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The Blues is Alright:  
Blues Music as a Root for Cultural Tourism and Public History

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Southern Studies  
The University of Mississippi

by

Katherine Duvall Osteen

April 2011

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## ABSTRACT

With a focus on the Mississippi Delta, Elvis Presley's Graceland, and Austin, Texas, this thesis is an exploration of the successes, failures, and necessary re-imaginings of sites of music lore, places in which the blues have played a role in music tourism, and how public history is used in different ways to accomplish a similar goal. For cities with ties to blues history, blues music tourism can become a source for financial stability as well as a teaching opportunity in the form of public history. Beyond a push to increase financial gain in places that are benefiting from blues tourism dollars, there lies an opportunity to sharpen the historic awareness of an American art form with distinctly Southern roots. However, there are few successful examples of blues music tourism that combine historic accuracy with financial progress. In most instances, the blues have been commodified to suit a specialized market, and the blues image is appropriated to create a tie to roots music without accurately representing its history. In what way has the re-imagining of blues music and blues culture shaped blues music tourism? The preservation of blues history is central to the

promotion of the blues as a cultural accessory, and as a cultural tourism agenda. The Mississippi Delta is at the forefront of using blues music tourism to foster positive growth through historic revision. Can that revisionism bridge the divide created by centuries of racial oppression? Elvis Presley's Graceland is considered part of American identity. But in actuality, it is the plantation home of a man who appropriated his talent from watching black blues musicians in and around Memphis and Mississippi.

What lessons can blues tourism take from the successes and failures of Graceland in order to become both financially successful and historically accurate? Austin, Texas, the "Live Music Capital of the World" uses the music industry as a means of self-identification. Can incorporating blues through public history exhibits help the city create a more historically inclusive music history narrative? In examining these three locations, it is easy to see the positive and negative aspects of cultural tourism. Historically responsible blues music tourism would be accessible to a broad audience without presenting an imagined version of history.

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
Introduction: THE BUSINESS OF TOURISM IN THE “TRUE SOUTH”.....	1
Chapter	
I. MUSIC TOURISM IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: THE CASH CROP OF REGIONAL IDENTITY.....	16
II. ELVIS PRESLEY’S GRACELAND: TOURISM, RACE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY.....	44
III. KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD: THE MUSIC TOURISM INDUSTRY MEETS PUBLIC HISTORY.....	60
Conclusion: BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME.....	75
NOTES.....	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	85
VITA.....	89

## INTRODUCTION

### THE BUSINESS OF TOURISM IN THE “TRUE SOUTH”

*“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.” Joan Didion*

On March 19, 2011, the South by Southwest (SXSW®) Festival in Austin, Texas, hosted a night of Mississippi music. The event, called “True South: Mississippi Music Showcase,” brought together a variety of musicians from the state who were reflective of Mississippi’s image as the “birthplace of America’s music.” Hip Hop, country, blues and indie rock musicians performed sets. Mary Beth Wilkerson, director of the Mississippi Development Authority’s Tourism Division, said, “Our state has so much more to offer than just the blues... This music showcase spotlights some hot, up-and-coming artists along with the blues artists we are known for.”<sup>1</sup> The Tourism Department set up a booth and handed out a variety of swag, from pamphlets about the Mississippi Blues Trail, to harmonicas emblazoned with the slogan “True South,” to CDs with a compilation of the best of the Mississippi blues. Blues artist Bobby Rush drew the biggest crowd, performing for a full hour. He paused halfway through his set and looked out into the audience, where his friend and fellow blues musician Pinetop Perkins sat in a wheelchair. The 97-year-old Pinetop, Pine to his close friends, made Austin his home in 2003, and had been performing at the city’s premiere blues venue Antone’s Nightclub since the 1970s. But he was a Mississippi Delta native, and he joined Rush on the microphone for a few minutes. The room was full of energy. Onlookers sensed something rare happening

as the two men played the music of the “True South.” Despite Wilkerson’s best efforts to bring recognition to other music genres with roots in the state, tourists who traveled to Austin for SXSW® saw that Mississippi was all about the blues.

Specialty tourism thrives in the American South. Festivals and tours that feature music, literature, culinary arts, and unique architecture are common across the region, and draw visitors from around the world. Natural landscapes, temperate weather and a sense of historic intrigue pique the curiosity of tourists, whose predominant knowledge of the South was shaped by reading or watching *Gone with the Wind*. A popular interest in regional heritage fostered the development of a heritage industry, combining nostalgia, culture and history to create tourist destinations. The tourist culture bolsters local economies, allowing areas that once relied on the fading prominence of agriculture to draw new economic support by exploiting the natural beauty of local geography and history. Cultural tourism is considered a “smokeless industry” – a labor-intensive export in which the only things extracted are souvenirs and photos, allowing for financial gain with light production costs.<sup>2</sup> Cultural tourism, in which a location exploits its cultural attributes for monetary gain, thrives in, but is not unique to the South. Placing exaggerated detail on notable attributes builds intrigue and draws travelers to areas of the country that may not seem like typical tourist destinations. Tourists seek out a personalized experience that corresponds with their individual interests, and the impact of tourism dollars encourages destinations to continue emphasizing local cultural attributes



in order to attract a steady audience. As the tourism industry continues to grow, destinations focus on promoting authentic<sup>3</sup> tourist experiences.

While paying tribute to local historic lore to promote tourism can generate recognition, honor and remembrance of an event or period of historic significance, it can also lead to inaccurate or problematic historic portrayals. Marketing history so that tourists can experience a culture requires an understanding of historic memory, public access and public interpretation. A balance must be struck between telling too much and not telling enough, and between explaining and covering up. Who cultivates history, and does that impact the accuracy of the presentation of historic memory? Who is responsible for historic accuracy? Is it desirable?

The primary function of cultural tourism is to provide information, entertainment and recreation, but the historic identity of the culture often gets lost in translation. In *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, Fitzhugh Brundage states, “the tourist South [is] a stage on which Southerners present the South as they want to see it and as they imagine tourists want to experience it.”<sup>4</sup> If this is true, can cultural tourism maintain its appeal while also maintaining a sense of historic integrity? In order to avoid approaching uncomfortable or difficult subjects, cultural tourism agendas often focus on the importance of regional identity by heavily promoting non-controversial highlights of a culture. This can be seen as historic erasure, but perhaps those responsible for it would rather view it as historic redistricting. Mississippi’s tourism division uses the new slogan “True South” to represent its cultural identity, and that is meant to encompass music, arts and heritage. Can you set the tourist’s stage with blues music, and leave out the state’s history of racial upheaval? Can you have a battlefield tour without an understanding of

what the war was about? The cost of cultural tourism may take little toll on the physical structure of a town, but the unseen expense lies in the price of creating cultural commodities out of actual historic experience, which very rarely tells a complete story.

Historic commissions and tourism boards must determine how they can use their past for growth. There is a major push to identify the roots of a city through cultural history. This is not a new idea, but the trend to focus on niche cultural markets is continuing to expand, drawing responses from tourists seeking specialized experiences that appeal to their individual interests. A cultural focus is emerging, and it is more readily centered around regionally specific activities. Regional identities are crafted around local traditions, and the most popular are the trifecta: local foodways, architecture, and the arts (musical and visual). Of those, music is the most wide-reaching cultural export. Much of the pulse of Southern history can be linked to the music created across the region. From country and gospel, to zydeco, jazz, and the blues, the music created in the South reflects its rich and dark history of locally disfranchised, nationally dismissed survivalists.

The elements of these styles of roots music often intertwine, and influence other genres. The significant impact of roots music on popular culture is unmistakable. Many artists that have achieved national and international acclaim owe much to the influence of roots music. For example, rock musician John Mellencamp recently recorded his album “No Better Than This” (2010 Rounder Records) at three historic recording locations, including Sun Studios in Memphis, the First African Baptist Church in Savannah (one of the oldest African-American congregations in the United States), and the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, where Don Law recorded the Delta blues musician Robert Johnson in 1936.

Singer and civil rights activist Mavis Staples produced an album with folk/rock musician Jeff Tweedy of the Grammy winning alt-country rock band Wilco. That the goal of these projects is to create historic social awareness through cultural identity may be a tad over-reaching, but a healthy recognition of the cultural significance of these endeavors, and the enormous impact of roots music on American culture, is certainly not.

Music is one of America's most unifying cultural products. The message disseminated throughout this joining of culture and creativity is: this is the way things were, this is why they are relevant now, and this is how we can connect them to our present-day lives. Recognizing the impact of this export, a major component of the growth in cultural tourism in the South has revolved around music and the promotion of music-based tourism. Cities are digging into layers of their musical pasts to tell new stories in hopes that they will preserve, profit, and prosper nationally and internationally. In *Music and Tourism: On the Road Again*, a study on music and tourism around the world, Chris Gibson and John Connell state, "the role of music in social constructions of place varies substantially from place to place, from sites that have deep histories of musical expression and production, where tourism strategies build on an existing spatial and cultural discourse, to others where musical connections are to various extents 'invented' as part of wider strategies to reinvigorate local economies or foster local cultural distinctiveness."<sup>5</sup> Whether drawing from existing historical roots, or using the universality of roots music to craft a specific image, the development of music tourism is shaping the cultural landscapes of cities that promote it.

Well-established tourist sites across the South like Beale Street, Graceland, and Stax Museum in Memphis overshadow small and underdeveloped tourist sites like the

studios of FAME Records and the Muscle Shoals Sound in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Nashville, Tennessee, has long been recognized as the home of country music. Austin, Texas, is the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World.” The recent creation of the Mississippi Blues Trail has drawn international attention to the land considered the cradle of blues music. Blues tourism is actively changing the landscape of the Mississippi Delta, and the expansion of blues tourism is becoming a cultural phenomenon. The result is a strange mix of development and interpretive historical appropriation of an art form once almost completely overlooked, then later viewed as, at best, a disreputable subculture.<sup>6</sup> Because the origins of the blues are rooted in a violent and racist Southern past, any destination using the blues as a foundation for tourism must decide how the history of the art form impacts both the landscape and the tourist experience. In making sense of blues music tourism, the biggest questions lie in how the history is presented, who has access to it, and who benefits from it.

The history of blues music is rich with cultural lore. Blues musicians have endured appropriation, injustice, denunciation, and revival at the hands of white popular culture demands. It has evolved and devolved many times as a cultural medium in the mainstream. For decades, blues tourists have been on a hunt for the true source of where the music came from – many times finding themselves on hands and knees searching for tombstones in Texas fields long overgrown and never properly marked, or combing small towns for juke joints rumored to still bring the blues. Other times, they line up outside of blues bars on the south side of Chicago to hear the blues in the same venue where musicians like Little Walter and Muddy Waters once played them. Out of this, the trend of blues music tourism has emerged in towns with ties to the blues. Blues music then

becomes the lens through which to examine how cultural tourism and public history are often combined to create or preserve tourist sites.

Hand in hand with downtown revitalization projects and Main Street development initiatives, many cultural commissions in cities with blues roots are digging deeper into their archives, attempting to deliver a fresh approach to the past. Even the lightest research would reveal that “banking” on the blues has proven monetarily beneficial for many places across the United States, from cities in the Mississippi Delta like Indianola, Clarksdale, and Helena, Arkansas, to Stillwater, Oklahoma, and even Washington, DC and Austin, Texas. From a financial standpoint, understanding and revitalizing blues music seems to be a promising path. Complications begin to arise in deciphering how, once a city rediscovers its blues roots in order to reap financial gain, it can represent the art form with historic accuracy and still present blues music and culture in a way that appeals to a broad audience.

Some cities with blues roots are focusing on general cultural revitalization instead of promoting a singular blues focus. For instance, the Deep Ellum neighborhood in Dallas, Texas once hosted traveling bluesmen like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton. The few existing recordings of Robert Johnson were made there. The neighborhood, once predominately black, was home to a host of juke joints and speakeasies. Decades of highway construction and suburban development further segregated the city, which eventually became home to a burgeoning punk rock scene, and now, in the first decade of the new millennium, Deep Ellum is being revitalized as Dallas’s Warehouse Arts District. Yet during 2010, the Deep Ellum Foundation mentioned neither blues music nor punk rock in a single one of its monthly meetings.

How do you create a plan for financial gain out of an art form that began as a form of survival and escapism in the face of severe adversity? For state sponsored tourism in Mississippi, the official answer seems to come from delivering a breadth of information including but not limited to blues tourism. Visitmississippi.org is the official website for the Mississippi Development Authority. The Mississippi Development Authority's Division of Tourism Development maintains the site, which provides information about the state's cultural resources. Once on the site, visitors can explore a variety of interactive features, and learn Mississippi facts and history in addition to finding information on trip planning and cultural offerings. There is also the option to download the 2010 tourism brochure. The colorful electronic document is 218 pages long, and includes a wealth of information about the state. In addition to pages of maps and advertisements for various businesses, there is a host of information on golfing across the state, information about hotels, casinos, local outdoor sporting activities like hunting and fishing, and schedules for significant festivals. All of this information is interspersed with brief essays on notable state attributes and points of pride including the educational legacy of the Civil War, the birthplace of Elvis Presley, and the heritage of blues music that is bringing so much positive attention to the Delta region, and subsequently, to the entire state.

A link at the bottom of the page directs you to listen to "Listen Live: Mississippi Music." During one rotation, visitors to the site can hear a Paul McCartney version of Elvis Presley's *All Shook Up*. Visitors can also watch one of four videos under the heading "Click Here For Your AUTHENTIC MISSISSIPPI EXPERIENCE." The short videos combine music, interviews and pictures of scenes from around the state. They

feature restaurants, golf courses, nightclubs, casinos, the University of Mississippi, and scenes from activities along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The videos encourage visitors to “follow their passions to Mississippi,” and are accompanied by a blues–style theme song. While the Mississippi tourism website indicates that growth on the state level is benefiting from a variety of tourist outlets, the connection to blues music created in the region is never far from sight.

Blues music, once largely ignored by white society, is now becoming the bread and butter of many towns in America, or at least a major part of cultural heritage celebrations and festivals. In many places, blues is becoming the key component to a town’s revival. For a time, there was little by way of information to steer a traveler. Now, there are tangible things to do and see, all within the framework of experiencing the blues. Bill Minutaglio, a professor of journalism at The University of Texas at Austin, spent years traveling to blues sites and writing about blues music. In an interview he noted, “I used to go to the Delta every year in the early 1980s, and there was almost zero blues tourism. I could go see Muddy Waters’s old cabin in the woods. Now it is in a museum. Is that good, less real? I don’t know. It’s a dance with the devil, I guess.”<sup>7</sup> The hope is that renewed attention on the blues will foster an appreciation for local history without eliminating its essential foundations.

Beyond a push to increase the financial gain in towns that are benefiting from blues tourism dollars, there lies an opportunity to sharpen the historic awareness of a true American art form with distinctly Southern roots. Ignoring the significance of the historic impact of this art form would lead only to its erasure. Therefore it is imperative that the historic integrity of blues music – the stories behind the music – be told openly and

alongside representations of the blues in cultural activities. Cultural tourism and public history do not have to be in competition with one another. The entire mission of public history is to “collect, preserve, and disseminate information to a non-academic audience.”<sup>8</sup> This, traditionally, is focused on museum culture, but with little effort, it is being altered to join forces with the tourism market. This could be the beginning of a new relationship between the public (civic) world and academia.

When creating sites of cultural tourism, the historic integrity of an area can easily be lost in misrepresentation. Lives and experiences become commodities in the wake of people’s expectations. A glaring example of this is often found at established sites of cultural tourism. The kitsch and lore that engulf places like Elvis Presley’s Graceland perpetuate musical mythology. The fabricated story of Elvis’s life, like the Graceland mansion itself, overshadows the history of music, race and cultural change that were directly related to his rise to stardom. This mythology can pique people’s interests, drawing them to the subject and providing a folkloric interpretation of regional history, which has its own value. But it can also diminish the historical integrity of a region by minimizing its significance in light of what tourists or developers deem as authentic. In the blues world, the legend of Robert Johnson, the Hellhounds and the Crossroads serves a similar function. The guidebook *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues* opens with the myth, “Folks in the Delta say that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil so that he could become the king of the Delta Blues. *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues* not only will tell you at which crossroads that legendary deal was made but also guide you to many other hallowed sites that nourished Mississippi’s signature music.”<sup>9</sup> It leaves little room for question as to why thousands of people make



pilgrimages to Graceland every year, and why travelers looking for the authentic blues experience make journeys into the Delta.

There is no shortage of books about the blues journey. Tourists who recognize the importance of the roots of music love the blues. In the blues they find something to pinpoint – the beginning of the evolution of many forms of music. From encyclopedias to personal chronicles, musicians, music lovers, and adventurers set out to understand the blues. In her book *In Search of the Blues*, Marybeth Hamilton attempts to reinsert the actual lives of blues musicians back into the blues history narrative by undertaking a revisionist look at the blues journey. Of blues journeys she writes, “The trek through the Delta in search of the roots of the blues has been a trope of music writing since the early 1960s.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is a way of coming to terms with or getting a glimpse of reminisces of slavery and segregation – a way to understand or bear witness to history. Perhaps there is an element of guilt involved, or a nuanced desire to be closer to the origin of something born out of circumstances that are difficult to imagine. Many blues journeys are undertaken by an outsider to the South – someone from a totally separate region, who has fallen in love with the sounds that come from there. They pack their bags for what is certain to be a harrowing journey into the heart of darkness. History books and hearsay have shaped their impressions, and they refer to the Delta in ominous terms, like “the cauldron of slavery.”<sup>11</sup> Even in 2010, mapping a blues journey is not the easiest task. Flights into surrounding cities beget car rentals beget long drives on stretches of highway, the utmost attention required as to catch signs for towns that are quite rural and remote. The undertaking requires, at the very least, a dedication by adventurous travelers. So most people are probably pleasantly confused and surprised to discover that once they

get to the “cauldron of slavery,” there is a vibrant tourist culture expanding across the region.

Of his 1990 blues journey, Hugh Merrill writes, “No one is paying attention. The audience treats the musicians as live background music...*My God*, I thought, *is this what the blues has come to? Where’s the electricity? Where’s the emotion?* I remembered what one woman from Louisiana once told me: “On Saturday night, we all let our hair get a little bit kinky.” I paid for my beer and left. Surely this is not all there was. On my way home, I decided that I would find out. The greatest migration in America took the blues as baggage – from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago and from Louisiana and Texas to California. I decided to recreate the trip.”<sup>12</sup> But this attitude, the need for being privy to the secrets of the roots of music, is not limited to blues culture. In his journey to the heart of Texas to get closer to the music of Bob Wills, Duncan McLean writes, “I’m three thousand miles from home...I’m not from these parts. I’ve come a long way in search of real live western swing. I won’t find real live Bob Wills that’s for sure: he’s been dead for twenty years. But his spirit lives on; I know it, I feel it. It lives on...somewhere. Not in the battered fiddle case in the museum upstairs...and now I’m after something. I don’t know exactly what it is, and I don’t know exactly where I’m going to find it. But *somewhere* out there...amongst the country dance halls, the ranch to market roads, the old musicians hunched over tin tack pianos and tenor banjos...that’s where I’m going to track down the spirit of Bob Wills.”<sup>13</sup> The commonality between these two hunts is clear. The authors are driven by a desire to hear the music, but also to see and try to understand the region’s history. That desire is the basis for blues-focused cultural tourism.

In *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Benjamin Filene states, “From the start, then, ‘discovering’ folk cultures involved re–imagining them.”<sup>14</sup> In what way has the re–imagining of blues music and blues culture shaped the experience of the blues today? In marketing a piece of history, what is the difference between recreating it and preserving it? There are blues festivals, blues societies, blues trails, blues clubs, blues–themed music venues, restaurants, television programs, and museums. The blues are replicated, impersonated, used as metaphor for love and loss. The preservation of blues history is central to the promotion of the blues as a cultural accessory, and as a cultural tourism agenda.

In Austin, Texas, the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (BCAH) at The University of Texas at Austin counts among its many archival acquisitions a music history collection that chronicles the history of American music from German folk songs brought to America by immigrants centuries ago, to cowboy songs, to records laid to wax by the Lomax family. It is no secret that Austin calls itself the “Live Music Capital of the World,” and the rich, albeit young, history of Austin music is housed in the BCAH archives. The BCAH recently acquired the Antone’s Nightclub papers, which include documents and records detailing the history of the venue that, at one time, brought renowned blues musicians like B.B. King, Mance Lipscomb, and Muddy Waters to town. The papers also include the Susan Antone Photographic Archive. This conjuncture of archival history and popular culture demonstrates the importance of the living preservation of blues music. It recognizes that the history of Antone’s is central to the preservation of blues performance, and to the continued development of a modern blues audience. Not only is the club a lasting tribute to the significance of blues music, but the

history of the club, properly archived, can be used to reach a broader audience. The blues, then, become a teaching opportunity in the form of public history as the collection takes shape in the form of exhibits and public presentations.

In *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy*, Kevin F. Gotham writes, “Chicago’s claim as the home of blues music is embedded within the active production of blues culture as a major pillar of the tourist economy.”<sup>15</sup> The city of Chicago has produced a blues tourism culture that they attribute to an authentic connection to blues history. The idea that authenticity can be produced for the purposes of tourism can be seen as exploitative, but it can also be seen as maintaining and preserving history. In one way or another, Mississippi Delta blues tourism, Graceland, and the music tourism industry in Austin are all examples of creating authenticity for the purpose of tourism. There is much to be gained, and some to be lost by examining the function of the way blues history is represented at each of these locations. Many opportunities exist for continued progress towards a congruent representation of the blues through both tourism and historic preservation.

With a focus on the Mississippi Delta, Elvis Presley’s Graceland, and Austin, Texas, this thesis is an exploration of the successes, failures, and necessary re-imaginings of sites of music lore, places in which the blues have played a role in music tourism, and how public history is used in many different ways to accomplish a similar goal. Music tourism exists because people keep it alive through their own desire to be a part of something that, like the music they love, resonates within them. Blues music tourism is often associated with a need to discover roots. For whatever reason, fans believe that answers will be found in getting to what they believe is the source. Perhaps for them,

music tourism keeps the ideas of place and time alive. There are positive and negative aspects to cultural tourism. Historically responsible blues music tourism would include past, present and future, and be accessible to a broad audience without presenting an imagined version of history. The Mississippi Delta town of Indianola defines its tourist slogan “Delta Harmony” as “a Combination of Voices.” The brochure reads, “Come visit Indianola, Mississippi and experience the voices that make Delta Harmony.”<sup>16</sup> Maybe this simple statement is part of the solution: to let a combination of voices tell their own stories. This idea, however simplistic, is not a bad theoretical goal, and can bring accessibility to complicated historic narratives.

## CHAPTER I

### MUSIC TOURISM IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: THE CASH CROP OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

*“The Mississippi Delta is shining like a national guitar. I am following the river down the highway through the cradle of the Civil War.” –Paul Simon, Graceland*

Mississippi’s reputation often precedes it. Public opinion has not been kind to the state whose history is marred by racial violence and oppression. In spite of that, there is a change happening across the state that is inspiring. A new industry is growing in Mississippi, specifically in the region known as the Delta, and it has the potential to positively impact the entire region. And for once, it is not coming from the soil. The Mississippi Delta is a geographically enormous region identified by its abject poverty, devastating past and history of high yielding agricultural production. The region is often called “the land where the blues began,” and the Delta blues hold an allure that has influenced musicians for decades. That deeply felt influence inspires a desire in music lovers to find what one *Los Angeles Times* reporter called, “the root of things.”<sup>17</sup> Now, in one of the most economically deprived regions in the nation, developers, historic commissions and downtown development associations are cashing in on the fandom and curiosity of music lovers to create a blues tourism industry. Museums, blues-themed restaurants, music venues styled as juke joints, self-guided tour maps, and art galleries are cropping up in hopes of drawing visitors to the region.

The state of Mississippi established a commission to create an interesting and accessible way to commemorate significant blues history locations throughout the region. The Mississippi Blues Commission organized the creation of the Mississippi Blues Trail. They enlisted the aid of blues scholars Jim O’Neal and Scott Barretta and designed a modernized take on the traditional historic marker. Combining technology and innovation, the Blues Trail markers present the traditional forty word raised historic text on one side, while the opposite side uses a sticker material to display a 300-500 word essay written by O’Neal and Barretta, and includes archival photographs with detailed captions. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mississippi Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration are the primary funding sources for the proposed trail, which is dedicated to locating and marking historic locations relevant to the history of blues music with roots in the state. The markers acknowledge the wide popularity of blues music and demonstrate a growing dedication to the study of blues history, as well as a commitment to promoting the heritage of a region as part of a tourism agenda.

Barretta and O’Neal joined forces to comb archives for genealogical information, as well as conducting interviews and oral histories of people associated with the music or its players in some way. On O’Neal’s website, he explains, “In the process of this, we’re finding out that a number of blues artists weren’t born when or where the previously published bios say, and histories are being revised and sometimes constructed virtually from scratch.”<sup>18</sup> Most of the well-documented history of the blues is concentrated geographically: the Mississippi Delta, Chicago, Texas. Until the 1970s, scholarship on the blues was sparse. A few notable works stand out from that period, including Paul

Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*,<sup>19</sup> and Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues*.<sup>20</sup> Few scholars wrote about the blues, and the majority of information was, and still is, collected by fans, mostly men, largely white. Telling the stories of the blues is difficult without relying on lore, and few definitive sources provide factual history. This is due, in part, to that system of slavery and the lingering segregation that prevented detailed records from being kept and plagues the South with uncomfortable silences.

One result of prolonged systems of oppression is an intense, extensive economic disparity that is common in many Southern cities. Part of the hope of the Blues Trail project is that the region will begin to profit from its history in a way that promotes education while drawing much needed financial support. In *The Southern Past*, Fitzhugh Brundage cites Charleston, South Carolina as one of the first significant locations in America to promote cultural or heritage tourism. The city began working to pull in tourists early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Charleston, a city that visibly embodies all of the traits attributed to the lore of the old plantation South, marketed itself to tourists seeking an authentic taste of antebellum life. A major problem with Southern cities like Charleston using their history as a cash crop to pull in out-of-town money is that no one involved in the process can afford to be honest in their historic portrayals. Doing so would require cities to include unflattering elements of history, thus revealing the darker side of the South, which included slavery, segregation, and the socioeconomic disparities that resulted from those institutions. Brundage writes, "Tourists could enjoy the picturesque spectacle created by servile African Americans without needing to understand them. Indeed, an exaggerated concern for African Americans might have interfered with the tourist experience."<sup>21</sup> Brundage's observations on Charleston's century-old dilemma



with historic memory and tourism can easily be applied to the dilemmas faced today across the Mississippi Delta as the region begins to promote Blues Tourism. Constant revisionism is a necessary part of compiling a narrative of blues history, because so much of it was lost to time before the blues was considered culture, and before culture was something considered fit to be studied.

Locating the Blues Trail markers is challenging because the Delta region alone spans thousands of square miles. The project is expected to produce over 200 markers, most of which are in state, but a few markers were created to showcase the roots of blues across the country. Tourists can find a Blues Trail marker in Los Angeles at the Grammy Museum. It recognizes the impact of Mississippi musicians and their contributions to American Music. There is one in Chicago's Grant Park, located across the street from Central Station, the train station that welcomed thousands of Mississippians to the city during the great migration. In Muscle Shoals, Alabama, a marker recognizes the contribution of FAME Records and the Muscle Shoals sound to the advancement in recording many famous blues albums. Other out-of-state locations include Tennessee, Florida, Maine, Louisiana, and Wisconsin. The blues may be largely attributed to Mississippi, but their wide influence is undeniable.

In Mississippi, the markers impact local attitudes towards commemorating the blues. Regional government officials participate in the dedication ceremonies along with the state tourism board and members of the communities where the markers are erected. The living musicians being honored, often joined by members of their family, come and occasionally perform. Tourists come from all over the state, sometimes further, and the significance of the marker becomes something to rally around. Cultural tourists can

awaken a sense of local pride otherwise unrecognized.<sup>22</sup> The Blues Trail serves as a revitalization tool for communities, and that is an integral part of the larger goals created by tourism commissions and creators of economic action plans surfacing in Delta towns.

To create an action plan requires knowledge of marketing, but it also requires developers to understand the role a cultural attribute plays in a community. The National Trust for Historic Preservation established a website that aides in this process. According to their website, CulturalHeritageTourism.org, there are four main steps promoters should take to assure success in cultural heritage tourism:<sup>23</sup>

1. Assess the Potential
2. Plan and Organize
3. Prepare for visitors; protect and manage your cultural, historic and natural resources
4. Market for success

These steps lay a general foundation for how to maximize the economic potential of an area. They encourage an assessment of a town's resources and the potential for the resources to be used as a tourist draw. This includes not only historic or archeological attractions, but cultural resources as well. They encourage organizations undertaking the challenge of cultural heritage tourism to be mission driven, and to build on the resources that are readily available, rather than try to reinvent their town.

These are a basic guideline, and should only be used as such. Their generality is both a hindrance and a boon. They provide direction, and encourage organizations to consult with folklorists and historians to properly engage the historic significance of an area. Purveyors of the steps are left to decide how to represent their cultural resources. The largest problem facing blues tourism in Mississippi is the desire to recognize the

significant advancements made in race relations, while performing a sort of rug-sweeping over the history of the region. Putting a progressive face on a difficult past creates an opportunity to ignore the burdens of history. It is convenient to separate the past from the present in the name of progress, but if monetary gain overshadows the need for providing regional historic context, the perspective is lost. Separating history from culture minimizes the story. Blues was not created in a vacuum, and recognizing the historic context of its creation provides a necessary and helpful addition to the narrative. The Blues Trail markers aim to create that historic context, but their mission must be emulated in other blues-tourism based developments.

Many will argue that by recognizing the artistry of the blues through demonstrations of blues performance, from blues-themed restaurants and stores to the creation of new venues themed as juke joints and music festivals, the region is serving its history and reconciling years of neglect. This is not entirely untrue. But the beneficiaries of these demonstrations: volunteers, participants, and creators, as Stephen A. King points out in his essay “Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: Race, Standpoint Theory, and Perceptions/Denials of Exploitation,” are, by and large, white. To King, this is problematic, because it perpetuates a continued historic “othering” of black participants in an art form they created. Black blues musicians become a spectacle for audiences made up largely of white participants.

The majority of tourism commissions, museums, popular blues-themed stores and restaurants are operated and owned by Delta transplants from across the country and around the world, a large number of whom are white. Race plays a major factor in the perceptions of the success of blues tourism leading to differing perspectives on the

financial benefits of blues tourism among white and black communities. Black communities think white blues promoters are profiteering from an art form whose origin is deeply rooted in fear, violence, racism and resistance. White promoters say coordination and participation promote racial reconciliation and progress toward a better future for the region. The shared opinion within a town's black community that white blues promoters are profiteering is common, according to King. In contrast, white blues promoters view their coordination and participation as ways to engage in racial reconciliation and progress towards a better future for the region. As a response, it is said that it is easy to make those claims when you are benefiting financially from an art form whose origin is deeply rooted in fear, violence, oppression and resistance.

King uses standpoint theory to evaluate race and tourism in the Mississippi Delta. According to King, "Standpoint theory is chiefly concerned with how the positioning of a group within a socially constructed hierarchy produces shared experiences for individuals in those groups."<sup>24</sup> Using personal interviews with locals as the basis for his data, King concludes that black blues musicians and black community members are concerned, even angry at the way white blues promoters profit from the blues. The chief concern seems to be the unequal distribution of money in exchange for performances. He further concludes that white blues promoters see the situation differently – that promoting the arts and culture of the region is a step towards introducing a new reconciliation and communal understanding between the races. Standpoint theory suggests that because the white blues promoters are entering the dialogue from a place of privilege, they cannot understand the deep-seeded feelings of betrayal and frustration that the black community members

express. White promoters, in this theory, are essentially creating a monologue, with black musicians becoming almost disposable characters.

Blues music was born against a violent backdrop of racial disenfranchisement. That fact amplifies the discomfort and sensitivity that comes along with and is inherent in the discussion of the role of blues tourism. The Mississippi Delta region is stricken with poverty resulting from centuries of unequal opportunity (as recently as 2007, 16.8% of Mississippi families lived in poverty.<sup>25</sup> White unemployment was 3.9%, while the unemployment rate for African Americans was 10.5%.<sup>26</sup>). To understand blues tourism, it is important to ask questions about its function. What is the goal of blues tourism in Mississippi? Is it racial reconciliation? Is it to better a region by creating economic stabilization through the tourism industry? Is it historic preservation? Mary Beth Wilkerson's position as director of the Mississippi Development Authority's Tourism Division includes a seat on the Mississippi Blues Commission. According to Wilkerson, the goal of blues tourism is to be a unifying element. People recognize Mississippi as the birthplace of the blues, and that level of attention is a major draw for the state. Through the popularity of the blues, tourists come to Mississippi, and once there they see that blues is one important piece of a much larger pie.<sup>27</sup> Tourism will generate money, and money will generate jobs, and jobs will generate economic stability across the state, but Wilkerson believes it will take more than blues tourism to make that sort of impact at a statewide level. On a regional level, people involved in Delta tourism are saying something similar.

Clarksdale, Mississippi, is a Delta city at the forefront of blues tourism development. Over the last decade, nearly fifty blues related businesses opened in the

city's downtown.<sup>28</sup> Longtime resident Kinchen "Bubba" O'Keefe might be Clarksdale's biggest believer. His revitalization efforts have brought many new businesses to the town, and his restoration projects have saved several historic buildings from complete dilapidation. He believes that Clarksdale can be the connector in the Delta for tourists and business people. People will come for the blues, and then they will see that there is more there. O'Keefe's angle is community based projects. He sees Clarksdale as a place where people can come to get involved, whether it is through summer work programs like Habitat for Humanity, or in community gardens, in archeological digs along the banks of the Sunflower River, or architectural preservation. But the key, according to O'Keefe, is to know who you are as a city, and not try to overextend your reach, but also, not to be singularly focused, or else you risk a major collapse. For instance, Clarksdale should never try to emulate Memphis's Beale Street with one main drag full of bars and live music, but it also should offer more than Greenwood, a neighboring Delta city home to the Alluvian Hotel, and the headquarters of Viking Range Stoves. "Greenwood is a Viking town. If the company goes under, the town will have nothing. There's already enough in Clarksdale to keep people occupied during the day, and during the night, unlike in towns like Indianola. There's just more here."<sup>29</sup>

In O'Keefe's eyes, Clarksdale can be a center for Delta business, and a pride of the region. But accomplishing that requires more than just good ideas. I asked him if he thought that blues tourism was the answer to solving the town's problems. He said, "I think tourism is one of the answers. There are a lot of problems though, so there are a lot of answers. Clarksdale needs something to bank its hope on. What are we going to bank our hope on? Something that lasts. There's no doubt that blues is playing an important

role, but we don't need to be focused just on that. If you just start focusing on one thing, then you're gonna be lost. Don't just lose your sight and paint the town blue."<sup>30</sup> Instead, he explained, use the blues, but be sure that the work you are putting into the town is feeding your community too.

After several trips through Clarksdale as a blues fan, John Henshall, an employee of the Australian based economic group Essential Economics Pty Ltd (EEPL), conducted a report for the city of Clarksdale. The "Objectives" section of *Downtown Clarksdale: An Action Plan for Economic Revitalization* lists fourteen objectives on how to achieve the vision of an economically sound and forward moving city. All of these objectives include words like: *restore, revitalize, target, apply* and *address*. These positive action words are littered throughout the 106–page report. To the report's credit, each objective shares the end goal of creating a system that will ultimately pay back the community through more jobs, better education, and better health care. To EEPL, profiting from the blues seems like the most obvious way to begin generating a flow of income whose returns can be shared by the entire community. Once the report was complete, the city of Clarksdale established the Board of Directors for Clarksdale Revitalization LLC. With the report as a guide, the board began discussing how to implement a revitalization initiative called the Main Street Project. Not all members of the board agreed that blues was the primary strength for Clarksdale. Board member Dr. Patricia Johnson was quick to offer that the scope of the project needed to be broad. "It's not all about the blues. While blues is certainly an attraction for tourists, we cannot forget our other strengths including agriculture and the Sunflower River."<sup>31</sup> And with that division, the absence of action is louder than the signs of progress.

The blues becomes the starting point for a solution. The history of the blues, and the history of the region is not necessarily a secondary issue, but rather, the commodity exploited through marketing plans. Who had access to this report? I received this report from the Director of Clarksdale Revitalization, Inc., just one of many organizations working to promote the cultural heritage of the town. This report is public information, but the general public is largely unaware that it was even conducted. Perhaps that is because there is so much overlap in organizations created to promote cultural heritage tourism that end up, as Bubba O’Keefe said, “not gelling. There are lots of big ideas, and not enough action.”<sup>32</sup> So then to whom does this economic vision for downtown Clarksdale belong? Can the general public pick up the report, read it, process the ideas, and generate new ones? It seems possible. It would be irresponsible to say that blues tourism is not greatly benefiting the Delta region. Considering that the downtown area typically experiences annual loss due to economic downturns (even with the new businesses, close to 40% of all commercial spaces in the downtown are vacant<sup>33</sup>), the continued promotion of blues heritage tourism serves to bring much needed financial support to the region.

On the [visitmississippi.org](http://visitmississippi.org) website, a section called “Meet Mississippi, One Interesting Person at a Time,” gives brief descriptions of Mississippians, not all native, who are enhancing the state through various endeavors. It is here that visitors can learn about Roger Stolle, the owner of Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art, located in Clarksdale’s downtown. Stolle is a Delta transplant from Ohio, who followed his love of blues music down river and opened his store, which sells blues albums and folk art to tourists who come to Clarksdale from across the country and the ocean to hear the real



thing. That desire for experiential authenticity drove Stolle to open Cat Head, and drives tourists to seek out the last vestiges of original blues culture. Local musician Foster Wiley, also known as Mr. Tater, played his harmonica on the sidewalk outside of the store, and the whine of his harmonica infiltrated the background through most of our interview. There was a show that night at Red's, one of the few old juke joints still standing in the town, and a handful of tourists came in and out of the store asking for directions. Stolle was friendly and matter-of-fact to everyone who walked in. After all, he used to be one of them. He came to Clarksdale in the early 1990s, and opened Cat Head in 2001. When he arrived, tourism in Clarksdale was limited to the occasional curious European or straggler from Memphis who got hold of a map and some album liner notes that mentioned the town and its musicians. Over the last decade, he watched Clarksdale develop in small spurts, which he attributed entirely to the town's recognition of the blues as an effective marketing technique. By 2008, there were at least a dozen out-of-towners who came to Clarksdale to start blues related businesses.<sup>34</sup> The majority, like Stolle, came because of their love for the blues. There are also groups of developers who viewed cheap land and tourist dollars with an opportunistic eye, and began buying up, renovating, and renting out properties to cash in. That group, while worrisome, is still a long way from their goal, according to Stolle. He said, "If you are in this for the money, you're crazy. If you're in it because your heart is in it, you're in the right place. The minute they put a Hard Rock Cafe™ here, I'm out. But we're a long way from that. At this point Clarksdale is just getting to a place where there is enough to do to keep people

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<sup>34</sup> Foster "Mr. Tater" Wiley died on September 10, 2010

busy during the day so that they can do something besides wait for music to start at night.”<sup>35</sup>

As Stolle gave his opinion about the town crafting an identity on blues tourism, he reminded me that he is a white man from Ohio, laughing that some people say he is a part of the problem of the disappearing juke joint blues scene, traditionally frequented and run entirely by black customers, owners and musicians. His background is in marketing, and he viewed his role in the promotion of blues music and tourism as central to the emerging blues experience. “When people who aren’t part of the culture start swarming the place, it is going to change it,” he said. “Is that wrong or is that right? Who knows? But upholding that authenticity just isn’t going to happen – people like Red (the proprietor of Red’s Juke Joint) will not survive without tourists. I help bring those tourists to him. He will not get the local black customers he used to get. The customers who have been coming around to hear the blues in juke joints for decades have gotten older – start feeling like they are too old to [live like this anymore]... If those customers aren’t replaced, he’ll go out of business.”<sup>36</sup> The city, like the entire Delta region, is in a period of preservation, with seeds of new growth and business development. If the downtown of Clarksdale and the surrounding Delta towns foster this obvious relationship between blues and tourism, the resulting relationship will bring historic preservation and the prospect of a financially stable future to struggling communities.

Another way that the blues are being used to promote growth within their communities is through blues music culture and heritage festivals. In his essay “Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals,” Stephen A. King asserts that blues festivals can be broken down into three main functions:

1. Homecoming/honoring musicians
2. Cultural preservation of blues music
3. Integration/racial harmony

King examines these categories through research, interviews, and personal experience. He closely examines all three, and maintains his commitment to these distinctions throughout the essay. At times, his tight categorization oversimplifies the history of Mississippi and the progress that the state is making through the promotion of blues tourism. The essay is broken into sections: one which explores the history of racial injustice in Mississippi, which King asserts is the foundation of the creation of blues music by black men and women experiencing these racial travesties. In the next section, King gives a brief history of music festivals “from antiquity to the present.”<sup>37</sup> This massive timeline is condensed to just over two pages, and begins with the root of the word “festival” stemming from the Latin *festivitas*, and tracing history of music festivals and culture through Woodstock, and arriving at fiddler’s conventions and the “contemporary festival.”<sup>38</sup>

When King examines the function of the homecoming/honoring of musicians, he refers to blues musicians as cultural resources who play an integral part of preserving the history of the region. The cultural preservation of blues music is number two on King’s list of the functions of blues festivals. It is also the function cited by tourism bureaus and councils as the main purpose of promoting the blues – to showcase this cultural resource it must be preserved. Victor G. Smith of Washington County, Mississippi stated that the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival “allows us a chance to welcome visitors from all of the United States to our community, and gives us a chance to show off. I think

that one of the best ways for Mississippi and the Delta in particular, to overcome past negative stereotypes is to encourage visitors to come here and see what we are really like – a progressive community wise enough to hold on to the heritage and traditions that define us.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to the preservation of the music, the homecoming element of blues tourism encompasses the preservation of gravesites, recording studios, juke joints and other sites that were, and still are, significant instruments in the history of the blues. Honoring these cultural attributes by highlighting them at music festivals serves as a means of preservation, which in turn promotes understanding, which encourages racial harmony. To King, these elements all work together, and when properly done, can serve as a chain reaction that is beneficial to everyone involved.

Because blues festivals reach such a large audience, there is pressure to monetize the blues by continuing to play to that broader appeal. To do this, festivals include a variety of musical styles that have their roots in the blues. They hire soul artists, rock musicians, and R&B performers to play alongside of blues musicians. In addition, the towns holding the festivals present a blues-centric culture that occasionally becomes a caricature of itself: fried catfish specials in restaurants, and Delta blues-themed everything from art and music to menus and walking tours. This hyper tourism, in which tourists are paying money for representations of the blues, could be destructive to the history of the region if it eliminates the sounds and whitewashes the culture rather than encouraging promotion through preservation. King argues that, “Although cultural tourism “preserves” traditional art forms, it also tends to “freeze” these traditions in time. As a consequence, blues musicians (especially musicians who have a strong historical link) are sometimes typecast as “authentic” Delta blues musicians.”<sup>40</sup> Later on he says,

“Indeed, preservation strategies encourage tourists and local community members to gain a new appreciation for the important role African Americans played in the creation and development of the blues. At the same time, some critics have suggested that the desire to seek a larger audience has compromised the original vision of celebrating Mississippi’s contribution to American music.”<sup>41</sup>

Examining the history of the region that produced such a major part of the blues music tradition, it could be considered destructive or counterintuitive to limit the scope of blues music to only the original style. The evolution of the music itself is representative of the evolution of race relationships in the Delta region and in Mississippi. The roots of the music are there, the history remains at the forefront of the story, but it is allowed to grow and develop with its audience. When discussing the promotion of racial harmony in Mississippi through blues festivals King states, “In many ways, blues festivals are one of the few avenues in which blacks and whites (and other racial and ethnic groups) can develop an important human connection. But this connection, not surprisingly, is often ephemeral.”<sup>42</sup> King is referring here to the attitudes often promoted at festivals, such as “No Black, No White, Just the Blues.” The slogan was created by The Cirlot Agency, a Mississippi marketing and public relations firm as part of an educational campaign for the state called *Mississippi, Believe It!*<sup>TM</sup> Cirlot did all of the work pro bono, calling it a “gift to Mississippi” for supporting the agency. The *Mississippi, Believe It!*<sup>TM</sup> campaign promotes the state’s cultural heritage from its musical history to the large number of writers, athletes and musicians born and raised there to its technological innovations and innovators.<sup>43</sup>

While progress towards racial integration seems light years away from where it once stood in Mississippi, and a recognition of blues as a significant cultural artifact has done much to assist that, festivals do not last forever. At the end of the night, black and white often go their separate ways. This has more to do with the failure on behalf of towns to fully correct the seeded injustices that plague the region than a failure on the parts of blues festivals to promote the ideal of racial harmony and integration. But even if actual integration seems a long way off, the impact of the spread of blues music is reaching new ears. As the region further separates itself from its history of institutionalized oppression, a broader, younger audience is being exposed to the fruits of blues music, and carrying that exposure to newer audiences.

One example of the broad influence of blues music on young musicians is seen in their increase in numbers and emerging popularity in the mainstream. Rob Hoerburger of the New York Times asks, “Can a nerd have soul?”<sup>44</sup> In his article, he discusses the new era of soul music being played by a young (barely 30), predominately white group of (mostly) men, Hoerburger tries to figure out the impetus behind the return to straight soul music. Of the music, he says, “it isn’t jacked up, minced, diced, reassembled, reduced, infused, technofied, processed, irony–dredged or in any other way *commented upon*. It was as if the last 20 or 30 or 40 years of pop music hadn’t happened.”<sup>45</sup> One of the subjects of this article is Eli “Paperboy” Reed, born Eli Husock, of Boston, MA. Reed attributes his sound in part to the fact he grew up listening to soul and early rock and roll records, and in part to discovering that he had a natural gift for wailing at a talent show in high school, where he sang Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come.”<sup>46</sup>

An NPR report on Reed claims that he "... goes for the sound of Southern soul, circa 1968: thick and juicy horns riding up and down the scales, stinging and slashing guitar riffs, fat drum beats... Can he possibly match the intensity of the soul kings of four decades ago, or is he just fooling himself? One thing is clear: Like the late, great singers he idolizes, the Yankee pretender croons with tear-jerking tenderness, shrieks like an in-tune banshee, and turns clichés into bittersweet truths about the illusory nature of love."<sup>47</sup> The "Yankee pretender" did spend a year before college living in Clarksdale, Mississippi, honing his sound by listening to Delta blues musicians, and perfecting his skills in several local juke joints.

Bubba O'Keefe met Eli Reed and his parents at Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art. After a brief introduction, the Reeds informed O'Keefe that they were dropping young Eli off to spend a year living in Clarksdale before he went off to college. Reed came to Clarksdale because he wanted to learn the blues. He had a job lined up working at WROX radio station, which later fell through. O'Keefe kept an eye on him during his time in the Delta, and offered him odd jobs throughout the year. O'Keefe says that Reed was surprised to find that the people who played the music that he loved lacked much, if any, formal training. He'd never been to the South before. The blues was something he downloaded from the internet. He was frequently frustrated and had a hard time adapting to life in Clarksdale. Technically speaking, he was an advanced musician with all of the skills necessary to play the blues. But he struggled to understand why he did not sound like the locals. O'Keefe remembers telling him, "If you're thirsty enough you'll drink that water."<sup>48</sup>

Several years later, during his performance on Sun Studio Sessions, a television program that broadcasts the sessions of new artists who record at Sun Studio, Reed donned a fitted olive green suit and a pompadour. As soon as he began singing, it was clear that this was not someone looking for the inspiration of Elvis. Reed plays blues and soul with tenacity. He is not scared to scream, groan and wail, and he is surprising in his renditions of a style so often attributed to predominately black musicians. If authentic music is deemed credible when it is true to the artist's intentions and central to the genre,<sup>49</sup> is Reed an authentic soul and blues musician, or does that even matter? He identified something about the blues that moved him, and went to what he saw as the source. Through trial and error, he found his own voice, and now he's another person bringing blues music to the public.

Reed's decision to be dropped off in the middle of the Mississippi Delta, without a real job, without a driver's license, and without knowing a single soul in the town could be perceived as naïve cultural appropriation. According to many locals, he often butted heads with other local musicians, and was quick to give instruction rather than to learn. But in a larger sense, he recognized that in order to understand the blues, he needed to immerse himself in them. The draw to the region was inherent. While his music crosses from blues to soul music, and he has never claimed to play the Delta blues, it could be argued that his intentions were to preserve a piece of blues culture through learning and translating his experience into his own style.

To Roger Stolle, preserving a piece of the original is better than having an entire culture disappear, which is why he does not take great issue with new versions of old styles. This includes young, white musicians like Reed, and places like Clarksdale's



Ground Zero Blues Club, the venue owned by actor Morgan Freeman and local businessman and gubernatorial candidate Bill Lockett. The function of Ground Zero is to provide a service to the tourists who travel for miles to hear blues music played by black musicians in a venue that creates an accessible experience. The venue can afford to have live music every night. Perhaps that service is no longer relevant to the people who grew up hearing music at Red's and Po' Monkeys, another local juke joint located in a former sharecropping shack in Merigold, opened by former sharecropper Willie Seaberry in 1961. As tourism grows and people come from all over the world to hear the blues, the culture that has never before had to rely on such consistency, must too grow. Finances and lack of consistency in customer base threaten to close down original juke joints. Money spent bringing in tourists seems, to some, to cheapen the authenticity of the experience. Where is the compromise?

Perhaps, if there is no one guiding the direction of a fading culture, that culture will disappear. Or perhaps, as Steven King suggested, the way that white developers are becoming involved in and generating profit from the promotion of blues tourism represents a modernized version of the sharecropping system.<sup>50</sup> While this perspective is plausible, business develops at a basic level around supply and demand, and the demand for bigger and brighter and bolder blues tourist attractions in the Delta is not present. That level of financial exploitation and abuse seems a far cry from the grass roots development occurring across the region. Hard Rock Cafes™ and bars that stray from the juke joint model that Ground Zero followed would not be well received by the fans who are willing to trek across the Delta just to see a gravesite. Tourists looking for a good time and a

chance to hear someone play “Mustang Sally” typically stay in Memphis, the city that first commodified the blues. There can only be one Memphis.

Memphis is most widely associated with its two major tourist attractions: Beale Street and Graceland. The razing and rebuilding of Beale Street in the 1980s created controlled models of history that could be easily bought and sold to tourists seeking an authentic blues experience. The street was bought up by developers and held onto for decades, falling into squalor and degradation. When it became clear that there was money to be made in tourism, old buildings and juke joints came down, and new versions of buildings and juke joints boasting authentic food and music came up. Even though little of the original street still exists, the tourism industry has painted an alluring picture: tourists can experience Memphis as they imagine it once was, while they drink and dance in the streets, and listen to live performances, not all of which are blues, but most of which take place in blues-named venues, like Mr. Handy’s Blues Hall, Rum Boogie Café, and Blues City Café. The Graceland mansion, Elvis’s home that is now the official Elvis Presley museum, is located in south Memphis, off Exit 5B on Interstate 55. The neighborhood, or what is left of it, is dangerous and littered with pawnshops, auto repair centers, and old apartment complexes. There is little effort at Graceland to connect Elvis to the Delta blues, despite the fact that Elvis learned to play the blues from black musicians that he met in his hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi, then later honed his sound in the clubs and music halls of Memphis by combining the roots of blues with country music. He popularized traditional Delta blues sounds by synthesizing genres and performance styles.

When tourists come to the Delta to hear the blues and see the birthplaces and gravesites of blues legends, they are often getting more of an estimated story than an exact historic location. Delta Blues musician B.B. King was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* saying, “There’s a plantation that’s been there (Sunflower County, MS) since slavery, called the Dockery Plantation, and it’s said that all us blues singers were born within 100 miles of it.”<sup>51</sup> This statement is a perfect example of the way Delta folklore takes root. A large majority of blues singers were born and raised in the Mississippi Delta, and Sunflower County seems like a logical place set at the center of the lives of bluesmen. Although this is a broad generalization, referring to the Delta as “the land where the blues began” is as accurate as standing in front of a historical marker indicating the general location of, for example, Charlie Patton’s (originally unmarked) gravesite. Both are in stark contrast to the claims of authenticity from Beale Street. The need for scholarly accuracy does not seem to impact the morale in juke joints and local businesses. A member of the Wesley Jefferson Blues Band addressed the issue of the universal connection to blues music one night at the Red Top Lounge in Clarksdale, saying “We had a guy in here from Hong Kong one time came up and played. We got no idea what they listen to over there. But he come down the Mississippi and play the blues.”<sup>52</sup>

The blues audience has changed, and with it, so has the scene. The need for flash and shine does not seem to drive most Blues Trail tourists. Although tourism was prevalent in the Mississippi Delta for decades on a small scale, the last decade has seen enormous growth in popularity of the hunt for real, true blues music. In the 2009 fiscal year, Mississippi had a seven percent loss in overall tourism dollars, but Sunflower County experienced a 12.5 percent increase.<sup>53</sup> Touring the Delta, much of the time, you

find what Connie Gibbons, former Director of the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center calls “The Choir.” “The people who come here – they are the choir: the people who believe,” Gibbons said. “You don’t have to invent a story for them – they already believe. What the story [of the blues] does is put things in a larger context for people – in the context of civil rights, of values and of determination. This is how we tell our story.”<sup>54</sup> While the story itself may be enough for “The Choir” there are still conflicting opinions on how to best preserve and promote this art form.

The B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center opened in Indianola, Mississippi in September 2008. Plans for the museum have been in the works since early 2003. Before the museum opened, Indianola was home to several hot spots in blues tourism that attracted dedicated fans. Charley Patton, long considered to be the founder of the basic, rough style that characterizes the Delta blues, is buried there. Club Ebony, a local juke joint founded in 1945, has served as the stage for musicians from B.B. King, who was raised in the town, to Count Basie, James Brown, and Howlin’ Wolf. Indianola is still a tiny town learning how to cope with the impending influx of tourism that has increased steadily since the museum opened. The town is beginning to resemble Clarksdale with its small independent stores and art galleries. The museum tells the story of King’s life growing up in Mississippi. The goal of the museum is to put into context his “life’s story of hardship, perseverance, talent and humility as a way to further the arts, youth development, and racial reconciliation in the Mississippi Delta and beyond.”<sup>55</sup> The exhibits are structured to inspire audiences through King’s story, and demonstrate perseverance through adversity. According to Adam Gussow, “Blues music, a form of cultural expression whose very ground was the unjust and painful relationship between

black and whites in the segregated South, is also a music that has helped minister to the lingering wounds of segregation during the post-civil rights era.”<sup>56</sup> King’s story of self-reliance, talent, and dedication is relatable. The backdrop of the blues bridges the gap between a painful past and a prosperous future. In this way, the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is using King’s success as a blues artist and the roots of his past as a teaching tool to help a community move forward.

Indianola is located in the Delta between highways 61 and 49, along the stretch of 82 between Greenville and Greenwood, all of which are significant locations for blues music tourism. The city’s residents are reaping the benefits of this progress. The growing sense of pride in their city is obvious. The Chamber of Commerce distributes a promotional package filled with pamphlets and maps guiding tourists to blues related locations and other places of local historic significance, emphasizing in all marketing literature that Indianola is an amalgamation of “Delta Harmony...where we have not forgotten what it means to be a community.”<sup>57</sup> This promotion of community seems to be a way in which the farming town, haunted by its own legacy, can use history as a rallying point. The promotion of unity may not speak to the actuality of it, but it may help put the seeds in place.

Evelyn Roughton is the proprietor of The Crown Restaurant in Indianola’s downtown. She has been in business for over thirty years. Her slogan is “Visit the King, Eat Lunch at the Crown,” which she adopted in 2008 as the museum planning was in its final stages. The menu at The Crown is simple and traditional, straying slightly from fried catfish plates common in the Delta. Many tourists who come to this region, having heard about the new museum and the Blues Trail, are surprised to find that the Delta is still an

impoverished region, and that, save for a few chain stores and interstate restaurants, modernity has not really caught up. There are few telltale signs of what year it is. Blues is not a traditional way of promoting economic development, and tourism provides an alternative source of revenue for an area that has seen depopulation and prolonged economic crisis.<sup>58</sup>

Roughton smiles at confused or concerned tourists, and welcomes the opportunity to tell them about what is happening in her town. “Food is always a great reason to go anywhere,” she says, “but we’ve been working really hard to get the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center here. We start to see big tour groups come in and we’ve been very blessed with the thorough publicity and the number of people from everywhere in the world that come here. I even changed my menu as a result...we are planning to get it translated into several different languages to accommodate international tourists. Museum is kind of a stuffy idea to some people, but the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is anything but stuffy.”<sup>59</sup> She goes on to explain that the museum, in her opinion, is the best thing that has happened to the Delta region. The city’s centralized location means that tourists have to travel through at least one Delta town to get there, and as a result, more towns are getting tourist traffic and tourism dollars.

Blues scholar Scott Barretta aided Connie Gibbons and others in the flow of texts, images, and sounds that fill the museum. Like Roughton, both Barretta and Gibbons were insistent that there is more to the museum than facts and figures. All three stressed the “Delta Interpretive Center” portion of the title, making sure that this institution was not thrown into the mix with traditional museums. This insistence on broader interpretation is reflective of blues tourism in general. People who want to hear the music and learn about

the scene and its history are hands-on people. They are not traditional museum patrons, and as such, they do not want a traditional experience.<sup>60</sup> That is why the Blues Trail markers and sites along the way are able to speak to their audience so effectively; they provide tourists with tools, but allow them to shape their own journey. Indianola is home to two Blues Trail markers within the city limits: the Church Street marker, denoting the historic African American district where B.B. King played for tips on the street corner, and African Americans owned their own thriving businesses, and the Club Ebony marker, one of the most famous juke joints in the state, opened in 1945 and still in its original location. The Blues Trail experience is inclusive, juxtaposed by a racially and geographically exclusive history. The promotion of blues tourism, at the very least, allows others in. If development continues taking the direction of instructive integration based in historic experience, little of the perceived authenticity will be lost in light of the knowledge that is gained and preserved. Otherwise, it will just become another way to remember part of the past without connecting it to the most central burdens of southern history,<sup>61</sup> and the results become forced, lacking the soul so often attributed to the blues.

David Rotenstein writes about the blues revival in Helena, Arkansas, and the King Biscuit Blues Festival. Helena borders the Mississippi Delta, and has a similar history of river commerce, with the original city center built along the levee. There is a Mississippi Blues Trail marker in the town, commemorating the “Mississippi to Helena” blues connection. Rotenstein’s essay largely explores the function of blues tourism in light of the history of the region, and because the paper was published in 1998, eight years before the birth of the Blues Trail, much information needs scholarly updating. It is important to note, though, that the reach of the Delta, and the Delta blues is not bound geographically

by the borders of Mississippi, or by the city of Memphis. The Delta reaches beyond state borders, and the King Biscuit festival is one of the oldest blues festivals around. It began in 1986. Helena, like Clarksdale and Indianola, is using its resources to preserve and promote the blues. In addition to the festivals and blues-themed shops, Helena is home to the Delta Cultural Center, which serves as a hub for visitors to learn about the region's social and economic history.

Historic preservation in Helena revolves almost singularly around the blues, especially during the time of the King Biscuit Festival. The Cherry Street Historic District runs through the middle of downtown Helena, and is designed to evoke a sense of being transported back in time, so that tourists feel the presence of what once was – even if what they are experiencing is a downtown constructed to recreate a reality that did not actually exist. The District, according to Rotenstein, is defined as a “blues heritage area.”<sup>62</sup> Even though this manipulated setting is openly aimed at drawing tourists dollars to the city, the version of American musical culture being presented provides some belated recognition of the importance of black musical expressions<sup>63</sup> and it can be argued that there are significant cross-racial alliances being created as a result of the Helena experience.

Despite certain silences in the landscape, the Mississippi Delta is moving forward. Using the region's sordid history as a boon to promote a better way of life, many social programs are bringing in fresh new ideas, and building small pockets of change that fight the stagnant status quo so easily attributed to the region. In addition, the low cost of living, and high availability of land have caught the eye of outside developers from across the country, some of whom have Mississippi roots, some of whom fell in love with



the location and the unique charm, many of whom have money to put into developing the region. With development, there are always inherent problems of misuse and abuse, but there are also opportunities for positive growth. Revitalization will bring a renewed sense of pride to many small towns across the region. The need for this should never be overlooked or understated. There is a strong need for historic recognition, and that type of education can inspire progress. The hardships that are laid into the framework of the history of the region should continue to be recognized and memorialized in public history settings, like historic markers and museums. For instance, the Mississippi Blues Trail speaks to elements of those hardships by highlighting the difficulties that many blues musicians faced during their lives. As Bubba O'Keefe said, "There are lots of problems, so there are lots of answers." The use of a remarkable resource such as the blues heritage that is so richly entrenched in the region seems like a logical foundation on which to build a progressive future.

## CHAPTER II

### ELVIS PRESLEY'S GRACELAND: TOURISM, RACE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

*“God bless the boys from Memphis, Blue Suede Shoes and Elvis”*

Elvis: “The King of Rock and Roll,” “The King of Memphis,” or just “The King.” How did a boy who produced virtually no original material after the age of twenty–three manage to become one of the most widely recognized symbols in the world and remain that way decades after his death? Elvis Aron Presley, born in Tupelo, Mississippi, on January 8, 1935 attributed much of his musical talent to being mentored by blues musicians in and around Memphis. His early recordings were a synthesis of country, gospel, and blues, making his sound somewhat safe and familiar to mainstream white culture, but with just enough rhythm to attract a younger, wider audience.<sup>64</sup> Elvis learned to play the blues from black musicians he met in his hometown, and later honed his sound in the clubs and music halls of Memphis by combining the roots of blues with country music, and delivered it to America’s youth in the 1950s causing the sensationalism of early rock–n–roll to engulf the nation. He popularized traditional blues sounds by synthesizing genres and performance styles.

Sometimes it seems that Elvis has never actually “left the building.” His likeness adorns items from Christmas tree ornaments to toothbrushes. A blatant reminder of this is on display near Graceland, his Memphis home. A marquee sign above the Lonely Hearts Hotel across the street from the Graceland mansion reads, “Before Elvis, There Was

Nothing...–John Lennon.” At first a pompous quote, it’s reflective of the magnitude of Elvis, and how that magnitude impacts the way history is influenced and remembered. Tourists come from all over the world to see Elvis Presley’s Graceland. He died in 1977, and Graceland still draws approximately 600,000 national and international tourists each year, making it the second most visited home in the country – falling only to the White House.<sup>65</sup> The King’s image is preserved through the renditions of countless impersonators. They don his signature style and sing the songs he made famous. There is even a Cirque du Soleil show called Viva Elvis that pays tribute to Elvis’s life through flamboyant dance routines, costumes, and musical performances that depict the different stages of his career. On the show’s official web page, they describe the event as “a harmonious fusion. Nostalgia, modernity and raw emotion provide the backdrop for his immortal voice...Created in the image of The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll – powerful, sexy, whimsical, truly unique and larger than life – the show highlights an American icon who transformed popular music and whose image embodies the freedom, excitement and turbulence of his era. Viva ELVIS focuses on the essential humanity of the one superstar whose name will forever be linked with the history of Las Vegas and the entire world of entertainment: Elvis Presley.”<sup>66</sup>

The story of Elvis represents an age of innocence and simplicity, and simplified historic narratives involve bottles of Coca-Cola, suburban growth, and post war unity. Radio deejays and purveyors of popular culture reference these “simpler times” fondly. In America’s master narrative, they are the years when the nation manufactured her own goods, and Elvis was on every radio station. He grew to be a worldwide celebrity, giving a face and a name to rock and roll music, creating an empire previously unmatched and

unseen. The true cult of celebrity emerged with Elvis, and perhaps that is what the aforementioned quote by John Lennon referred to. But other people, mostly African Americans, mostly in small venues for small audiences, were doing the exact same thing, singing the exact same songs – because they had written them. Elvis’s handlers put a white face on it, a lot of money behind it, and the blues were transformed into tenable music for largely white audiences. The perpetuation of the myth of America’s golden age allows Elvis to rest in peace, and the roots of his stardom rest along with him, conveniently dismissed in favor of the myth of the legend.

Elvis styled what became his signature sound from listening to black blues musicians in Memphis clubs and he soaked up their performance style. He appropriated their sound with basic chords underneath repetitive lyrics, their style of dress with oversized jackets and pants, and their dance moves from hip swaying to foot stomping. If that appropriation is what propelled him to stardom, why is Elvis better known than black blues musician Memphis Slim? Why is Graceland so much more widely recognized than the juke joints of the Delta? In her book *Wounds of Returning*, Jessica Adams follows the economies that follow slavery. She travels across the south examining the evolution, spatially and in ideology, of representations of southern plantations in the post-slavery South. She argues that the consumption of black bodies during slavery did not end with emancipation, but shifted shape into the consumption of blackness in consumer culture, demonstrated in a myriad of purchasing patterns beginning immediately after emancipation with spectacle lynchings, and continuing today with the promotion of plantation tourism, heritage festivals, and other similar purchases of culture once created through the taking of black bodies. To Adams, Elvis is a signifier of white ventures into

black culture.<sup>67</sup> His signature style was crafted through a minstrelization of black musical characteristics. Watching dance motions, listening to guitar riffs obsessively, and when his time came, incorporating what he learned with the country style of music that he knew, performing the blues and rockabilly amalgamation that thrust him into superstardom. Then he housed all of that on his very own plantation, and created his empire. When viewed in this light, it is hard not to draw parallels between the Elvis brand and the history of southern plantation profiteering.

In his essay “Elvis Presley and the Politics of Popular Memory,” Michael Bertrand notes that Elvis’s legacy was and is contested in black and white society. Most commonly, Elvis is remembered in a positive light. He is considered responsible for desegregating rock and roll, and his contribution to bringing blues music into the white mainstream is greeted with appreciation and admiration. In that popular historic narrative, Elvis is the King. But Bertrand goes on to explain that in many circles, the King was, and is contested. He cites a quote from the *Chicago Defender*, “When Elvis Presley breathed his last breath and the press hailed him as the ‘King of Rock,’ Ol’ Man River cried out, ‘Naw he ain’t! My friend Chuck Berry is the King of Rock. Presley was merely a Prince who profited from the royal talent of a sovereign ruler vested with tremendous creativity. Had Berry been white, he could have rightly taken [Presley’s] throne and work his crown well.’”<sup>68</sup> Here, Elvis’s musical appropriation is linked with the appropriation of the Delta blues that occurred so frequently during the 1960s by bands like Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones.

Maybe, like the story that the Delta Interpretive Center tells of B.B. King’s life, the story of Elvis’s rise to Graceland is one that people identify with: the poor son of day

laborers, rising through the ranks of blue-collar work and being rewarded for the talent he nurtured in churches and blues shows across Memphis. The roots of the blues have always been linked to hardship. But more than his working class background, it was Elvis's appropriation of black style that hoisted him into widespread fame. Grace E. Hale writes, "Blackness, understood as synonymous with authenticity, again became a medium in which whites could express their own felt sense of difference and with which they could enact their own transformations."<sup>69</sup> Those transformations, Hale suggests, created a sense of freedom through rebellion, and propelled a love of the image of outsider in white society. In her journey to discover the next manifestation of American music, Amanda Petrusich draws a connection between blues and hip-hop that works both with Adams's view of the use of blackness as a commodity, and Hale's view of blackness as something adopted by whites as a means of escapism. She states, "...it is in this way that the blues most closely resembles contemporary hip hop – black music born of hardship; unconcerned with already established forms; occasionally vulgar; often marked by religious, violent, and highly sexualized themes; riddled with slang, euphemisms, and double entendres; and eventually fetishized and commodified by affluent whites."<sup>70</sup> Was race truly the differentiating factor between Elvis and Muddy Waters? Between Elvis and B.B. King? Both Waters and King enjoyed (and still enjoy, in King's case) successful careers as pioneering blues musicians, but their impact was not as shocking as that of Elvis. As a result of his success, Elvis's wealth reached beyond comprehension, and he used that wealth to create a tightly monitored life within the Graceland mansion. Today his name, owned and controlled microscopically by Elvis Presley Enterprises, continues to amass a large fortune through his imaging.

So universal is the legacy of Elvis that in March 2011, citizens of Budapest, Hungary were invited to participate in a vote that would rename a city landmark after Mississippi's own Elvis Presley. The decision came in the midst of a government effort to remove the names of Soviet leaders from many of the city's landmarks, and replace them with the names of individuals who contributed to the success of Hungary's independence. Though Elvis died in 1977, Hungary remembers his final appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in January 1957, when he dedicated the gospel song "Peace in the Valley" to the people who participated in the October 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviet Union. Elvis, who typically refrained from making political statements, felt compelled to reach out to the citizens of Hungary, and called for Ed Sullivan to solicit donations from viewers. The effort raised approximately 25 million Swiss francs, according to the mayor of Budapest Istvan Tarlos.<sup>71</sup> According to Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. CEO Jack Soden, Elvis would be very grateful for this honor.<sup>72</sup> Presley will receive posthumous citizenship, and will have a to-be-determined landmark named in his honor. Anyone can vote online on the city of Budapest's website Budapest.hu, which is in Hungarian. (Let the record reflect that with the efforts of an online translation service, the author of this thesis voted for the Margit híd budai hídfő, the Margit Bridge, which connects the cities of Buda and Pest across the Danube River.)

Elvis's image often represents freedom and independence to fans. In her book *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith & Image*, Erika Doss writes, "Elvis, after all, is an American emblem, and debates and conflicts over who Elvis is and what he means are comparable to the debates and conflicts over what America is and what America means."<sup>73</sup> He is the ultimate Great American Story – a boy from humble beginnings who worked his way to

success. This tale is a bit deceiving given the definition and scale of success achieved by Elvis, but it still resonates decades after his death. The mayor of Budapest assured the media that he was not an Elvis fan, that the move to rename the bridge was strictly political.<sup>74</sup> The influence of a 21-year-old Presley is still internationally relevant, and the image ascribed to him in 1957 is his lasting legacy.

Despite its location in a decrepit interstate neighborhood, Graceland provides a sanitized version of American history. There is nothing wild about Graceland. The “Good Rockin’ Tonight” ends with the departure of the last tours buses from the mansion at the end of every work day. It is a tribute to the life of Elvis, whose image is a tribute to an uncomplicated version of American history. As you drive down Elvis Presley Boulevard, Elvis themed gift shops and hotels materialize, but then fade less than a mile past the mansion. Those who still visit Graceland come for a variety of reasons. Some come for love, others come out of curiosity, others just happened to be in Memphis, perhaps on business, or just driving through. They come in droves by way of tour busses, caravans, and RVs, consistently filling the parking lots around Graceland every day. Many do not even notice the change in the image of Elvis that has taken place over the last decade. Until the early 1990s, shopping centers in the area were littered with Mom and Pop style Elvis souvenir shops, but the intellectual property lawsuits that earned Elvis Presley Enterprises (EPE) imaging rights to all things Elvis have closed down any unsanctioned distribution of his image.<sup>75</sup> Now, Graceland Plaza holds souvenirs, which, while still retaining their kitsch, hold an eerie air of seriousness. There is little good-natured fun in the souvenirs and shops, as if you were browsing a generic department store rather than



an Elvis-themed goods store. This sanitized commercialization of Elvis, however disappointing to older fans, seems to satiate the majority just the same.

In his cultural analysis of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Appalachia examining the persistence of upper-middle class whites in bringing cleanliness and godliness to the area, David Whisnant explores how different definitions of culture can be divisive and destructive to cultural and regional identities. His approach examines the problematic nature of outsiders descending upon the rural mountain towns and reinforcing the perpetuation of perceived regional stereotypes. While Whisnant recognizes the importance of the educational and financial growth the outsiders intended to bring, he suggests that the sterilization of a culture and the erasure of identity destroy any hope of preserving a real and valuable piece of American history.<sup>76</sup> Erika Doss's *Elvis Culture* makes a similar argument while examining the impact that Elvis Presley Enterprise's acquisition of the entire Elvis Presley estate and rights to all imaging and ownership has on Elvis's legacy and his fan base. Before EPE's takeover in the mid 1990s, Elvis's image belonged to his wide-reaching fan base.<sup>77</sup> His likeness was crafted in countless fashions, one of the most popular being the Velvet Elvis paintings, outlawed by EPE shortly after they gained imaging rights. The images that EPE now use for merchandising depict the slender, young star before his foray into drugs and Las Vegas. No "Fat Elvis" images are sanctioned. Elvis is instead portrayed as the ultimate embodiment of the American dream, rising from nothing and achieving everything. According to Doss, "With annual revenues currently exceeding a conservatively estimated \$100 million, EPE is a major corporate player completely dependent on Elvis's image...If an 'official' image of Elvis comes to dominate, one that translates exclusively in terms of dollars and

profit, Elvis will just wind up joining all the other hollow American icons, from George Washington to JFK, who once satisfied our national craving for identity and definition.”<sup>78</sup>

Tourists visit Graceland at astonishing rates. Elvis culture maintains an international appeal. They worship the icon of his image, a symbol that grows increasingly further from the significance of its roots. What does this say about the people who perpetuate this imagery? Fans still weep at his tomb during the annual Elvis week. Elvis is dead, and his image is closely monitored and manufactured, so what are we keeping alive? If culture is the operative basis for most agendas,<sup>79</sup> then the agenda of Elvis Presley Enterprises seems to be to portray American culture as frozen in an imagined time. Elvis, once a defining cultural element of white America, is mass-produced, homogenized, and theme park-like. He was once considered a rebel – controversial, racy, pushing boundaries through his connections to black culture and his overt sexuality. While times have changed (Elvis is no longer shocking to modern audiences) the homogenization of Elvis robbed him of his historic perspective, placing him in trademark status like Coca Cola™ – a fixture in rather than a shaper of culture. Controversial Elvis, his questionable rise to stardom, fall from relevance and rise to Vegas, are removed from his story. The results are incomplete and sterile at best.

Graceland became a constructed representation of Elvis’s reality. In the mansion, the idea of authenticity is framed around what Elvis Presley Enterprises believes are tourist’s expectations and preferences of who Elvis is. Like the stage of the tourist South that Brundage described, the tours of the mansion and the scripted narrative of Elvis’s life are crafted around what fans need Elvis to represent. The simplicity of his celebrity is emphasized. At heart, they explain, Elvis was a good old country boy with a whole lot of

soul. He lived in a great big mansion, but he enjoyed unadorned pleasures, like horses, guns, and an appetite for cars. After all, he worked as an auto mechanic before he became a celebrity. He's just like us. Ex-wife Pricilla narrates the audio-guided tour, and quips, "One time it was meatloaf. Meatloaf every night for six months."<sup>80</sup> Amanda Petrusich adds, "The dining room is set for a formal dinner, napkins rolled, flowers arranged, forks selected – and despite the tourists and Plexiglas and digital cameras and security staff, I can't escape a creepy suspicion that the Presley's are about to return home, settle into their favorite seats at the dinner table, and pass a basket of rolls."<sup>81</sup> The emphasis put on making tourists feel like Elvis is their own best friend, a relatable, common, playful neighbor, contributes largely to his sustained appeal. Fans deeply connect to the feeling of the "magic of composition,"<sup>82</sup> believing that being so close to the source somehow makes Elvis feel more real.

Above all else, Graceland survives.<sup>83</sup> This representation of American history is sanitized for the masses, overlooking the reality that Elvis was a product of his era as much as segregation was. How detrimental is it that Elvis's superstar status buried him with the benefit of a one-sided historic narrative? There is very little published revisionist scholarship of Elvis's life, and as a result, the King rests peacefully and uncomplicatedly on his plantation. We go to see the Jungle Room, the gold lamé suit, and the tacky farmhouse that enraptured young white America, and still manages to do so. And like streets named after Confederate generals, and tours of working plantations, we often fail to ask the larger questions. What does this historic tourism say about who we are, or who we think we are? Are we people who want to know about our past, or people who want to find peace through fabricated realities and representations of our past?

Petrusich sees Elvis's Graceland as a symbol of American curiosity. People go to Graceland because they do not know what to expect from the site; they do not know what they want to glean from the life of Elvis so many years after his death, but there is a common strain in American culture that has penchant for getting close to the curious. She explains, "...The mansion, however inadvertently, promises to answer big American questions about talent, wealth, fame, decline, failure, death. If we can see, firsthand, what kind of books Elvis read, the strange furniture he favored, the colors of the tiles that lined his kitchen, will we be better equipped to understand the biggest of all American myths? Will we know what happened to the ones—who—die—too—young?"<sup>84</sup> In part, Petrusich is right. Graceland does seem like the place to go to understand the roots of American fascination with celebrity. Maybe this is because Elvis's celebrity is so delicately handled. His final years were addled with prescription drugs and poor health, but his image is so perfectly crafted that many people either do not know or do not acknowledge that. But more than the myth of celebrity, Graceland promises to answer questions about where America places its values, and it is a symbol of how deep we are willing to look. And the answer seems to be: not that deep.

Using history to create a tourist destination is complicated. Navigating how to tell a story so that people will want to see it and learn about it means that many times, the story must play to a large and diverse audience. Complex discussions of race, class, gender and hardship must be presented in a way that is easy to understand if the hope of that destination is to attract tourists. Tours to the coast of West Africa to see the "Doors of No Return" where enslaved Africans were herded onto boats to cross the Atlantic and tours that navigate Nazi death camps in Poland and Germany – the purpose of these are

clear. Certainly they are not without their own problematic portrayals, but their function is to teach a lesson. They explain history, allow for reflection and even a sense of historic closure through experiential authenticity. The lessons of humanity emanate through a universally acknowledged atrocity. But tourism gets more complicated when the impact of the history is not as easily understood. The heritage of a region like the South gets promoted, and the history falls by the wayside in light of a simpler story to tell. Plantation tours are considered a part of southern heritage, but telling a story from the perspective of hoop skirts, carriages, cotton, and a benevolent master is far simpler than explaining the burdens of slave labor that was extended throughout systems of unfair wage labor, and subsequently complicated the racial dynamics of an entire country, the impact of which can still be felt.

Because slavery is over, because the narrative of equality exists, and because we want to look beyond a sordid historic past, we allow ourselves to look beyond the gates of Graceland, and into the plantation on the hill where Elvis used the talents of black musicians to deliver a sound that became a national identity of youthful, wholesome rebellion and unending prosperity. According to Michael Bertrand, “how people remember correlates directly with how they view themselves in relation to society. For those historically marginalized, popular memory frequently provides an alternate version of history that satisfactorily explains their own marginalization.”<sup>85</sup> Conversely, to escape acknowledging the marginalization of others, Graceland creates a historic narrative that is easier to digest, and satisfactorily explains to tourists how they want to see themselves.

**“There is some soul in Alabama that you can’t find in Los Angeles”**

There is no official website for the visitors’ bureau in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Rather, information on Muscle Shoals can be obtained on the Colbert Country visitors

bureau website. The site explains that Colbert County, the “Gateway to Northwest Alabama” is home to a host of fascinating tourist destinations, such as Helen Keller’s birthplace, the Coon Dog Cemetery, and the Alabama Music Hall of Fame. The Muscle Shoals Recording Studio, home of the famous Muscle Shoals rhythm section known as “The Swampers,” is actually located in Sheffield, Alabama, and the FAME recording studio is in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. The locations are 2.5 miles apart from each other, and were both the sites of the creation of some of the most recognizable American popular music. Under the “Music Heritage” section on the site, a notice states, “We’re building a larger database for this section. Please visit again soon.”<sup>86</sup> There are links to the websites of both recording studios, but little information on either of the pages about the history of the studios, or what is there now, or what information could be gleaned from a tour.

Lynyrd Skynyrd paid tribute to the sounds of The Swampers in their song “Sweet Home Alabama,” singing, “In Muscle Shoals they’ve got the Swampers, they’ve been known to pick a song or two.” During the 1960s and 1970s, some of the most well-known and well-loved music of the twentieth century was produced at studios across the town. The Muscle Shoals Sound was defined by its geography. George Lair of the Alabama Music Hall of Fame said, “You can draw a triangle from Nashville to Memphis to Muscle Shoals, and while Nashville is the country center, Memphis is generally known as the blues center. Muscle Shoals, being between those two places, has been able to combine those two styles into a real Southern rhythm and blues that was very appealing.”<sup>87</sup> The raw, deep, yet simple sounds behind Aretha Franklin, Clarence Carter,

The Rolling Stones, The Allman Brothers, Paul Simon, and Bob Dylan, among others, resonate with the unique circumstance of location.

FAME Records has a gift shop with albums and t-shirts, but little more. The original Muscle Shoals recording studio houses a small museum, and on December 15, 1997, the studio was added to the Alabama register of Landmarks and Heritage.<sup>88</sup> Muscle Shoals is just as easily located as Indianola, Mississippi, but for a location responsible for so much music history, it seems unusual that tourism is not a major focus. True music lovers – the hardcore pilgrims – cannot deny that a huge portion of Southern Roots Rock was created there. The recording studio that remains seems a logical stop on the Delta Music tour, yet little promotion has occurred. On January 6, 2010, the Mississippi Blues Trail erected a marker called “Mississippi to Alabama” in Muscle Shoals to commemorate “the many decades of musical connection between Mississippi and Alabama.”<sup>89</sup> The marker details the intertwined history of musicians from both states crossing the borders to play, perform and record. It is located outside of the Muscle Shoals Recording Studio.

Tourism is continuing to grow into the Delta as people realize that if Beale Street is even a little bit authentic, then the Delta, still raw and untouched in many ways, must be even closer to the roots of authentic blues music. What would it take for Muscle Shoals to become a tourist Mecca? An annual tribute to the Muscle Shoals sound? A Roots Music Museum and Interpretive Center? A street lined with bars and restaurants that boasts nightly live music and debauchery? The Blues Trail lets you swim with notions of what used to be. Graceland is an extravagant and overwhelming display of pop–trademark history. Muscle Shoals is concrete, small, and worth recognition. It is an

actual location where things happened – a root, of sorts. Music tourism exists because people keep it alive through their own desire to be a part of something that, like the music they love, resonates within them. Why, then, is there not more being done to preserve and promote the continuation of this historic location? Physically, there was never much more to it than the four-part rhythm section and a few recording studios, but that is significantly more concrete than much of what is commemorated along the rest of the Mississippi Blues Trail.

The idea of authenticity strikes me repeatedly while looking at these three very different places. The word is common in the tourism industry, but its usage varies. What is keeping these places alive, and must keeping them alive change them? How do people move from hearing to seeing? In his essay “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” Ted Ownby states of music tourists, “The music belongs to them, and signifies something important in their lives, but [recorded music] can be ephemeral... Going and hearing, touring, is making music three-dimensional... In some ways, sharing musical experiences makes commodities – recorded music – less commodified.”<sup>90</sup> Unless there is a unified approach to the development of this tourist market, there is a risk that the Delta will become a product, become Graceland-like, or disappear entirely. The function of tourism, with all of its negativity and commodification of real lived experience, is to promote something that is interesting to others. Developers making a profit on the backs of locals will ultimately fail, because in order to do a place justice, you have to love it. People who love Elvis are no longer responsible for Graceland, and it may still survive because his image might just be enough to keep people coming back, but eventually, younger



generations will forget who he was and what he meant to the nation. They will forget the reality of his life and grow bored with his 1950s Rockabilly image.

Perhaps the creation of music tourism keeps the ideas of place and time alive. Does it matter if Ground Zero Blues Club is a real juke joint? Or is it more important that the idea of a juke joint is preserved? Does it matter if Elvis Presley Enterprises makes the distribution of unflattering images of America's Golden Child illegal? How important is it for everyone to know that Elvis died alone, in his home bathroom, of a drug overdose? And in the answers to these questions, do we find an answer to why Muscle Shoals seems largely obsolete? There are positive and negative aspects to preservation and restoration in cultural tourism. Historically responsible development would include past, present and future, and be accessible to a broad audience without presenting an imagined version of history.

### Chapter III

#### KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD: THE MUSIC TOURISM INDUSTRY MEETS PUBLIC HISTORY

*“There’s Heaven, Purgatory, Hell and the Blues. I’m just tryin’ to crawl up from the blues.” –Townes Van Zandt*

Austin, Texas, the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World,” is home to a successful music tourism industry. The city’s slogan became official in 1991, after it was discovered that Austin had more live music venues per capita than anywhere else in the nation, and whether or not it’s still accurate, the name stuck. The city’s tourism strategy is different from the blues-centric Mississippi Delta. Its cultural heritage does not boast the birth of the blues, nor is it the home of a singular cultural icon central to America’s recent past. It could be argued that Willie Nelson is a cultural icon of the city – he is the familiar face of the cosmic-cowboy culture that combined rock, country, blues and folk music to create a sound sometimes simply known as Americana. But Nelson is not the only cultural icon of Austin, and there is no shrine in his honor. (There have been rumors for decades of erecting a large statue of Nelson in front of City Hall.) There is a statue of Austin musician Stevie Ray Vaughn, a prolific white blues musician who died in a helicopter crash on August 27, 1990, at the age of thirty-five. Austin’s music market is diverse, spanning genres and styles from zydeco and Latin music to blues, jazz, country and rock and roll. An inordinate number of musicians and songwriters are from

there or have made a home there, contributing to the city's \$600 million dollar music industry.<sup>91</sup> The industry alone employs more than 12,000 people.<sup>92</sup>

On the Austin's Convention and Visitor's Bureau website [austintexas.org](http://austintexas.org), visitors are immediately greeted by flashing photographs of musicians and concert patrons at various local venues and festivals. Across the screen flashes the message, "When you can hear music where you land, around every corner, and all other times in between you know you're in THE LIVE MUSIC CAPITAL OF THE WORLD."<sup>93</sup> Tourists visit to hear to the music that the city creates, and come by the thousands to attend the many festivals held around Austin each year. Beyond the various music districts across the city, there are four main festivals that bring international attention to Austin's music tourism industry. Austin City Limits Festival hosts three days of live music from a variety of artists. South by Southwest® is a music, film and interactive festival that brought over 80,000 tourists to Austin in 2011. Panchanga Festival is a Latino music and heritage festival, and Urban Music Festival targets the African American tourist market, underrepresented in Austin, and hosts a weekend of hip-hop, R&B, jazz and soul music.

Perhaps Austin is successful at music tourism because it does not have to answer so loudly for its complicated past. The state of Mississippi is burdened by its history, and the slowness of the nation to allow the state to shed that burden perpetuates the stereotypes attributed to it. Poverty is blatant in the visual landscape of the Mississippi Delta, making it difficult for tourists to see how anything could thrive there. The stark segregation still so prevalent across the region is proof that the burdens of southern history are not so quickly forgotten. But Austin is just far enough away from the heart of the Deep South that it can be considered the West, and so even though the city underwent

stringent segregation that led to the relocation of the city's black population further and further east of the Capitol, and the stigma of southern history can be overlooked in light of the fun, funky vibe that took root in the city. Because Austin music tourism can draw from a wide musical heritage, there is little demand to address the challenges of blues tourism that Mississippi faces. Music tourism can exist as entertainment without having to provide as much historic context.

Putting cultural attributes into a historic context, and then making that history available to a nonacademic audience requires historic revision. Some forms of cultural history are a product of their times – restaurants, juke joints, main streets. Other forms have to be taken, finessed, marketed, and delivered to an audience. Austin and the Mississippi Delta are examples of unlikely tourist destinations that are revising their histories by promoting music at the forefront of their tourism industries. Both regions try to convey the significance of their musical heritage while also acknowledging their history. In this way, the conversation between history and public access means information must be revised constantly to accommodate new (or perhaps overlooked) subjects.

Music tourism in Austin celebrates hybridity and diversity. The scope of music found across the city is broad, encompassing every style imaginable. The uniqueness of the Austin sound is that there is no one Austin sound. Instead, it is an amalgamation of different voices, and the diverse cultures that those voices represent. Austin is not known for its “long view” history. The Capitol and the Governor's Mansion are historic sites, but what passes for old here is really just a few decades old. Sites heralded as historic date back barely further than the 1940s or 1950s. In that time, many roots have taken hold

there, and as a result, there is no singular focus on a specific music genre. Blues music in Austin is as varied as the rest of the music scene. Traditionally, the Texas blues sound is characterized by a distinct country swing in conjunction with jazz-like improvisations, which were made famous by the “father of the Texas blues” Blind Lemon Jefferson. But in Austin, you are just as likely to hear the Delta blues or the Chicago blues being played by a Texas musician.

While blues are played in conjunction with many types of music at various venues across the city, the most recognized blues music venue in Austin is Antone’s. In 1975, Clifford Antone opened the first location of the blues club Antone’s Nightclub. Since that time, the club has served as Austin’s premiere location to hear blues music. Antone nurtured relationships with blues musicians from B.B. King and Muddy Waters to Albert King and Pinetop Perkins. While many of the names of people who have graced the stage at Antone’s are unknown outside of the blues world, Antone realized from an early age that their contribution to the music was invaluable. He was a true student of the blues, one of many young white boys for whom Elvis was not enough. He listened and picked apart bands, honing in on the talent of each member. That attention to detail is arguably why Antone’s maintained a reputation as the premiere blues joint in Austin. Antone invited many musicians to come and play, and he would create bands out of individual groupings of musicians. Horn sections, guitarists, drummers from across the country who had never played together, played at Antone’s. Much like the Music Maker’s Relief Foundation today, Clifford Antone saw an opportunity to aid musicians who were unable to make enough money to take care of themselves. He created Antone’s as a way to give blues artists from all over the country a home, a hot meal, and an opportunity to play.

While many Austin venues were getting involved in the cosmic cowboy hillbilly folk country scene that became today's Americana genre, Antone's was bringing in bluesmen hailing from Texas, Louisiana, Chicago, and Mississippi.

Blues music faded in and out of mainstream popularity during the 1970s and 1980s, but the preservation of the music and the people who played it never stopped being important to Clifford Antone. His efforts are still recognized today as some of the most important endeavors in blues music preservation ever undertaken. Antone was posthumously inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2009 for his contributions to keeping the blues alive.<sup>94</sup> Of Antone's Don McLeese of NoDepression.com wrote, "After frequent visits but before moving from my native Chicago to Austin, I wrote that the best Chicago blues bar was a thousand miles or so south of the city's limits. It was amazing at Antone's to see Chicago blues artists who'd been sleepwalking for decades back home become energized in the company of young Texas musicians who didn't merely worship them but pushed them. It was the difference between blues as a wax-museum anachronism – 25 variations on the theme of "Sweet Home Chicago" – and blues as a live-wire jolt."<sup>95</sup>

Susan Antone took over direct ownership of Antone's in the late 1990s. She ran the entire operation until a 2010 merger with Emo's, a punk rock venue in Austin. The ownership merger allowed Susan to back away from the handling of the club that her brother Clifford built, the daily operations of which kept her busy for nearly four decades. The merger may be the beginning of the end of Clifford's intended legacy, which was cut short by his 2006 death. But a recent article about the merger asks, "what's punk rock if not a variation on the blues?"<sup>96</sup> Beyond quips, the merger can be viewed as another

example of Austin invention. The clubs remain loyal to their respective genres, but the breath of fresh air will encourage larger audiences to experience a side of Austin not mentioned as loudly in Austin's vociferous Americana narrative. The Antone's – Emo's merger will change the dynamic of both venues. The evolution of a business is not its end. Preserving the history of Antone's will allow the club to continue growing, while assuring that the significance of its role in preserving and promoting the blues remains solid.

The Mississippi Blues Commission has not placed an out-of-state marker in Texas yet, but it is not for lack of places to put them. A Blues Trail marker would find a perfect home in front of Antone's. It could also be placed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (BCAH). Both Austin and Mississippi have major universities that are acting as repositories of blues artifacts. At the University of Mississippi, the Blues Archive houses one of the largest collection of blues related material in the world. At The University of Texas at Austin, the BCAH has a wide variety of blues artifacts, ranging from the John Avery Lomax papers to the Mance Lipscomb collection. The University of Mississippi is directly involved in the preservation of the blues and the promotion of the Blues Trail. Blues scholars come to the archives for information to write the markers. The university was even awarded its own marker in 2008 for its contribution to documenting the blues. The BCAH is an archive with collections from all areas of American history. They are able to create and display a variety of exhibits, and function in many ways like a museum. One contribution they have made to documenting the blues is the acquisition of the Antone's papers.

When an individual is interested in donating his or her materials, referred to as “papers,” there is a specific process that must happen in order to properly process the collection. The deed of gift is signed. The collection is turned over. Archivists then catalogue the contents of the collection, place it in proper acid-free containers, and take it to the temperature controlled storage facility. There are slightly different procedures when larger materials are collected. The storage process changes, crates are ordered and special locations are arranged for storage. But by and large, the preservation takes place first through acquisition, then through cataloguing, then through proper storage. If an institution is lucky, they have a large digitization department, and can get the materials onto computers through unique types of photographs and scanners that do not harm the material, which is sometimes centuries old. When researchers want to look at the material, it is available, either in digital format, or in its original form. Many materials have to be handled with gloves to preserve the integrity of the original documents.

In 2009, Susan Antone approached the BCAH and requested that her papers, and the papers from her brother’s nightclub, find a home there. She began taking photographs of musicians at Antone’s in 1975. Over the last three decades, she has acquired thousands of pictures of internationally acclaimed musicians, many of whom are now deceased. Her pictures are not “music journalism.” She had a unique form of access, and a love for the performers and their crafts. These pictures represent a lifetime labor of love. Many of the artists she photographed hold celebrated positions in American music history. Clifford Antone preserved the history of American roots music by creating a home that welcomed bluesmen. Susan preserved the history of American roots music by capturing raw and



personal portraits of the artists, many of whom were not even recognized for their own significant contributions until long after their death.

The Antone papers are comprised of photographs, music calendars, posters, autographs, and club records, all central to the history of the club and the people who played there. Because Austin, Texas is the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World” it seems impractical to leave this body of work solely in the hands of researchers who come to the archive. Austin’s musical heritage is not terribly old, but what it lacks in age it makes up for in content. Now that she is spending less time running the club, Susan spends much of her time helping the BCAH archive her photography collection. The process is exacting. She sits on the floor in front of a stack of photos and identifies each person in the picture. The archivist (me, for all intents and purposes) writes down the information, numbers the photo, and places it in a folder. The filing system is elaborate, and that is due largely to the same reason that Clifford was so famous. There are thousands of pictures from thousands of shows that involve a myriad of musicians playing in various compositions. If Albert King is photographed with Stevie Ray Vaughn, does it get filed under Albert, or Stevie? (In the early stages of the process, the filings are happening on a first-name alphabetical basis.) The process is not perfect yet, and the cataloguing is just the beginning.

Photography tells one story of American roots, and the way that it is preserved and displayed will tell another side of that story. Both stories deal with the value of content. One is from the beginning, and the other is for the future. The BCAH is now charged with the preservation of Susan’s photography. Because the center is neither strictly a museum nor strictly an archive, there is constant confusion about what to do

with some of the remarkable materials housed there. I believed her photography could combine blues music and public history, creating a cultural narrative of the Austin blues scene. When I wrote the initial proposal for the Susan Antone Photography Exhibit, I had eyes larger than my budget. But my proposal was based on the fact that Clifford Antone created a place where blues music could be brought to life and preserved. Antone's survived several relocations, and has outlived many of the other music venues opened around the same time despite the fact that they were equally as central to the Austin music narrative. To archive these photographs was not enough. They needed an exhibition that drew on the lore of Austin cultural history and told the often-lesser-known story of musicians who had paid their dues for years before getting the recognition they deserved. Not everyone gets to be famous, but Antone's assured that everyone got a chance to be heard. The project is ongoing, and includes a photography exhibit, a small book of photos, and a digital oral history project that includes interviews with musicians and patrons. Hopefully, through its fruition, public history will breed cultural tourism in the form of a revised Austin music narrative.

The Susan Antone Photography Exhibit provides an example of how tourism is used as a force of diversification, promoting cultural invention and innovation.<sup>97</sup> It demonstrates that the importance of the preservation of blues performance is central to the preservation of blues music history as well as the continued development of a modern blues audience. This public history project is a re-imagining of blues culture. It is a presentation outside of the traditional or expected setting of locations, like the Mississippi Delta. In telling the story of blues music at Antone's, the blues shape the existing Austin music narrative, which is only loosely affiliated with the blues, despite the impact that the

blues had on the city's music scene. Austin becomes a point of reference for blues through public history – another way to maintain their historic integrity.

In many ways, Austin music tourism is focused more on promoting music than on combining music and history, and as a result, the back-story often gets left out. The goal of the Susan Antone Photography Exhibit is to join history with popular culture, bringing together an academic institution and a nightclub in order to fill in some blanks that get left out of the master narrative. The goal of Austin music tourism will never promote the blues the way that Mississippi does because Austin is not just about the blues. But the city could take a lesson from the efforts going on to embrace history and culture across the Mississippi Delta in how to harness the two without dismissing either one. The BCAH and Antone's have an opportunity to create a successful display of regional history and culture, and that could be the trigger for allowing a more complete story of Austin music history to be told.

Many voices get left out in master narratives, and when they are heard, the narrative becomes more complete. The story of the blues in Mississippi is one such example. Because black voices and black culture were dismissed within the master narrative for so many years, very little thought was given to studying something like blues music. But through revisionist history, the incorporation of those stories is helping tell a more inclusive story. That complaint is not unique to Mississippi. In his autobiography about life as a black musician in the early Austin music scene of the 1950s and 1960s, Major Lee Burkes offers a glimpse into a part of Austin history that is often overlooked. *In the Shadow of Austin* details Burke's life growing up in and around the city, and making his name as a blues musician. He played at the Victory Grill, Big

Mary's Club, Good Daddy's Club, Sam's Showcase, and a host of other juke joints that made up Austin's vibrant East Side. By the time Major was playing the clubs, white Austin was honing in on the cosmic-cowboy sound coming out of the Vulcan Gaslight Company, a venue that catered to a largely white crowd, mostly hippies, lots of psychedelic music mixed with a growing folk music scene. He talks about his experience as a black musician as being found largely in the shadows of a predominantly white culture. "Privileges came to me within my music career. As strange as it seems to say this, music has afforded me open doors to business opportunities I never would have dreamed of. However, the irony here is that my financial investment in music has never paid off directly. Meaning, it has paid me well sometimes, but most often it has not paid – rather it has cost."<sup>98</sup> The decline of the Chitlin' Circuit in Austin forced most of the East Side juke joints out of business, and until 1975 and the creation of Antone's, there was no real place for blues musicians to play in the city.

Today, virtually all of the Austin juke joints are gone, except for the Victory Grill, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places on October 16, 1998, and received a historic marker from the Texas Historic Commission. Johnny Holmes opened the Victory Grill in 1945 on "Victory Over Japan Day," as a restaurant and bar for black soldiers returning from World War II. The Grill quickly rose to fame in the city, and became one of the most popular Chitlin' Circuit stops, attracting nationally known acts like James Brown, Etta James, Billie Holiday, Chuck Berry, and Janis Joplin, who cut her blues teeth on many of the juke stages in East Austin. The Grill fell in and out of several stages of decline and repair over the years, and even closed for a time in the late 1980s. It was reopened in 1996. Today, it is under new ownership. The new owner, Eva Lindsey,

painted the building yellow and red, paying tribute to her alma mater, Huston–Tillotson University, Austin’s historically black university. The kitchen still continues to serve home–style cooking. The diversity of culture in Austin has encouraged entrepreneurs to examine the roots of the Grill’s history, and use those roots to connect to a modern audience. The new goal of the Grill is to bridge the gap between the Chitlin’ Circuit and today’s modern urban environment by bringing in blues acts as well as neo–soul music and spoken word poetry, among other genres.

Austin is known as an inventive city, and that legacy of creativity is constantly evolving in public memory. The Austin music narrative is the largest shaper of the city’s cultural heritage, and that story of amalgamation and freedom of expression serves as an anchor for the culture that continues to take root here. The people who are perpetuating the story of musical Austin are what Benjamin Filene calls the “cultural workers.”<sup>99</sup> Their reinterpretation and redefinition the history of the folk culture that is born here shapes the central narrative of the city. If Austin had not created itself in its own image – if the city’s residents had not created the live music venues, and hosted thousands of musical acts across all genres, then Austin would not be such a central location for musical exploration. It is the cultural history of the city that allows for the public perception that this is a place where experimentation and innovation has been, and always will be welcome – that you can bring your ideas here. Filene says that, “public memory is formed by a recursive process, one that involves revisiting and reevaluating the culture of the past in the light of the present.”<sup>100</sup> Making the musical heritage of Austin a cultural rallying point has helped the city thrive. Surrounding Texas cities like San Antonio, Dallas and Houston had a burgeoning blues scenes long before Austin, all of which

continued to thrive through the 1940s and even into the 1970s. Austin was slower to develop as a blues-recording center, but did become a central hub for blues in the mid 1940s, continuing through the 1950s. Blues music took a back seat in the city during the 1960s and early 1970s. While blues-centric shows continued to be played at emerging music venues, they were not the focus. The Vulcan Gaslight Company (1967 – 1970), and later, the Armadillo World Headquarters (1970 – 1980) served as the primary concert venues for younger audiences to see non-mainstream music. Both places hosted blues acts like Fred McDowell, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin’ Hopkins, James Cotton, and John Lee Hooker, but they primarily catered to acts like Shiva’s Headband, the 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Elevators, Willie Nelson, the Flying Burrito Brothers, and a host of other acts ranging from psychedelic (Vulcan) to jazz, country and rock (Armadillo).

The Armadillo World Headquarters and the culture that encompassed it are the primary source of the “Keep Austin Weird” attitude that is still so central to the city’s identity. Austin’s reputation as a place where everyone’s welcome and anything goes grew out of this era of experimentation and an amalgamation of music, art and culture. To some extent, this self-perception was valid. In his essay “Home with the Armadillo: Public Memory and Performance in the 1970s Austin Music Scene,” Jason Dean Mallard uses concert calendars to count how many times musical acts graced the stage at the Armadillo, and draws the conclusion that Austin was home to much more than the cosmic-cowboy, hippie-redneck style of music that emerged there. Mallard asks, “How do we reconcile popular perceptions about the Armadillo and its role in promoting certain types of music with the reality of what actually took place there?”<sup>101</sup> The performances at the Armadillo were widely varied, as was the audience. Public perceptions of Austin are

still shaped by the culture that grew out of that era, and the decade-long run that the venue held still dominates popular memory, and plays largely into the denotation of the city as the “Live Music Capitol of the World.”

While the original building was demolished and replaced with high-rise office buildings, the spirit is still very prevalent. Much of the artwork and paraphernalia associated with the venue was taken over by Threadgill’s, a home-cooking restaurant and music venue that reinvented itself after the demise of the Armadillo. After several reincarnations due to change in ownership and building damage, Threadgill’s, now known as Threadgill’s World Headquarters, sits just blocks from where the old Armadillo World Headquarters stood, and the music beer garden is a throwback to the beer garden that was found at the original Armadillo. Threadgill’s hosts a versatile musical lineup and attracts locals and tourists for events ranging from rock and roll to a Sunday Gospel Brunch. Local radio station KUT is also keeping the spirit of the Armadillo World Headquarters alive by engaging in a community oral history project, recording the stories of people that remember the venue. The oral history project airs spots during the Texas Music Matters program. The project is housed in the archives of the BCAH, which is also home to the Texas Poster Art Collection, which showcases original artwork created by local artists. The artwork includes venue calendars and promotional material for the Armadillo. Through efforts like these, which promote cultural history, Austin is not only recognized as a major tourist destination, but a major site of relocation. In the last decade, the population of the greater Austin area has grown by 500,000 people.<sup>102</sup> Austin is consistently ranked as one of the best places to live in the country because of its strong job market and because of its cultural offerings. Now, it would be a stretch to say that the

1960s and 1970s Austin music scene are reasons why the city continually attracts new growth in the face of economic decline across the country, but the attitude associated with living here, in conjunction with the continual promotion of an experimental culture certainly does not hurt.

Museums and archives are traditional homes of public history. Outside of those spaces there is opportunity to use acquisitions to create less traditional projects that will reach a wider audience. This is done through documentaries, oral histories, the creation of exhibits that will travel or will be presented in locations outside of the institutions that house them, interactive websites that showcase a digitized exhibit, and many other ways. The Mississippi Blues Trail, for instance, bridges the gap between traditional styles of public history. It tells the story of blues roots, and how those roots impacted the music created a specific region. The Susan Antone Photography Exhibit similarly bridges the public history gap by using photography to tell the story of blues music in Austin. Both use music to discuss history, but they also use the history of the regions to discuss blues music.



## CONCLUSION

### BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

*“I remember the days when I played at chicken fights and your only pay was the dead chicken,” he once told the New York Times. “But now I can’t retire even if I want to. Everybody’s calling me.” Pinetop Perkins*

On Monday, March 21, 2011, two days after his appearance at the “True South: Mississippi Music Showcase” at the SXSW® Festival, Joe Willie “Pinetop” Perkins died in his sleep at his home in Austin. He was 97 years old. Pine, as his friends called him, was born in Belzoni, Mississippi in 1913. He was one of the last surviving pre-war era Delta blues musicians. He outlived most of his contemporaries, including former band mate Muddy Waters, born the same year, about forty miles apart. Pine traveled from Mississippi to Chicago and played in several different bands as a sideman before launching his solo career later in life. In the 1970s, Clifford Antone booked him to play the club, and he never stopped coming back. In 2003, he made Austin his permanent home and Antone’s his refuge. If he was not on stage playing piano, you could find him in the back of the club, smoking menthol cigarettes and selling his albums. Perkins’s presence in Austin was deeply felt by the music community, who considered him family from the start. He played at Antone’s but also spent time at country music venues like the Broken Spoke, occasionally playing, but mostly enjoying the music. Austin blues musician Marcia Ball said, “For me, Austin's been a place where we all came because there's a pure love of music with no discrimination of styles. To see Pinetop at the Broken Spoke just tied together so much of what Austin's about musically.”<sup>103</sup>

Perkins's Austin funeral was held at the Cook–Walden Funeral Home north of the city. His Mississippi funeral was several days later in Clarksdale, where he was buried. The event was packed with media, musicians, fans, and friends. During the service, many musicians took to the stage to play tributes to the man that fellow blues musician Hubert Sumlin called “the patriarch of our entire blues family.” During a moment of remembrance, Bob Margolin recounted an exchange he'd had with Perkins several years earlier. It was 2005, and Perkins had just won a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award. Margolin asked, “What's the best thing about winning your Grammy Award?” Perkins responded, “That I'm alive to get it.” His obituary was printed in media outlets from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Huffington Post*, to *Rolling Stone*, among others. Perkins's renewed career gave him the opportunity to impact the lives of many young blues musicians. His presence at Antone's brought blues music to an eager audience. The admiration from his friends and fans, and the outpouring of media coverage remembering his contributions to music history was a clear sign that blues music reaches a wide and diverse audience.

Just a week before Perkins died, the world lost another revered Delta bluesman. Big Jack Johnson died on March 14, 2011. One major problem facing blues tourism is that the aging musicians are dying, leaving a large hole in blues music history that must be filled, and quickly, through preservation of their stories, and of their craft. Red Paden, proprietor of Red's Juke Joint, said, “If you don't want to die, don't be born.”<sup>104</sup> There is opportunity to preserve the legacy of these aging musicians through new forms of cultural tourism, like the Mississippi Blues Trail. There is also much that can be done using technology to incorporate digital media, oral histories and visual exhibits to

preserve and display pieces of public history that can then be used as teaching tools. If cities are able to combine their resources with functional, interactive learning tools, public history and cultural tourism can be used in conjunction with one another, bringing new attention to blues music, using it as a lens for a revised narrative of American music history.

In an article on Johnson's death and the blues culture in the Mississippi Delta where Johnson lived, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter analyzed the Delta in a way that has become common among tourists. He questioned the depth of the interracial friendships that he saw, he questioned the sincerity of blues tourism, and he questioned the longevity of the region's reliance on the blues as a force for structural regional change. Progress does not happen over night. That is, perhaps, the most frustrating element of blues tourism. A lot is expected all at once, but rewriting how history is represented, and creating progressive solutions takes time. Tossing up blues-themed businesses may begin a conversation about what the blues were and what they have become. Perhaps exposing young audiences to the blues will foster a dialogue about Southern American history. And through cultural tourism and accurate representations of public history, the blues can be used as a teaching tool.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Wilkerson, interview with the author, March 18, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Linda K. Richter, "State-Sponsored Tourism: A Growth Field for Public Administration?" *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (Nov.–Dec., 1985), 832-839.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this argument, and of all discussions of authenticity in this thesis, I will use the definition of authentic presented by Kevin Fox Gotham in his book *Authentic New Orleans*, in which authenticity refers to "a plurality of idealized representations of the city that residents, organizations, and tourism boosters have constructed over the decades." (Gotham, 2007: vii)

<sup>4</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: a Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2005), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: on the Road Again* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Gussow, "Where Is the Love?": Racial Violence, Racial Healing, and Blues Communities" *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Winter 2006), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Minutaglio, interview with author, July. 21, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> "Definitions of Public History," *Public History Resource Center*, web. November 4, 2010.  
[http://www.publichistory.org/what\\_is/definition.html](http://www.publichistory.org/what_is/definition.html) (accessed February 1, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Steve Cheseborough, *Blues Traveling: the Holy Sites of Delta Blues* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 2001), inside cover.

<sup>10</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Basic, 2008), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Wyman and Richard Havers, *Bill Wyman's Blues Odyssey: a Journey to Music's Heart & Soul* (New York: DK Pub., 2001), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Merrill, *The Blues Route* (New York: W. Morrow, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: on the Road Again* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000), 12.

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York UP, 2007), 205.

<sup>16</sup> Indianola Chamber of Commerce promotional material. (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Richard Fausset, "Red Paden's Mississippi juke joint has caught the blues" *The Los Angeles Times* March 25, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Jim O'Neal, "The Mississippi Blues Trail market project," *Stackhouse and Blues Esoterica* (April 22 2008) <http://stackhouse-bluesoterica.blogspot.com/2008/04/mississippi-blues-trail-marker-project.html> (accessed January 10, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*<sup>19</sup> (Cambridge University Press, 1960).

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1959).

<sup>21</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: a Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2005), 185.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Stolle, interview with author, Nov. 21, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Cultural Heritage Tourism, "Getting Started: How to Succeed in Cultural Heritage Tourism." <http://culturalheritagetourism.org/howToGetStarted.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen A King. "Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: Race, Standpoint Theory, and Perceptions/Denials of Exploitation." *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the SummerConference on Intercultural Dialogue, Maltepe University, Istanbul, Turkey* (July 22 2009). [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p315052\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p315052_index.html) (accessed Feb. 2, 2011) 11.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen A. King, "Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: Race, Standpoint Theory, and Perceptions/Denials of Exploitation" 7.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen A. King, "Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: Race, Standpoint Theory, and Perceptions/Denials of Exploitation" 7.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Beth Wilkerson, interview with author, March 2, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> John Henshall, B Com (Econ), Dip TRP, LFPIA, and Principal, Essential Economics Pty Ltd. *Downtown Clarksdale: An Action Plan for Economic Revitalization*. (September, 2008). pp. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Bubba O'Keefe, interview with the author, March 11, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Bubba O'Keefe, interview with the author, March 11, 2011.

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- <sup>31</sup> Patricia Hymel, "City revitalization efforts under way" *Press Register* (July 2, 2008) <  
<http://www.pressregister.com/articles/2008/07/03/news/doc486ba2ffd804a040956043.txt>> (accessed  
March 6 2011).
- <sup>32</sup> Bubba O'Keefe, Interview with the author, March 11, 2011.
- <sup>33</sup> Henshall, John, B Com (Econ), Dip TRP, LFPIA, and Principal, Essential Economics Pty Ltd.  
*Downtown Clarksdale: An Action Plan for Economic Revitalization*. (September, 2008). pp. 1.
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- <sup>36</sup> Roger Stolle, Interview with author, Nov. 21, 2008.
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Music & Society* 274 (2004) 458.
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- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 466.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, 466.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 467.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, 467.
- <sup>43</sup> "Mississippi... Believe it!" <http://mississippibelieveit.com/home/> (accessed March 13, 2011).
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[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/magazine/14soul-t.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/magazine/14soul-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1) (accessed February 7,  
2011).
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<sup>52</sup> Matt Dellinger, "Mississippi: The State of the Blues" *The Oxford American* (Summer 2001) <<http://www.mattdellinger.com/articles/stateblues.html>> (accessed Sept. 8, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Becky Gillette, "Banking on the Blues" *The Delta Business Journal* (July 10, 2010). <<http://www.bbkingmuseum.org/banking-on-the-blues>> (accessed Oct. 5, 2010).

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<sup>55</sup> B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center Website, "About Us" <<http://www.bbkingmuseum.org>> (accessed Feb. 3, 2011).

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<sup>58</sup> Scott Barretta, interview with author, Dec. 5, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Evelyn Roughton, interview with author, Dec. 5 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Connie Gibbons, interview with author, Nov. 21, 2008.

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<sup>63</sup> Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: on the Road Again* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 166.

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- <sup>72</sup> Elvis Presley: The Official Site of the King of Rock 'N' Roll, "Elvis Presley to be Named Honorary Citizen of Budapest" March 2, 2011, web. <http://www.elvis.com/news/detail.aspx?id=5262>.
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- <sup>76</sup> David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 12.
- <sup>77</sup> Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (New York: University Press of Kansas, 1999) 257.
- <sup>78</sup> Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (New York: University Press of Kansas, 1999) 259.
- <sup>79</sup> David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 12.
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<sup>83</sup> Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007) 94.

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## VITA

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### Educational History

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**Bachelor of Arts**, Rhodes College 2007

Major: History Minor: Women's Studies

**Senior Thesis:** *Gender in the Fatherland: Women in Nazi Germany*

Published, 2007 Rhodes Historical Review by the Phi Alpha Theta Honors Society

**Oxford University, Lincoln College** *Fall 2005*

*Academic focus on Tudor History and Early Modern European Art History*

**Eurocentres Language School, Paris, France** *Spring 2005*

Gained an elementary proficiency in spoken and written French

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### Professional Experience

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**University of Texas at Austin Center for American History**

**Research Project Coordinator**, Austin, Texas (Concurrent with graduate school)

- Provide research assistance to Executive Director on manuscripts and related projects, including a biography on Dr. Denton Cooley (2011), and a biography on Red McCombs (2010)
- Created a full-scale project proposal for the Susan Antone Photographic Archives, and received implementation approval from the Director of News and Media at the Briscoe Center for American History. In this ongoing project, I am responsible for helping Susan Antone select photographs and artifacts to be included in the Briscoe Center for American History archives, the establishment of a deed of gift, overseeing the digitization process, and creating and assisting in the implementation of an exhibit and an opening reception to take place in March, 2011 during the South by Southwest Music and Film Interactive Festival
- Served as Production Assistant for John Nance Garner Museum Documentary, conducting archival research and providing detailed logistical support
- Established a national film festival submission process for the documentary film *When I Rise*, created advertising for documentary

**Rice University** September 2009–December 2009

**Assistant to Douglas Brinkley**, Houston, Texas (Concurrent with graduate school)

- Researched book manuscripts and articles that were published in national media outlets including *Newsweek*, *The Los Angeles Times*, as well as academic journals
- Proctored classes
- Provided organizational support to Dr. Brinkley through communication with national news outlets, publishing houses, Rice University, and the James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy

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**Southern Poverty Law Center** May 2009–August 2009  
**Public Affairs Summer Intern**, Montgomery, Alabama (Concurrent with graduate school)

- Identified funding sources for upscale of the Civil Rights Memorial
- Created oral history project documenting the stories of the unsung members of the Civil Rights Movement, contacting hundreds of individuals

**National Civil Rights Museum** January 2006–January 2007  
**Tour Guide**, Memphis, Tennessee (Concurrent with college)

- Conducted tours of the museum, requiring a working knowledge of American Civil Rights History from 1650 – 2007
- Altered tours to suit the needs of diverse audiences: tourists ages ranged from young children (6 years) to the elderly (90 years)

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### Academic Accomplishments

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**Director, Writer, Producer** April 2009  
**Tortillas de Maiz** (Concurrent with graduate school)

- Film explores the influences of globalization, especially Hispanic immigration, on Mississippi, and was selected for inclusion on a special edition DVD in the Fall 2009 Issue of *Southern Cultures Magazine*, published by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Film accepted to the 2010 *Oxford Film Festival* (awarded honorable mention) and the *Crossroads Film Festival* (April, 2010)

**Rhodes College** January 2007–May 2007  
**Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive**  
**Fellow** Memphis, Tennessee (Concurrent with college)

- Selected by Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs to participate in a groundbreaking digital oral history project documenting the stories of men and women involved in the Memphis Civil Rights Era through conducting and transcribing interviews with major participants in the Civil Rights Movement

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### Non-Academic Employment

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**Square Books** October 2008–July 2009  
Oxford, Mississippi (Concurrent with graduate school)

**The Madeira School** February 2008–April 2008  
Substitute History Teacher, McLean, Virginia

**Garden & Gun Magazine** May 2007–February 2008  
Marketing Assistant, Charleston, South Carolina