130 blues markers, following them up with a series of Civil Rights, Civil War, and literary markers. Expert researchers, working with local sources, make recommendations on the placing and content of the markers.

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