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Blues is My Business (And Business is Good?)

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BLUES IS MY BUSINESS (AND BUSINESS IS GOOD?)

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the social, political, and economic trends that govern the blues music scene in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Clarksdale is seen as a sort of “ground zero” in the blues world, it is often referred to as, “the land where blues began.” This claim is not without merit but it is not strictly historically accurate. Many of the town’s spokespeople use euphemisms that distort the troubled history of race relations in the town and its music spaces.

This investigation centers around the economic state of the town’s tourism industry, the individuals who act as the town’s promoters, and the general trends observed in the blues audience.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the people who live and work in Clarksdale, MS. I am forever grateful for their kindness.

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This project would not have been possible without the help of many people. The foremost of these people is Sean Apple who has been an extraordinary friend and mentor. Without his generosity I could have not completed my research. Adam Gussow was also extraordinarily generous with his time and helped me throughout the whole of the writing process.

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I am also grateful to the people of Clarksdale who have been so welcoming and open. I hope that my research has done the town justice.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Clarksdale, Mississippi is 66 miles west of Oxford on Highway 6. Lafayette County gives way to Panola, Quitman, and finally Coahoma County. Hill Country turns to Delta and soon cottonfields stretch as far as the eye can see. It used to all be jungle, settled by the Choctaw and other native groups–the only evidence of their existence are names like Issaquena and Coahoma, and burial mounds that tower above the otherwise uniform fields. Right before you reach Clarksdale, you hit Lyon–the birthplace of Son House, a prolific Delta bluesman and idol of Howlin' Wolf and Robert Johnson. Out past Farrell, on what used to be the Humber plantation, you will come to the 1928 levee that runs all the way to Vicksburg and beyond. It is an engineering marvel, and a monument to the thousands of laborers who made the project possible. A few miles away, the Stovall plantation, where a young Muddy Waters lived the first thirty years of his life. At Clarksdale's city limits, the highway deposits drivers onto MLK Blvd. The neighborhoods on each side of the road are littered with burnt-out ruins, abandoned properties in need of demolition, and other scenes of poverty. After a few miles, you cross the railroad tracks and end up in downtown Clarksdale. There are still many abandoned buildings and storefronts but scattered amongst them are music venues, restaurants, art galleries, and stores. These are the businesses intended to serve

tourists, people who come from around the world to listen to music in the land where blues began. I know the drive well, having done it an average of four nights a week for two years. The cotton fields and bayous, the landscape of the Delta, is still as mysterious and wonderful as the first time I laid eyes upon it.

"They visit [Clarksdale] for the music," Roger Stolle, owner of Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art, is fond of saying, "but they come back for the people" (Stolle). When I first came to Clarksdale in 2018, it was as a tourist. I had always been a fan of blues music and since I was going to be in the area, I figured that checking out the town would be worthwhile. What I found was a tight-knit community of extraordinary artists, musicians, and promoters in a town otherwise decimated by poverty. It was a paradox that defied any and all expectations, and I wanted to know more. I applied to the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi with the intent of learning more about the South, and especially the literature and music it has produced.

I moved to Oxford, Mississippi in 2020 and began my studies. In March of that year I remember hearing about a new club that had opened up in Clarksdale: The Bad Apple Blues Club. I was intrigued and drove over to check it out. Sean "Bad" Apple, the owner of the venue, was performing his signature mix of North Mississippi Hill Country blues and Bentonia blues. I asked Sean a few questions after his set, and he showed me some things on the guitar and told me to come back the next time he was open. We quickly struck up a friendship and Sean soon suggested that I begin playing harmonica with him on a few songs. I took him up on the offer, quite frankly amazed that such an opportunity had come my way. Now, just shy of two years later I have had the privilege of playing at the Juke Joint Festival, the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel

Festival, Clarksdale Caravan, and Sean's own Bad Apple Blues Festival. The more I got exposed to the Clarksdale blues scene, the more intriguing and complicated the situation seemed. I got to see the world that tourists do not typically see; a behind the scenes look at the ways that money moved through the blues economy, the ways that promoters marketed the town, and the complicated dynamic between a performer and their audience. I began taking notes, talking to people, as well as searching for scholarly works about blues tourism and specifically Clarksdale blues tourism.

A number of works have been written about Clarksdale's blues scene, though fewer than expected given the town's rich cultural history. Adam Gussow's work on the blues tradition provided a solid foundation for the history and context of the region's music. His investigation into the Crossroads legend illuminated how the historical record was manipulated by stakeholders in the town's blues scene. Clay Motley's work made well-researched and compelling arguments about the ways that the blues world's complicated racial legacies operate in Clarksdale. Paige McGinley, Steven A. King, Elijah Wald, and Kathryn Radishofski's studies were also very helpful in trying to accurately understand the economic, aesthetic, historical, and sociological dynamics at work. Brian Foster's work, *I Don't Like the Blues*, was especially interesting in light of my own experiences in Clarksdale. Foster, a sociologist by training, moved to Clarksdale in 2014 initially to, "study the South, to talk to enough people and spend enough time to say something worth knowing about the Black folks who called the region home. I had gone to set the record straight" (Foster 1). Foster did not set out to write about the blues but found the topic inescapable. "I don't like the blues," was the sentiment most often expressed by the local African American community. Foster's

conclusion is that, “the rural black south is the blues. They just don’t like it (we think) like they used to” (Foster 4). The interviews he collected are compelling, offering a perspective that had seldom been explored in academic works. A couple of the local African American musicians offer less than favorable appraisals of the tourism industry; Foster uses pseudonyms for these performers, though it is patently clear who they are to anyone who is familiar with the musicians of the area. Foster’s greatest failing is that he does not talk to others who operate within Clarksdale blues. Roger Stolle, Kinchen “Bubba” O’Keefe, Jim O’Neal, or really any one of the many transplants who work in blues could have provided their own thoughts on the industry. This would have led to a more balanced assessment of the region and the specialized economy that operates within it. Foster set out with the goal of becoming part of Clarksdale, of seeing the on-the-ground realities that are otherwise impossible to know about. The rich detail and compelling interviews he gathered provide a wealth of knowledge, even if it is a bit one sided, and he certainly captured parts of Clarksdale other researchers have not been able to.

My own time in Clarksdale as both a tourist and a participant in the blues scene had, unintentionally, equipped me with a wealth of local knowledge and contacts that served me well for an investigation into blues tourism there. I conducted interviews with key figures like Stolle, O’Keefe, and others. Some local musicians were happy to talk–I made sure to explain what I was researching and confirm their willingness to be on the record. A few people refused to speak with me and I did not press the issue. The few off-the-record statements I gathered are presented without identifying information as I did not want to expose my sources. Clarksdale is a community that I care very deeply

about and I hope to portray it accurately and fairly in my research. The blues community has been extraordinarily welcoming to me and I have made several life-long friends in the area. I also see the issues the community has, and I try to evaluate them as fairly as possible. I did not exploit my closeness to the situation and made sure to conduct myself ethically as both a researcher and someone who is a peripheral part of the community. The research conducted will offer an in-depth look into the business of blues, the way that blues is marketed, and the dynamic between the blues performer and their audience.

Clarksdale's downtown area is an odd middle-class enclave in a city otherwise decimated by poverty. A third of the downtown businesses are related to the blues in some way[1]. Just twenty years ago the downtown area was a ghost town. Ground Zero Blues Club, co-owned by Morgan Freeman, and Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art, owned by Roger Stolle, were both established in the early 2000's and played a major roles in the revitalization of downtown Clarksdale. Stolle moved to town in 2002 and quickly became the primary marketing force behind Clarksdale blues. His work on the radio, in his guidebooks for the Delta, and the documentaries he has produced have introduced many tourists to the region and its unique music. Stolle uses consistent language to sell blues to the general public, emphasizing the "real deal" music and the "deep blues" tourists can expect to see in the area. Bubba O'Keefe is a local real estate investor turned tourism spokesperson. As the current director of tourism, it is his job to ensure that tourists get the experience they are looking for. As such, he can articulate

[1] The Downtown area of Clarksdale only spans a few blocks with Delta Avenue being the most developed.

the economic and cultural goals he sets for the town. The history of the downtown area, and especially historical exclusion of African Americans, is complicated and many of these problems go unresolved to this day. The majority of blues businesses are owned by whites, and mostly by white transplants, who are passionate about blues and its history. The painful history of segregation and Jim Crow are still felt, and few places more so than the downtown area.

Blues is not a popular genre of music in the contemporary age. “I think the blues is listened to by a tenth of one percent of people,” local musician Sean Apple is fond of saying. Marketing the blues, thus, is a challenging thing and those who do it are faced with a variety of hard choices. If they present the history accurately and tell the town’s legacy of racialized violence and oppression they risk turning tourists away. If they present a somewhat more favorable history, relying in part of Robert Johnson’s crossroads mythology, they risk whitewashing a history that is seldom done justice. Roger Stolle is the main marketing driver behind the town and while he seems to do his best, he is prone to using euphemisms that distance the tourist from the genuine pain behind much of the genre. Much of the difficulty of telling an accurate history is based on the complicated racial politics that operate within the blues world and in the local African American community. In a community so touched by poverty, there is a dangerous urge to “clean up” the image of blues to make the genre more attractive to wider audiences. This practice threatens to engage in the suppression of African American history and traditions which have already been underrepresented in the historical record.

The blues audience is an especially interesting topic. The blues came about sometime in the 1880's or 1890's and was the predominantly popular music that African Americans listened to from the 1910's up until the 1960's. In the sixties, white college age audiences became the predominant group that listened to blues, the African American audience having migrated towards soul and other genres. Blues performers have a long history of trying to cater to what their audiences wanted to hear in the hope that this would lead to better tips. Historical sources reveal that Robert Johnson, one of the most popular bluesmen amongst blues tourists, played a lot more than blues songs. He was a human jukebox who would play jazz, country and western, polkas, and anything he could find on the radio. This contrasts with the popular image of a haunted bluesman playing his own highly personal brand of blues. Muddy Waters, both in the Delta during the 1940s and well into his Chicago career, paid a lot of attention to audience trends. He released acoustic records to appeal to folk audiences, and even a controversial psychedelic record called "Electric Mud." The blues idiom is broader than most tourists know, though most artists rely heavily on blues standards, usually Chicago blues, that fit the audience's conception of "classic blues." The question of what authenticity means in the blues is of critical importance to this investigation. A performer who appears more "authentic" will appear more compelling to their audience and thus, is likely to receive better tips. Race is a definite factor in this and white blues musicians are much less likely to meet tourist definitions of authentic. If African American locals listen to blues, it is more than likely going to be soul blues. Soul blues is underrepresented in Clarksdale, apart from the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival which makes a point of hiring popular soul blues acts. Apart from soul blues

shows, the typical blues audience in Clarkdale is primarily made up of middle-aged whites, and mostly white men. Paige McGinley dissects the subject quite ably and points to economic and social trends that help explain why and how white audiences have come to the blues. What is clear is that blues performers are responsive to their environment. Repertoire, performance style, and even appearance are altered to try and meet audience expectations. Contrary to expectations, the blues is a highly adaptable art form that is, to a significant extent, driven by its audience.

My research in Clarksdale taught me a great deal about loving something while still recognizing its faults. The Mississippi Delta, and especially Clarksdale, is an anxious place that can neither escape the past, nor fully live in the present. Scholars have called the Delta myriad things: the South's South, the most Southern place on earth, and even a microcosm of the United States. These labels, for the most part, are appropriate. It is a place where long standing issues with racial inequality, poverty, and class differences are strained the most. Understanding the forces at play here can add to our understanding of the South, of the United States, and even of the globe. Identifying and examining the issues Clarksdale has is important; I do it precisely because I love Clarksdale and hope it can be better. I am, and forever will be, grateful to the people I have had the privilege to meet and work with in the community. Clarksdale's musicians, business owners, promoters, and audience fit together to make a truly unique community that, despite its issues, produces art and music of the highest caliber.

The first two chapters deal exclusively with Clarksdale's blues economy and marketing. The third chapter expands the scope of the investigation to include the national and international blues audience, though Clarksdale is still at the heart of the investigation. This structure lends itself to a detailed investigation into the town and its trends and how it fits into larger, even international, trends.

CHAPTER II

BLUES IS MY BUSINESS (AND BUSINESS IS GOOD?)

Clarksdale is the seat of Coahoma County, within the Mississippi Delta region. In 2019, 15,734 people lived there, 38.7% of whom live below the poverty line[2]. There is live blues music seven nights a week attracting thousands of tourists a year. Do blues drive economic development, and if so, where does the money go? Examining the workings of the blues business is important not only for the town itself, but additionally for all other small towns hoping to profit from heritage tourism. Race, poverty, privilege, and ethics all have a role to play in this part of the Delta and an understanding of those factors is essential to understanding what is going on in Clarksdale. The goal of this investigation is to establish a background to the social and economic factors that are currently at play, then examine how blues tourism touches the lives of long term residents and relative newcomers as well as assess the positive and negative effects of tourism on the community as a whole.

It is important for me to acknowledge my own place in this investigation. I am not from the Delta. I am not from Mississippi. I grew up under more privileged circumstances than the average Clarksdale resident and thus, I do not think I will ever

[2] This data was found in Brian Foster's work *I Don't Like The Blues*, in table 3.

fully understand what it is to grow up in the Delta. That being said, I have been playing music in Clarksdale for a little more than a year now and this experience, however limited, has granted me partial entre´ into the tight knit community of musicians and business people who have chosen to make their home in the Mississippi Delta. This community has been nothing but welcoming and helpful to me. Clarksdale is already a small town and the blues side of it is even smaller. There is a closeness, even amongst people who compete with one another- they all recognize they are working in service of a music that is not exactly popular, but that does attract passionate fans. Some of my close friends are musicians or business owners in town, so it is challenging to impartially judge their contribution to the culture and environment of the town. That being said, I have little trouble recognizing the major issues that plague the town and its tourism industry. The situation on the ground is very complex and there are many stakeholders who seem to be at odds as to the proper way to conduct blues business in the town.

The goals of Mississippi blues tourism seem fairly simple, if difficult to realize. The primary one is to drive money into Delta towns like Clarksdale. However, Steven A. King points out that, “the economic impact of blues tourism is still largely unknown, the result of incomplete data and contradictory evidence...In the past five years more blues-oriented small businesses have opened in Clarksdale and other Delta communities...yet this evidence must be viewed anecdotally because there is no systematic and reliable method to gather verifiable data” (King 166-167). The lack of data frustrates attempts to quantitatively measure the results of tourism in the economy. It would seem there is money to be made, or at least that people are trying to make money; there are thirty

festivals each year and live music seven nights a week at the six or so clubs in the downtown area. For a community whose economy is so connected with the blues, the city government and tourism board have done little to measure the success of their main attraction. King goes on to say that, “tourism strategies in small towns often translate into the ‘commodification of its landscape, turning the place into something to be consumed.’ The plantation and sharecropper shacks [in Clarksdale] have been commodified for both profit and preservation, transformed from symbols of oppression into sources of pleasure by blues tourists…[these strategies] may alter the public’s negative perception of Mississippi, racial reconciliation may be sacrificed as a result” (King 141). This speaks to the problematic enterprise of trying to redeem the public image of a state so associated with racism and slavery. Most of the nation–and indeed, most of the world– knows little about Mississippi except that it is in the South and that it seems to be epitomized by what they have seen on tv, especially movies like *Mississippi Burning* that present the state as a troubled backwater brimming with virulent racists who will commit heinous acts of violence against African Americans or indeed anyone who goes against the status quo. State officials and tourism boards face the difficult task of fully and accurately telling the history of the Delta without either erasing the immense suffering of the African American community or driving away tourists with extensive talks about the troubled heritage of the region. Using blues as a way to redeem Mississippi’s public image is fraught with difficulties and is unlikely to make tourists or locals happy. Redemption must not mean erasure of Black history.

Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the union. In 2021 19.6% of Mississippi’s citizens lived below the poverty line according to the Friends Committee on

National Legislation; this was the highest poverty rate for the entire United States. Clarksdale, the self professed “Golden Buckle of The Cotton Belt,” has been economically troubled for a long time, 38.7% of the town’s residents live below the poverty line, according to the 2020 census. The Delta was not always economically depressed , however, as Elijah Wald states that, “the Delta was particularly fertile ground for the blues boom…[due to the] youth and mobility of its black residents...Most Delta land was cleared and settled only in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, and in order to attract black farmers and plantation hands, relatively high cash wages were paid” (Wald 85). It was during this time that the population, and especially the African American population, grew in the Delta. There was work to be found and it seemed that the area had a future. Agriculture, and specifically Cotton agriculture, was the main focus of the economy. Once agriculture was mechanized in the 1950s, a large percentage of the African American community could no longer have access to the agricultural jobs they had been working for generations. This labor vacuum contributed to the Great Migration of rural African Americans to cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York. It is during this migration that blues music moved from the rural sphere to the urban one. Gussow notes that, “Between 1920 and 1960, more or less, blues music was black popular music. This is true whether we are talking about blues queens like Bessie Smith and Dinah Washington, or urbane city bluesmen like Charles Brown, Leroy Carr, and B.B. King, or the Mississippi-to-Chicago axis that gives us Charley Patton, Jimmy Reed, and Muddy Waters’ (Gussow *Whose Blues* 41). During the Folk “Revival” of the sixties, white audiences became increasingly aware of blues music and many older blues singers found a new career playing to college age, white, audiences.

"It's important to acknowledge that there had always been *some* white audience for blues music. There was a white urban audience for blues queens like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey in the 1920s," Gussow states, "By the time we get to 1960, blues is beginning to ebb as a black popular music, or certainly as *the* black popular music" (Gussow *Whose Blues* 42). Soul music, R&B, and rap have all supplanted blues' role as the popular music of the African American community and this can be seen in the demographics of those who visit Clarksdale. "Who are the blues tourists?" McGinley asks rhetorically, "The tourists are, for the most part, 'baby boomers, well-educated, middle to upper middle class whites…' most are men" (McGinley 184). My own observations on the ground have certainly matched this assessment. This is the audience for blues now—a sociological reality which is complicated by the fact that most classic blues songs were not written for white middle class men. The performers who are so lauded, including Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, and Son House, would have had little in common with the people who listen to their music and travel to their gravesites and markers.

Blues is or was, at least in part, a vocalized expression of African American pain and a medium that brought people together in the expression of their struggles and triumphs. The struggles faced were more often than not caused by institutionalized racism and overt racialized violence. Modern blues tourists do not, usually, have any experience with these things. McGinley adds that, "blues tourists conceive of themselves and their activities as highly individualized, and as capturing the spontaneity and freedom of life on the road associated with the wandering bluesman" (McGinley 184). My experiences on the ground in Clarksdale certainly bear this out. Many of the

tourists bring musical instruments and try to sit in with local bands and learn things from the seasoned performers. In this way, the tourists attempt to take on the role of a blues musician and live a sort of compressed version of the blues lifestyle. Of course, when the tourists stay in a sharecropper's shack there is wifi and hot water heaters and nice itineraries of when music will be played, which notably distinguishes the tourist's experience from the original residents'. This is not to say that Clarksdale blues is inauthentic- many locally born musicians and talented transplants play authentic and world class music that they have honed over years of playing in the tight knit blues world. These are people who live, sleep, and eat blues--people like Lucious Spiller, Watermelon Slim, Anthony Sherrod, Terry "Big T" Williams, Sean Apple, and Deak Harp, who make up the eclectic community of Clarksdale artists. Many of them could likely get higher paying gigs in Nashville or New Orleans, but they stay in Clarksdale due to the blues infrastructure and the deep history the region has. Blues music is personal in this regard. Even if the audience is not experiencing true hardship they still appreciate the blues enough to justify traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles to see an area that has long been considered "the land where the blues began." That speaks to a certain level of passion in the music that is special. These tourists see Clarksdale as more than a socioeconomically disadvantaged town, they see it as the capital of the blues world; somewhere they can travel to to show their reverence for the genre. The blues, for them, inspires such passion perhaps due to its inherent exotic nature; it is the music of African American poverty and thus, seems alien to the well-to-do baby boomer audiences. A trip to Clarksdale is thus a sort of anthropological inquiry into the roots of the blues idiom.

The language of religion and pilgrimage is also used to fascinating effect in Clarksdale. Steve Cheseborough, a scholar and blues musician, wrote a guidebook titled, “Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues.” Cheseborough is clearly using the phrase “holy sites,’ to evoke the language of pilgrimage. Tourists are reimagined as pilgrims, the Delta taking the place of Jerusalem or Mecca. Some tourists scoop up dirt from rural crossroads purported to be “the real crossroads,” much like how pilgrims would take back earth from Jerusalem. Tourists can buy, used and often battered, instruments from BluesTown Music in order to have an instrument with “real Mississippi mojo,” and numerous stores carry guitar slides, mojo hands, and other associated blues trinkets. “This is Honeyboy Edwards’ guitar slide,” one local musician exclaimed to his audience, “it doesn’t get more real than this.” The slide functions like a saint’s relic in that it provides a tangible connection to “the real deal,” in this case, a genuine Delta bluesman. Much like the relics of the medieval era, there is trade in blues paraphernalia. Buying a guitar slide in Mississippi carries more weight, more spiritual meaning, than buying a slide online. Deak Harp, a local musician and owner of Deak Harp’s Mississippi Saxophone Emporium, sells customized harmonicas and promises that they come with, “mojo added” (Harp). The Shack Up Inn has a venue they call “The Juke Joint Chapel,” which evokes the image of an audience of rapt blues listeners receiving the bluesy teachings of a local musician. Tourists, on their personal blues pilgrimage, seek meaning–revelations even–from “the land where blues began.”

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Clarksdale's population has declined steadily since the destruction of the agricultural labor market by tractors and mechanization. In 1970, 21,673 people lived in Clarksdale. In 2013, the number was 17,964 (Foster table 4). There are many vacant buildings and decaying homes in the neighborhoods and in the city center. The downtown area has been claimed by the blues based businesses and, as I'll discuss later, many locals do not feel welcomed in this part of town. The Delta Blues museum, Ground Zero Blues Club, Bluesberry Cafe, Cathead Delta Blues and Folk art store, Deak's Mississippi Saxophone Emporium, BluesTown Music, Red's Lounge, and the Bad Apple Blues Club all are found in this small pocket of the city. The downtown area is also the area Brian Foster investigates from the perspective of the African American community in Clarksdale. "Out downtown, that whole area [downtown] is white…" says one woman with the nickname of Cookie (Foster 69). Janice Green, another woman interviewed by Foster, stated that, "Downtown was white...they didn't even want a black car over there…[They] didn't want to see no black cat on the ground. It was just that prejudiced" (Foster 71). This is an exaggerated statement that highlights a painful truth- an example of blues humor. Green may not "like the blues" but she expresses herself in a bluesy way. Her joke illustrates that the local African American community is still culturally connected to the blues idiom, though they have been excluded from the

commodification of the genre. When she says “downtown was white” she is referring to the earlier era that was still marked by Jim Crow. She still feel unwelcome and excluded from the downtown area, even after the Jim Crow era has passed. Both of these people interviewed lived in Clarksdale and expressed that they did not feel welcomed in the downtown area in both the modern day and in the historical past. Jim Crow laws and segregation ended somewhere around 1970 in Clarksdale when schools were integrated, and cultural memory is long. It used to be Jim Crow era laws and prejudices that created an uncomfortable atmosphere for Black citizens. The current atmosphere is caused, most likely, by the differences between businesses oriented towards locals and those oriented towards the blues tourists. In 2013, the aggregate poverty measure of Clarksdale was 40.86% (Foster table 4). This indicates that a large number of the town’s residents—and black residents in particular--live below the poverty line and thus would have little disposable income to spend on entertainment like live music or CDs or other goods being offered by the tourist focused businesses. “A recent study in Clarksdale noted that two-thirds of the city’s downtown businesses, ‘have a close association with Blues music and Delta culture’ and that most of them fail to ‘provide for the typical, day-to-day shopping needs of Clarksdale/county residents’” (Radishofski 219). A downtown full of these businesses is not hospitable to someone who cannot afford to shop in them and, in fact, does not need the things being sold. This would be very frustrating because it clearly indicates that the community is not meant to be enjoyed by locals. I do not think this was the intent of the business owners, but this is a result of them moving into a community and marketing their goods towards those middle class and above.

"The downtown area was dead, on life support," recalls Kinchen "Bubba" O'Keefe, a lifetime resident and developer in the town. O'Keefe began buying vacant buildings and refurbishing them. In the early 2000's he sold Roger Stolle the building where Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art is located. "What I was trying to create downtown was an artist and music community," O'Keefe continued, "something that I would want in my family to go see. Just have a little but thriving downtown." (O'Keefe). Where there were empty buildings there are now blues venues, restaurants, and art galleries[3]. There are still many vacant buildings but of the occupied ones, most are associated with the blues. Few old businesses were displaced, but the downtown area now caters to primarily blues tourists, the white middle class. This marketing strategy effectively excludes most people who live in Clarksdale. There are probably less than forty residents of Clarksdale who actively take part in the blues scene, ranging from musicians to club owners to tour guides[4]. In a town of fifteen thousand, this leaves a lot of people out in the cold. The old Jim Crow era distribution of public space is thus enforced without much thought by the downtown businesses. Blues tourism superintendents, "testified to the industry's impact on the city's geo-social terrain in lamenting increasing instances of 'white nights'- evenings in which white tourists make up the majority of the patrons at live blues events- and in sharing their concomitant frustration over the loss of local African American patronage at blues venues" (Radishofski 219). Blues tourism was supposed to be the way to bring the Delta into

[3] An overview of the new blues venues can be seen at the Visit Clarksdale tourism webpage: https://www.visitclarksdale.com/musicvenues.
[4] This figure was reached by simply adding up the local musicians, club owners, restaurant owners, and staff.

the modern era. It would drive development, residents were told, and that money would be used to benefit the community. A small group of locals does take part in the industry. This group includes the local African American musicians who do reap the benefits of more steady gigs. Instead, those who came into the town alienated the local population and unwittingly strengthened the racialized barriers that had existed for decades.

As the musical tastes of the African American community have evolved, the blues scene in Clarksdale has remained static.

The adult African American community, "prefers soul blues and R&B to country blues, the first two representing genres that are not included in blues authenticity concepts or supported by many of the industry's promoters, tourists, or venues" (Radishofski 219). This is to say that most tourists do not know about, or know much about, soul blues or blues-inspired R&B and these genres do not sound like the stripped down music tourists come to hear. Soul blues artists are underrepresented in the festivals and clubs of the area due in part that they do not fit with what type of blues is expected. "I saw Big T (Terry Williams) play a weeknight show at Red's Lounge," recalled Scott Baretta in a 2021 conversation, "there was almost nobody there and he played a lot more soul blues than he usually does." Big T typically plays a lot of blues standards like "Catfish Blues" and "I'll Play the Blues for You," in the style he learned under the tutelage of "Big" Jack Johnson, a famous local player. His oft unplayed soul blues repertoire indicates some awareness that tourists want to see "classic blues" more than they want comparatively modern soul blues. The sparsely attended show at Red's provided an environment where Williams could have fun and play songs he would

otherwise play. This change in repertoire speaks to Williams' understanding of tourist tastes. White tourists, for the most part, do not know soul blues songs or artists and they want to hear songs that they can easily identify as blues. The Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival, one of the original Mississippi blues festivals, does hire Soul Blues acts, usually on a Saturday night. There is significant African American turnout, including a lot of locals. Some Clarksdalians colloquially refer to the Saturday night shows as "Black Night" and the Friday night shows as "White night," though no one wanted their name associated with this quote. The blues idiom is considerably more vast than most people think. There is no one style of "authentic" blues. But the urban, polished, sounds of modern soul blues contrast with tourist expectations and, as tourists are the main source of income for these blues businesses, it is in the best interest of the clubs to book performers who sound like what tourists expect. Unfortunately, this further removes the local community from the industry and leads to the perception of "white people blues." Neither style of blues is historically invalid but crusaders for blues purism do not respect modern blues as much as they do the pre-war delta blues that was born in the cotton fields and churches of the Delta. As a result, local, African American audiences may feel divorced from the blues tradition that emerged from their community and that they are the supposed representatives of.

Blues businesses make money by romanticizing a music that is closely associated with black hardship. One Clarksdale tourism superintendent said that, "a lot of African Americans [are] not going out [to the Shack Up Inn] because… they know the story of [a] one room shack with seven, eight children growing up in it and sleeping in one room...A lot of it is painful...They don't want to relive that" (Radishofski 217). What

is a fun trip into the past for white, middle-class, tourists is far less nostalgic for the people who still live in the town that has been so marred by racism and prejudice. The cultural memory of the blues is painful and cannot be avoided in a discussion of the music. The blues harkens back to a truly awful time for African Americans, and thus, most members of the community listen to more contemporary music; music that looks forward and speaks to success and modernity. White blues tourists bring none of this cultural baggage to the table. McGinley points out how even though "State officials see blues tourism as a strategy for transforming public perception of the state as a racist backwater,…the constant minimizing of state-sponsored history of violence towards its black residents ultimately undermines the goal of racial reconciliation that many in Mississippi seek to achieve" (McGinley 185). Thus, the industry actively erodes the value of African American history and life while also romanticizing perceived positives. It seems that blues music history is disconnected from the history of the people who created the blues. The blues is then treated as a product that can be marketed and sold to consumers who are unfamiliar with the precise history of the genre.

The paradox of blues tourism is that racialized suffering was essential to the creation of the form, and indeed the most depressing songs are praised as being real and '"authentic", but this suffering must be confined to the past in order to make tourists feel that they are not contributing to an ongoing system that victimizes the African American community. Tourists want their blues musicians to have lives that reflect the songs they play but do not want to be held responsible for the real world suffering of the artist or the community that the artist grew up in. Real poverty is "authentic" but unpalatable when viewed off stage; theatrical and imagined poverty such as that

immortalized at the Shack Up Inn is an edited history that is much easier to stomach. Steven A. King points out that, “The use of ‘hardship,’ ‘trial,’ and ‘adversity’ is a carefuly crafted rhetorical device; these abstract words do not accurately convey the horrors of lynching, the isolation of segregation, the political disenfranchisement of voting rules designed to thwart black participation in civic and political life, or the fear of encountering law enforcement” (King 146). Careful language helps distance the reader, the tourist, from the real life suffering at the root of the blues. Abstract concepts take the place of concrete suffering. For an industry built on art created through and by suffering, honest discussions of suffering and historical injustice are extremely uncommon.

McGinley also connects the blues revival of the sixties to the trend of, “the rural...as a pastoral alternative for disenchanted suburbanites...The logic of the blues revival- the desire to preserve a supposedly disappearing folk form- animates the heritage tourism industry of the Mississippi Delta, which depends on producing the blues as both disappearing and remaining, as both living and dead; the ‘preservationist impulse’ that characterized the revival resembles that of contemporary heritage tourism” (McGinley 185). This is to say that blues music evokes a certain nostalgia amongst the suburban middle class; it is a rural art that offers an appealing set of aesthetic traits. The average blues tourist feels a bit like an anthropologist gone to study a dying art. Taking an interest in a rather unpopular music comes with a certain level of implied social capital. The blues tourist wants to be an individual who has sought out the rare and mystical art of the blues and in some ways embodies the bluesy stereotypes. The archetypical bluesman is a loner who goes from town to town making a living off of his

mythical skills, much like the cowboy heroes featured in western movies. It is an archetype of Americana, a folk hero. Robert Johnson the man is not who is being sold to tourists. It is Robert Johnson, the myth, that the businesses and performers all speak to. Johnson's troubles are more palatable when they are supernatural fights over his soul. His real struggles with incarceration and harassment are glossed over to give the legend better optics. In Johnson's song "Crossroad Blues," "Debra DeSalvo hears a "hell-bound" man 'crushed by existential dread'" where more pragmatic listeners like Gussow hear, "a man who is using abjection rather than surrendering to it, skillfully milking sympathy from an imputed female listener" (Gussow *Beyond The Crossroads* 222). The romantic interpretation of the song is that Johnson is telling the story of the Faustian bargain that granted him his supernatural skills. However, the song can also be read as a scared traveler's journey in the Jim Crow South. When Johnson sings, "Standin' at the crossroad, baby…risin' sun going down" he is likely evoking the Sundown laws that prohibited African American travelers from being in certain jurisdictions after nightfall. The fear that DeSalvo hears is real, but it is the fear of lynching. Lynchings often took place in public spaces like town squares and, yes, crossroads like the one where the crossroad monument now stands. This is not an attractive history to sell. The Faustian bargain is more fun and hence, more tourist friendly. For those trying to reach blues tourists there is the definite inclination to sell the most entertaining parts of history while omitting the unpleasant ones. This is a matter of self preservation for many of Clarksdale's shops and venues. They must create a welcoming and fun environment that seems "authentic" while also making sure

to please their patrons. It is a sad fact that blues is not popular music anymore- these businesses need to get the most they can out of the few tourists they get.

Those musicians and business owners who have moved to Clarksdale to work in the blues industry are a peculiar lot. Clarksdale simply is not a place that most people want to move to, for the most part. It is far from industry, there is high crime, poverty is rampant, and infrastructure is bad. It is not Nashville. What is considered success in the blues economy is dismal failure in any other form of tourism. Roger Stolle, owner of Cathead Delta Blues and Folk art (which opened in 2002) and head marketing force of the town, recounts how his St. Louis employers scoffed at the idea of opening a store in Clarksdale, Mississippi. "When I finally decided to resign and move, my boss refused to believe that it wasn't just a ploy to get more money...He started opening up the drawers in his desk looking for a pen and a piece of paper. He said, 'Ok, what square footage will your store have?' because he wanted to show how a retail blues store in Mississippi would not make the money I was making at May Company. He just couldn't understand I was moving for a mission and not just a paycheck" (Coopwood). This is hardly a unique story. Most of these business owners moved to town to pursue passion, not financial success. Prior to moving to Clarksdale from St. Louis, Stolle had a good job in marketing and a steady income. He gave that up, in his own words, to "promote the blues from within." He is aware that many in the town do not like blues tourism–both White and Black. At a town hall meeting one man said to him, "'blues ain't gonna save our town.' He also added, 'and I'm tired of hearing about the blues.' Stolle wondered if the man's comments represented how many felt. 'That really struck me,' Stolle says. 'The blues wasn't going to save anything on its own; that was only something like a

Nissan plant could do. However, blues could be the first piece of the puzzle. In fact, it was the only piece of the puzzle we had to play back then. The thing about puzzle pieces is that you add on to them until you have a complete picture." (Coopwood). It would appear that Stolle thinks that adding tourism to the economy will help attract more business to the town in sectors outside of traditionally tourist oriented businesses. This seems fairly intuitive. Companies scouting for locations have certain needs and a town that is hospitable to visitors is likely to have those needs met. The blues will bring in the people and the town has to do the rest to woo potential industries to invest in the town. However, at this point there is no Nissan plant, no big factory to bring jobs to the area. It is just the blues, and the blues is not feeding the whole town.

A local musician, Sean Apple, recently opened his own blues club on Issaquena Street, the heart of the historical black business district in downtown Clarksdale. "'I myself have, number one, always been a fan of the blues,' says Apple. And secondly, I consider myself a blues musician. So, the transition to blues club owner is basically a natural progression. I've personally played in so many clubs over the years and the best places have been Po' Monkeys in Merigold, for instance, and some juke joints in Marshall County, the old Subway Lounge in Jackson and Red's Lounge in Clarksdale—those places influenced me and served as a model for Bad Apple. Those places are real blues clubs. Sadly, the descriptive "blues club" is thrown around a lot these days to describe various venues but, because of economic pressure, oftentimes other, more contemporary music like country or hip-hop has to be played to bring in the crowds.

"That won't be the case at Bad Apple Blues Club,'" Apple claims, "'If I end up losing every bit of money I put into the club, then so be it—I'll always stay true to my

vision and mission of bringing only the real thing to my place and I think the folks who come in will catch that vibe right away.'" (Criss). Apple is a transplant to Clarksdale, having moved to Mississippi in the early nineties. Over the years he has played with Jack Owens, R.L. Boyce, Calvin Jackson, and various members of the Burnside and Kimbrough families. As a result of this, Apple views himself as an inheritor of the blues tradition. His years of bad pay and seedy gigs alongside the older men and women of the blues grant him the right to open his own club, to try and recreate the places he played in his youth. His mission, then, is to try and bring the "real" blues experiences to tourists so that they can enjoy the same environment that he enjoyed first as a fan and subsequently as a working blues player. Apple gave up lucrative five night a week gigs on Beale Street in Memphis in order to run and perform at his club, "'The Beale Street thing paid the bills but the audience mainly just wanted to show up, have a good time, regardless of the music,'" Apple mentions, "'That won't be the case with Bad Apple Blues Club. I think the minute people enter the door they'll know, they'll sense, it's authentic blues music'" (Criss). Part of this authenticity goes beyond the typical musical elements of a show. Apple cracks jokes, talks history, and tells stories about music and life. It is not a jukebox experience, it is an attempt to bring the spontaneity and atmosphere of a historic juke joint to tourists who are not familiar with this facet of the blues. He is not trying to steal the music from anybody or unduly profit off of the blues. It is his aim to protect the art form he loves and give it to others so they may take the same pleasure he has. The blues business, in other words, is complicated by the disparate life experiences and personal investments of those who participate in and

profit from it. For some, the blues is a lifestyle, one that reflects different understandings of the community and its history.

Any investigation into the blues and Clarksdale must acknowledge the work done by sociologist Brian Foster in his new study, *I Don't Like the Blues*. Foster, a trained anthropologist, lived in the town and spoke extensively with African American locals, documenting their feelings about, and interactions with, blues music and the blues tourism industry. The general consensus was that blues tourism did little to help the African American community and, at worst, did harm to the very people who had created the art form. "I saw how they push so many festivals and so many this and that, but then to not see that money being used to help the Blacks here…" one woman stated, "Use the money to help, not just put money in your own pocket" (Foster 106). Another man simply said, "We ain't the blues no mo" (Foster 107). The African American community wants to move past a painful history, while blues businesses pride themselves on preserving the blues, and the pain that is carries, into the modern era. This is the "preservationist impulse" that McGinley mentions, one that draws white blues fans into conflict with the African American community yet again. "Who blues?" one woman asks, "They [white blues fans] wouldn't know blues if it sat in they lap...That blues [performed in the blues clubs in Clarksdale] is different from what we grew up on, you know, Johnnie Taylor...Marvin Sease...Jackie Neal, Tyrone Davis" (Foster 106). This is a common sentiment. The form of blues enjoyed by the African American community is not the historic, usually pre-war, Delta blues that brings tourists. Soul blues is the local flavor of blues that plays on the radio alongside R&B and rap. It is what people grew up listening to, not the acoustic or even electric styles that historically

were centered in the region. Delta blues sounds dated to ears accustomed to hearing the polished melodies of modern soul blues. Foster gives a voice to people typically excluded in discussions of blues tourism which is extremely valuable not only to this work but also just in terms of other scholarly discussions of blues and heritage tourism. His choice not to speak with figures like Roger Stolle or other blues promoters is curious; it leaves a big part of the dialogue unspoken. The passion and love for the blues that local promoters and business people have does not stem from a place of wanting to hurt the community, though they have tailored their approach towards the middle class tourists who visit. The people who come to see the music have the means to travel and the disposable income to spend on blues paraphernalia. This unfortunately tends to exclude locals who have less money to spend and are not inclined to listen to the "authentic blues music" being sold. Foster's exclusion from his study of many of the business owners and even local blues musicians leads to an inherently unbalanced assessment of the town and its issues. Perhaps he thought those voices were already spoken for enough by the body of other scholarly work about the town but still, his research does not paint a full picture.

Admittedly, my own interaction with the African American community does not extend beyond the blues world. My problem is the opposite of Foster's. I have made friends with many of the musicians and business owners and talked about the state of blues tourism and their interaction with the blues of both historical and modern styles. I do not know what the average life of a Clarksdale resident, black or white, looks and feels like. From the conversations I've had, I've developed a reasonably accurate sense of what it's like to be a working Clarksdale blues musician, and what sort of

struggles are required to make a decent living on a meager amount of tourists. Most professional musicians in town make enough money to live on, but few have health insurance or much disposable income. The blues is a way of life for them that goes beyond economic concerns. These are individuals who have learned blues from some of the music's great practitioners, who have practiced and struggled for years to acquire the skills that allow them to claim to play the blues. In many ways the life they have chosen is a rejection of conventional employment and a choice to live in a community of people who cannot escape the world of blues. Roger and Sean both come from families that were middle to upper middle class and they have chosen to live their lives in a poor, small, town in the Mississippi Delta because they love the art that is associated with the town. King agrees with this assessment to some extent, saying that, "a number of local blues promoters, both past (Jim O'Neal) and present (Roger Stolle), have promoted the music and local musicians and received comparatively little financial reward for their efforts. At worst, however, the relationship is defined by contempt: the musician views the promoter as a parasite, a leech who financially defrauds the talent for personal gain. Inversely, the promoter views the musician as essentially ungrateful and ignorant about financial realities" (King 178). All these realities seem to be in play in Clarksdale. The promoter will typically be looked upon as an untrustworthy figure, especially within the context of the blues where so many artists have been taken advantage of. On the other hand, the business of promoting blues is difficult and requires a good understanding of regional economies and the governing principles therein. The relationship is a distrustful symbiosis that both sides stand to gain from. The promoter is able to book music and market the town as a destination

and the musician is able to get gigs and play to potentially larger audiences. O'Neal and Stolle have received little money despite the fact that they both laid the groundwork for modern blues tourism in Clarksdale. They are really the reason that Clarksdale is on the map as a destination for blues music. Stolle opened his store in 2002 and remembers that, "'Clarksdale's blues scene [back then] was sporadic. Ground Zero Blues Club was up and running mostly featuring blues on the weekends, but sometimes an occasional rock band also performed...There was no reliable live blues Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday and nothing during the holidays. Even then you could still end up with the occasional Friday or Saturday night where there wasn't any blues being played in town" (Coopwood). The history was there and many of the musicians were as well, but there was no regular structure that blues tourists could base their trip on. Roger stepped into the role of lead promoter for the town and in a short while there was at least one blues show per day, seven days a week. This continued through the pandemic and has become a hallmark of the town. To this day Roger is still frequently heard on MPB, the Mississippi division of NPR, and numerous other media programs. He is, in effect, the spokesperson for the town and its blues musicians. For this, he does not seem to live a lavish lifestyle. He works in his store, doing interviews over the phone, and will spend time to talk blues with anyone who comes into the shop. His love for the music and culture are evident in pretty much all aspects of his life. His passion for the genre was not represented in Foster's work–an analysis of Clarksdale is only complete once all sides of the story are given equal measures of attention.

It is clear that there are strong feelings on both local residents and those who cater towards tourism. Many locals feel abandoned and disregarded by tourist centered

businesses. Their lived experience is not reflected in the history that is told to visitors and their music tastes are neglected to suit tourist desires for older, seemingly more "authentic," music. A de facto segregation is enforced through economic exclusion of African Americans in the downtown area. It also seems that little of the money earned through these businesses goes to benefit the African American population. Local musicians do reap the benefits of more consistent work and local workers in food service and hospitality also get the benefit of steady, tourist focused, work. These are jobs that would not exist without blues tourism, though very few of the jobs have much room for further career advancement. In the minds of many, it seems that their history has been stolen and sold to tourists without any return to the community. The primarily white business owners and musicians are passionate lovers of the blues and the culture that created it. Many have lived and worked in the community for years but still, it is in their economic interest to serve the middle class, white, tourists who come from around the world to learn about and experience the blues in its historical setting. When asked if blues had saved Clarksdale, Roger Stolle said that, "'It definitely saved the downtown, and that's the heartbeat...We still have work to do, but because of blues we've attracted the players who can help with the other non-music stuff. The jury may still be out, but our case is strong" (Coopwood). While promising, this does little to answer the questions asked by the African American community. The downtown may be revitalized, but still the space is economically segregated and thus perpetuates the injustices that the region is known for. More community involvement should be sought out in terms of both civil governance and the creation of public spaces that are open to all. The history of Clarksdale is owned by everyone who lives there and that should be

reflected in the museums and monuments that scatter the town. The economic divide between the downtown area and the rest of Clarksdale is more difficult to address. The hope would be that new industry would come to the area and higher wages would make downtown spaces more financially accessible to locals. This has not happened but it may yet still. Clarksdale's identity is never static as it is always being remembered and reinvented and redefined. There are glimmers of hope, even in the midst of a pandemic.

As all things seem in the Delta the past cannot be neither escaped nor fully recognized. Locals and newcomers both care passionately about their community and its perception. While Clarksdale may be "The Crown Jewel of Blues History Destinations" to some, to many others it is home. Somewhere between these two ideas there is a version of the town that does everyone justice. Until that point is reached, the town's identity will always be stuck between the future and the past, haunted by the groups who struggle for control.

CHAPTER III

WHO VOICES THE BLUES?

Two questions that cannot be escaped when looking at blues tourism is this: who has the right to speak for the blues and who currently speaks for the blues? In Clarksdale, Mississippi, this particular question lies at the center of a complicated power structure that dictates not only the narratives that are told, but also where and how money is spent on blues.

To answer this question properly is important to understand how and where the blues came about. This is a way to ensure the proper inheritors of the blues are highlighted. The official record, commemorated by a blues marker and a Mississippi state tourism website, states that W.C. Handy heard an unnamed rural musician playing slide guitar in a Tutwiler train station in 1903 (*Where The Southern Cross The Dog*). The melody caught his attention and in 1912 W.C. Handy published the "*Memphis Blues,*" an instrumental composition based on the bluesy slurs on the third and fifth scale degrees he heard in Tutwiler[5]. "*Memphis Blues*" was one of the first published

[5] Handy records his account the episode, "The band which I found in Clarksdale and the nine-man orchestra which grew out of it did yeoman duty in the Delta. We played for affairs of every description. I came to know by heart every foot of the Delta, even from Clarksdale to Lambert on the Dog and Yazoo City. I could call every stop, water tower and pig path on the Peavine with my eyes closed. It all became a familiar, monotonous round. Then one night in Tutwiler, as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me with a start.

blues songs and it is for this reason that Handy is sometimes referred to as "the father of the blues."[6] He bought into this nickname, even titling his 1941 autobiography *Father of The Blues*. Handy's "*St. Louis Blues*" was a great success, still earning him twenty-five thousand dollars a year as late as 1958 (Salamone). Handy's work may have been in his name, but it was based on a composition he heard a rural, and unnamed, musician play. That musician was not the first blues musician either. In a book titled, *Blues: The Basics*, Dick Weissman emphasizes that "We need to keep in mind that we do not have any recorded examples of African American music or blues from the late nineteenth century, the time when scholars believed the blues first evolved" (Weissman 9). Thus, the early history of blues is murky, but we can be sure of at least one thing. Blues was rooted in agricultural communities African Americans lived in the years following the civil war.

The blues performed in the twenties was not like the blues imagined by contemporary blues tourists. The "Blues Queens" were backed by big bands with horn sections and featured polished and jazzy vocals. Blues scholar Adam Gussow remarks, "Between 1920 and 1960, more or less, blues music was black popular music. This is true whether we are talking about blues queens like Bessie Smith and Dinah Washington, or urbane city bluesmen like Charles Brown, Leroy Carr, and B.B. King, or

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A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags, his feet peeped out of his shoes. As he played he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly." (*The Father of The Blues*)

[6] The first official blues song was "I Got the Blues"(1908) by Anthony Maggio. He was a New Orleans street musician. Despite publishing the first blues song, Maggio does not get the attention that W.C. Handy received for his compositions.

the Mississippi-to-Chicago axis that gives us Charley Patton, Jimmy Reed, and Muddy Waters" (Gussow *Whose Blues* 41). The details that connect the blues of the twenties and the blues that fans still search for today are extremely relevant to the question of blues provenance. Paige McGinley asserts that tent shows in Clarksdale during the 1910's "enabled the transmission, innovation, and reinvention of popular theatrical and musical practice between residents and visitors. Abbot and Seroff have demonstrated how lyrics, licks, and theatrical scenarios spread geographically as performers toured…While it would be challenging if not impossible to prove, it is difficult to imagine that Muddy Waters (who would become a performer in the Silas Green from New Orleans Tent show), Charley Patton, or Robert Johnson- all residents of the Delta- would not have attended one of these shows" (McGinley 40-41). Paige is claiming, then, that the blues artists we associate with the "original Delta blues" may have, and likely were, influenced by the popular blues songs of the twenties. The twelve and sixteen bar structures associated with blues were certainly a product of the big band blues era. The fact that these same structures can be heard in Delta blues recordings lends credence to McGinley's claim. Elijah Wald adds to this by saying, "[Robert] Johnson had studied these northern, urban, styles and his compositions are generally professional, composed works" (Wald 132). Wald's claim about Johnson implicitly contrasts his relatively polished style with that of Son House or Charley Patton's style which lent itself to, "a single blues guitar arrangement for twenty minutes or more, singing a couple verses, playing a solo, then singing another verse as inspiration hit. A song would thus be made up of 'floating verses'" (Wald 132). Robert Johnson, a big part of Clarksdale's crossroads mythology, was following in the mold of tent show blues

acts like Bessie Smith or even W.C. Handy. His songs were rehearsed and structured to fit the time constraints of 78 rpm records and appear to emulate the structures of other successful urban blues artists.

In an interesting irony it would seem that the rural population from which W.C. Handy took his blues was then influenced into recreating big band blues as it could be performed by one musician. It is a reinvention of an old form. Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and other Delta migrants to Chicago took the idea of Delta blues and transformed it into music that bands could play while retaining the grit of early Delta performances. The success of Chicago blues bands was then emulated by groups that remained in the Delta like The Jelly Roll Kings or even more isolated rural artists like Belton Sutherland, who recorded a version, though without attribution, of Muddy Waters' "*Can't Be Satisfied*" in 1978[7]. Thus, it would seem that blues is neither completely rural nor completely urban. Both communities traded influences, with rural artists being inclined to try and emulate the more popular, urban, forms of blues. However, the more traditional forms of blues like those played by Son House or Charley Patton are rarely played in contemporary Clarksdale. Most songs played are urban standards like those popularized by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King, or Albert King. Steven A. King, writing about blues tourism in Clarksdale and elsewhere, emphasizes that, "some performers are often typecast as 'Delta Blues' musicians, despite the fact that these musicians have largely abandoned their earlier styles" (King *Blues Tourism of the*

[7] Lomax, Alan, director. *"I Got Trouble"* . *YouTube*, YouTube, 16 Dec. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3Mc5_u83o. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

Mississippi Delta 457). The blues are nominally “Delta Blues” because they are played in the Delta, but they are not historically appropriate for that designation. These are generally polished arrangements with agreed upon structures, very much indebted to the blues of the twenties as well as the popular music that came out of Chicago and Detroit. McGinley points to the Savoy Theater, a “ruin not yet made pastoral…[at the] heart of Clarksdale’s historic blues scene that goes largely unexplored by tourists” (McGinley *Staging the Blues* 220). The blues that would have been played at this historic theatre in an earlier era are not acknowledged by tourists, perhaps because they may not recognize the form as the “real-deal” blues they are searching for. It's also little wonder that the modern blues businesses are centered in the historically white downtown.

The historical home of blues music in Clarksdale was the New World District, effectively the black business district of the town. Now that area is mostly broken-down, abandoned buildings or white-owned music venues, McGinley reports that the poverty rate of the neighborhood is more than 60% (McGinley *Highway 61 Revisited* 81). These days, according to Clay Motley, “Clarksdale’s downtown has many empty buildings with the ghostly names of long-shuttered businesses etched in brick or tile. Clarksdale’s New World district, on the other side of the railroad tracks, fared even worse. Crowds of shoppers and musicians used to congregate at the corner of Issaquena Avenue and Fourth Street. Now many of the buildings have disappeared altogether, leaving empty lots of broken glass and concrete” (Motley 83). Several long blocks from that intersection, Red’s Lounge is one of the holdouts, a black owned business that hosts blues shows, though it was founded in the 1980s, long after the heyday of the New

World entertainment district. Roger Stolle, local business owner and blues promoter, believes that, “there are two main jukes left [in Mississippi]…Blue Front Cafe in Bentonia and Red’s Lounge in Clarksdale” (Stolle *Mississippi Juke Joint Confidential* 26). The Red Top lounge, once the home club of “Big" Jack Johnson (1939-2011) is a crumbling ruin just a block away from Red’s, the old sign having been stolen years ago by blues fans. There is no marker here, just like the nearby Savoy theatre. These ruins generate no income, no tourist buzz, nothing. King points out that blues festivals, “[have] encouraged community leaders to “sanitize” and “repackage” the community in order to attract tourists to the area” (King *Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals* 457). This is a pretty basic marketing strategy. It is hardly surprising that there is pressure to present the community in a more positive light but the issue is that this process verges on whitewashing and can do more harm than good to communities that are already under economic and societal pressure.

When Fisk University sent a folklore team to Coahoma county in 1941, the county that contains Clarksdale, they found the general African American public to view blues disapprovingly. One nineteen year old they spoke to said that, “I thinks blues is wrong to sing, especially for a Christian. No folks around here who calls themselves Christians sing the blues. Dancing is alright if it's just a sociable thing, but it ain’t right if it's like at a juke…” (Work III et al 80). This goes to show that even amongst the African American community historically associated with the music, blues musicians were very much seen as outsiders. Blues music in a juke joint context is a subculture that attracts the more rough-and-tumble element that the African American middle class wanted to get away from. Muddy Waters was interviewed by the Fisk researchers during the

survey, just a few years away from Chicago stardom. Before his own recording career, Waters, “listened constantly to phonograph records…He explained that it is necessary to use two different repertoires to accommodate the demands of white and Negro dancers” (Work III et al 118-119). This Muddy Water’s was not yet renowned for his original compositions. He functioned as a human jukebox with the talent of replicating the songs he has heard on the records. He is fairly well respected for a rural musician but when he goes to Chicago he becomes a genuine pop music star. Still, in Coahoma County he occupied a much different social location- a tractor driver and moonshiner who happened to play music on the side (Gordon 21). Clarksdale did have bars and music venues for African Americans in the 1940’s but as Waters remembers, “Twelve o’clock you’d better be out of there…You had to go out in the country…down to the bootleggers place” (Gordon 22). These are not respectable patrons, it was a backwoods party with moonshine and blues. Violence was common and deadly. The Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale has an old acoustic guitar that Waters smashed on a man’s head. Even at its most arranged, the blues is tainted by poverty and violence. The real history of the blues is ugly, unfit for tourist consumption in the eyes of city planners.

The crown jewel of modern Clarksdale blues is Ground Zero Blues club, which opened in May of 2001. It is housed in an old cotton grading warehouse, on the historically white side of town. Actor Morgan Freeman is a partial owner of the club and

frequently promotes it during interviews and appearances[8]. It is a place that plays a blues club well. It has “traditional” southern fare like bbq and catfish that are cooked with the sort of excess imagined for a theme restaurant. The tablecloths are covered with people’s names and other random scribbles, adding a make-your-own mark element to the blues world. If you are an aspiring blues musician the ultimate thrill would be to “jam” with local artists; this usually looks like a somewhat languid guitar solo or some harmonica licks over a twelve bar pattern. The tourist thus becomes a part of the blues spectacle and, simply by being on stage in Mississippi, becomes more “authentic” in their own bluesy way. The one jamming is then encouraged to give a generous tip and then rejoins the audience. Musicians drive around town inviting instrument-wielding tourists to their shows promising to, “get them up” on stage. It is a complicated space where pleasing the tourists is the main focus, not preserving the integrity of the music. Clay Motley recognized this during a visit when he commented that, “I saw the wildly talented Lucious Spiller play an un-spirited set for a room full of tourists at Red’s. I have seen Lucious play many times, and he is one of my favorite acts in Clarksdale; however, on that night each song had a gratuitous guitar solo where Lucious walked around the room and predictably played his guitar in tourists’ faces—presumably to make them feel special and improve their photographs of the event (and thus Lucious’s tips)” (Motley 93). Lucious is not a blues purist and some of the more musically conservative tourists are bothered by that and his own branding as a “delta

[8] See, for example, “Anthony, Kontji. “5 Star Stories: Oscar-Winning Actor Morgan Freeman Takes Us to Ground Zero Blues Club.” *Https://Www.actionnews5.Com*, https://www.actionnews5.com/2020/06/09/star-story-oscar-winning-actor-morgan-freeman-takes-us-ground-zero-blues-club/. “

blues musician," a phrase which he fulfills by being a musician who plays blues in the Delta, though those songs are not typical of the historical delta blues. His repertoire spans works like "Purple Rain" and "Rainy Night in Georgia" all the way to gospel covers. Still, the fact remains that Lucious's ability to recreate a wide variety of songs is highly reminiscent of the original delta blues players playing the part of "human jukeboxes." Thus, in an interesting irony, Lucious's and indeed many other musicians who have wider repertoires are being truer to the original blues than they may know. Speaking about Robert Johnson, more or less the archetypal Mississippi bluesman for the contemporary blues tourist, Elijah Wald states, "Johnson had big ears for all the latest sounds, and Shines [A fellow bluesman and associate] recalls him playing everything from hillbilly tunes to Hollywood cowboy songs and Bing Crosby numbers" (Wald 118). Both Lucious and Johnson played what they think the crowd wanted to hear so they would get better tips. Blues purists make up only a tiny portion of the contemporary audience, and they listen to music with a different intent than the casual blues fan. What the purists often fail to realize is that the blues, and especially live blues, is good time music to drink and dance and party to. It is not a recital, not a performance to mull over at length. The fact of the matter is, if Johnson was alive today, in all likelihood he would be hamming it up on stage with his guitar solos and taking photos with tourists. The fascination with the "real deal" or the "pure blues" is nothing more than a romanticization of the past- a strange yearning for a pastoral history that never really existed.

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You cannot tell the story of modern Clarksdale Blues without running into Roger Stolle. He is, without exaggeration, the main voice for Mississippi blues. He has written three books, been part of numerous documentaries, and can frequently be heard on MPB's radio station talking about the blues. His store, Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art, is ideally situated in downtown Clarksdale–walking distance to Ground Zero and the Delta Blues Museum. He purchased the property from "Bubba" O'Keefe, the current director of tourism for Clarksdale. When blues tourists want to know where to go, they ask Roger. Thus, to borrow his phrase, he is the arbiter of what is the "real deal." I interviewed Roger in his store and talked with him about which artists, in his view, constitute the "real-deal" and he recalled,

> "You know, when I first started going the Red's [One of the few remaining black owned blues venues in Clarksdale], he had his roster, you know, Wesley, Junebug Jefferson and Dr. Mike Michael James, you know, Super Chikan, Big Jack Johnson. Like these regular guys. Those were the guys he used until they started dying. And eventually it was down to just having a couple acts. So the second wave was sort of helping facilitate, introduce, Red to guys like T-Model Ford and Robert Belfour. And, you know, some of the, you know, Terry [Terry "Harmonica" Bean] who might have been more of the solo- duo type players. So he had sort of that timeframe. And then now that T-Model and Mr. Belfour and guys of that nature are gone. You have the, you know, the Big T's[Terry Williams] and the Big A's [Anthony Sherrod] and the Lucious Spillers, you know, sort of another generation. But the beautiful thing about Clarksdale is that we have both native musicians and those who have moved here now. So it sort of fleshes out very nicely. You have a lot of different shades of blues going on from young to old, from, you know, deep blues to sort of soulful blues. So it gives us a really nice collection to work with" (Roger Stolle, Interview with David Larson).

This is a telling analysis of the town's talent pool by someone who is, almost inarguably, the biggest music promoter in the town. Red's is the touchstone "real deal"

venue for Clarksdale and as such, Stolle recommends it as one of the must-see sites for the town. When approached for an interview, Red Payden declined to comment about his place in the town's music scene. Roger, then, shall be the main voice for the venue and, as evidenced by carefully crafted social media posts, does function as the venue's main mouthpiece. A post on the "Red's Old Timers' Blues Festival" Facebook page states,

> "Enjoy a little bit of the great outdoors and a whole lot of real-deal blues this Saturday in Clarksdale, Mississippi! It's the 3rd-ever RED'S OLD-TIMERS BLUES FEST, put on by your favorite grouchy old juke joint runner — Big Red Paden.
>
> From 94-year-old Cadillac John to old-enough-to-know-better Super Chikan Johnson, it's gonna be a smile fest. Good people, good music, good times. Oh, and it's FREE thanks to the generous support of Visit Clarksdale Tourism, Southern Bancorp and other generous private donors.
>
> Hopefully, y'all got your shots. Red still asks that folks spread out and social distance. Also, please mask up when you talk to Red or any of the musicians... and maybe leave the selfies till next year" (September 1,2021).

The phrase "real-deal" pops up here again, a sort of fingerprint that indicates Stolle's involvement in the marketing and execution of the festival. In this instance the "real-deal" is fulfilled by Paden's notoriously gruff demeanor and by the age of the performing artists. However, the fact remains that this festival is a quite polished affair with corporate sponsors and numerous grants to provide funding. Paden is effectively lending his image to a festival- giving it credibility in exchange for help facilitating the event and its associated marketing.

“Real deal” is a good example of blues signifying, a blues practice Debra Devi defines as “the use of innuendo and doubletalk that is fully understood only by members of one’s community” (Devi). When Stolle says “real deal” he means old and African American. He cannot say this directly, though it is what is implied through the artists he focuses on. “I firmly believe that this search for what’s real, what’s honest, what's authentic,” Stolle exhorts, “is central to today’s increasing interest in deep blues culture” (Stolle *Mississippi Juke Joint Confidential* 10). “Authentic” is another word that crops up often in the blues world, though it is rarely defined. Much like “real deal” it signifies a lot without directly saying anything that would offend people. The Old Timers’ Festival has featured only one white artist, a man named Watermelon Slim, in its three year run. In his description of Clarksdale’s musicians, Stolle spoke primarily of the African American artists who live in the community, with particular emphasis on those who came from rural areas. An older African American artist from a rural area like T-Model Ford or Robert Belfour is his pinnacle of authenticity, the “real deal.” It is who tourists expect to see playing the blues and thus, that is who promoters use to market the town. Of course blues is the cultural heritage of the African American community and especially those who grew up in and around the Mississippi Delta, so these musicians should certainly be supported by local blues infrastructure. The issue becomes whether other, white and non-native Mississippian, blues musicians in town are treated fairly, and indeed many of the non-local musicians have commented off the record that they feel they are treated with less respect by both promoters and fans. None of the musicians I spoke to wanted their views on this topic to be attached to their name, although it is a common complaint amongst the artists.

When asked why he moved to Clarksdale, Stolle writes that he hoped “to circle the wagons, to mount a defense, to help the last generation of cotton-farming, mule-driving, juke-joint playing bluesmen deeply inhale the final breath of this amazing tradition we call Delta blues. My idea was to help other like-minded individuals and entities organize and promote this uniquely American art form from within and by all means necessary” (Stolle *The Hidden History of Mississippi Blues* 17). This is effectively his mission statement and it is consistent with his actions. The use of phrases like “cotton-farming” and “mule-driving” is certainly racially charged and evokes a connection to slavery and decades of Jim Crow segregation that other blues promoters are hesitant to reference. Stolle’s mission is a preservationist one, motivated by his evident love for blues music and culture. He has faced a lot of criticism over the years for his role in Mississippi blues marketing. Motley reports that, “Professor Stephen A. King wrote a book-length analysis of Mississippi’s contemporary blues tourism industry and concluded that it is ‘unclear if whites are reaping whatever financial benefits are associated with the blues tourism.’ All of this should give pause to critics suspicious of the motives of white entrepreneurs in Clarksdale. Someone who wants to make easy money—to do anything easy for that matter—should look someplace other than Clarksdale” (Motley 92). Motley goes further to say that despite the fact that whites own most of the blues associated businesses, “this is less the result of overt racism or political machinations than it is of structural inequality that persists. Clarksdale draws blues fans from all over the world, and some of these fans eventually move to town and take a risk by opening a tourism-related business. Many of Clarksdale’s most popular downtown businesses—keeping in mind that there are precious few businesses open

downtown—are owned by transplants who have moved from places such as Seattle, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Ohio, the Netherlands, and Australia. Locals do not have access to capital of this sort" (Motley 89). This has been the conclusion I have drawn from my time in Clarksdale as well. The town is still haunted by the Jim Crow era society that shaped the town's borders and landmarks and those who come to make businesses in the area, for no fault of their own, fall into place in a way that continues to perpetuate the structural and societal inequality that are nearly inescapable in the Delta. Stolle loves the blues, I have no doubt about this. His presence has been a great thing for the town of Clarksdale and for blues music in general. He creates lots of economic opportunities for musicians in a town that could very easily have been forgotten. He is perhaps guilty of romanticizing the blues, though he is pretty open about its roots in slavery. Despite the complicated ethical and social status of Clarksdale, it seems Stolle is doing his best to equitably market and promote blues music.

Bubba O'Keefe is another big player in the Clarksdale blues scene. O'Keefe is the Director of Tourism for Clarksdale, a real estate investor, and a lifelong resident of the town. In February of 2022, he sat down for an interview at the Visit Clarksdale office building, which is housed in the much refurbished train depot where artists like Muddy Waters took the train up to Chicago. O'Keefe is an economic developer and the Director of Tourism for Clarksdale. His main focus is bringing money into the community and revitalizing the downtown area, with a stated goal of "trying to create…an artist and music community, something that I would want in my family to go see and do and in and just have a little but thriving little downtown…people living down there, restaurants" (O'Keefe). O'Keefe has sought to use blues tourism as a way of

accomplishing this goal. Tourism brings people to the area who would presumably want to stay the night, creating lodging and restaurant business, while also bringing attention to the cultural heritage of the community. In addition to this, O'Keefe referenced the idea of the "broken window theory," the idea that beautifying the downtown area would lower crime and drive economic development. He began buying and refurbishing buildings in the downtown area, one of which he sold to Roger Stolle in 2002 to house his Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art store.

O'Keefe's connection to the blues began early in his life. His father owned the Stuckey's gas station in Como, Mississippi where Fred McDowell pumped gas, and O'Keefe knew McDowell, even hiring him to play a fraternity party in Jackson, Mississippi. O'Keefe admits he did not "get" blues music at that time and only began appreciating it later on. This is fairly consistent with what you would expect. White locals rarely go out to see blues acts in Clarksdale because this is not the music they grew up listening to, and hence, appreciating. There are a few places where white locals typically congregate, places like Ramon's or Stone Pony Pizza. These are historically white spaces where Black Clarksdalians would almost certainly not feel comfortable. The blues clubs, in general, see very few white locals and thus the whiteness of the space is a result of tourist demographics. O'Keefe became aware of a greater legacy of Clarksdale blues through the work of Sid Graves, the founder of the Delta Blues Museum. Sid famously declared, "you don't have to like the blues to like green" (Motley 88). This would appear to be the lens through which O'Keefe looks at the blues. The blues, while not the music he loves, is the music that brings people to Clarksdale and that drives development. So while O'Keefe may not be the most

passionate aficionado, he does understand that promoting a blues-friendly environment is in the best interest of the town.

The Delta Blues Museum is an especially important player in the world of Clarksdale Blues. Sid Graves was the founder of the Delta Blues Museum, which he opened in 1979 in Clarksdale's public library (Motley 86). Graves tried to win over white Clarksdalians with the phrase, "You don't have to like the blues to like green" (Motley 86). Clearly, Graves recognized that blues was a potential driver for economic development and also that blues could be preserved by making it an economic focus. This dual purpose preserved the art form while making it attractive to entrepreneurs. The unfortunate result of this is the urge to make blues more commercially friendly, to play with the history to make it easier to sell. "Clarksdale's civic and cultural elites, including the Delta Blues Museum, have profited by blurring the lines between Johnson's mythology and Clarksdale's civic history, enabling them to merchandize the crossroads brand to business investors and blues tourist alike," says Gussow in his investigation of Crossroad myth and history (Gussow *Beyond The Crossroads* 15). He goes on to say, "The museum happily dispenses with scholarly accuracy, blurring the lines between history and myth to arrive at a kind of tantalizing truthiness that shores up the ideological basis for Clarksdale's claim to Johnson-at-the-crossroads and, more pointedly, helps the museum sell stuff" (Gussow 259). This is a harsh indictment, though it is warranted. The museum plays up the devil mythology and exploits the sparse historical record in order to market the crossroads and, by extension, the town. In this regard, it seems the museum cares more about green than blues.

The Delta Blues Museum does give back to the community by offering free lessons to local children. This program has trained some of the major local players including Anthony “Big A” Sherrod and Christone “Kingfish” Ingram. Ingram’s success story of rising up from poverty to become one of the major up-and-coming artists in blues attracts others to the Museum’s lessons, though their success is far from guaranteed. Teaching children how to express themselves through music is almost without a doubt a good thing. Viewed cynically, however, the program may function as a sort of feeder school that turns out local, typically African-American, musicians who can then “graduate” to playing out in local clubs. In effect, this ensures that there will always be local musicians to support the blues scene, which in turn, brings people to town and to the Delta Blues Museum. It is in the museum’s best interest to maintain a pool of local talent, especially local African American talent, to bolster claims about the town’s “authentic blues scene.”

Others in Clarksdale have been critical of the town’s myopic focus on the blues. Motley points to Buster Moton, “a maverick former city councilman…[and] the most politically powerful local critic of blues tourism… Moton regularly accused Mayor Luckett of focusing on the blues, rather than black poverty. In 2015, Moton interrupted a city board meeting by loudly declaring, “The mayor gets whatever he wants to get, the blues things . . . he’s getting all the blues things, but no homes for the people of Clarksdale” (Motley 88). This is a fair point. The blues oriented economy seldom intersects with the local, primarily African American, community. Business either exists in the blues world or without, and seldom do the two meet. Tourists are not inclined to spend money in the poor and unfortunately, dangerous community. It is not uncommon to hear

gunshots echoing through the neighboorhoods of Clarksdale- the police presence, by my own observation, seems to be focused on the downtown area. Tourists are the priority because they spend money. King says that this, “resembles an all-inclusive resort in which tourists are contained within a remote enclave, completely isolated from the surrounding community. Within the safety of this self-contained compound, guests can, indeed, "stroll around" the premises (day or night) without anticipating danger from real or imagined threat” (King 31). This critique is not without merit.

Workshops that teach tourists how to play blues music are common. Frank McKenna, a part owner of The Shack Up Inn, was critical of these workshops and the amount of money they bring to the community (McKenna). A closer look at the Harmonica Experience, a five day harmonica workshop, reveals that of the three instructors, none of them live or work in Mississippi, let alone the community of Clarksdale (The Harmonica Experience). Thus, the money paid to the workshop does little to help the local economy. The attendees do engage in jam sessions at a few local clubs, which undoubtedly results in money going to these clubs. McKenna’s gripe is that this is where the involvement in the community ends. The Shack Up Inn’s owners make a little money, which may go into the community, but the lion’s share goes home with the instructor and thus, leaves Mississippi. The instructors, Cheryl Arena, Hash Brown, and TJ Klay, have all done impressive things in blues and played with artists more likely to be referred to as, “real deal.”[9] Their credentials are not under fire here,

[9] The Harmonica Experience webpage lists that their instructors have played with, “RL Burnside, Louisiana Red, Honey Boy Edwards, Lazy Lester, Charlie Musselwhite, James Cotten, Duke Robillard, Candye Kane, Johnny Clyde Copeland, Smokin Joe Kubek & Bnois King, Sonny Rhodes, Pinetop Perkins, Luther “Guitar Jr.” Johnson, Johnny Rawls, Kim Wilson, Big Jack Johnson, Kenny Neal, Jr.

just the way that they use the town to add to their business. Clarksdale provides the backdrop, the staging location if you will, for the workshop. Attendees can say they learned to play the blues in the Delta, and technically they're telling the truth.

It is important, also, to note that "The Harmonica Experience" is a spiritual successor to "The Blues Harmonica Jam Camp" which was started by instructor Jon Gindick. Gindick has a long history in the area and is involved with a children's charity in Tutwiler, MS. Giving back to the community is admirable and shows respect for the area and the people who make their homes there. "The Harmonica Experience" does not appear to have charity work associated with it, though this does not mean the instructors do not help the community. The big ethical question is whether non-local event planners have a duty to bring money into town. The owners and investors in the Shack Up Inn and other hotels are likely to receive income they otherwise would not have, but as McKenna pointed out, the workshop attendees do not spend much money at other businesses. McKenna's place in this is interesting because he has a stake in the Shack Up Inn and also works as a clerk in Roger Stolle's store, Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art. He sees what tourists buy because chances are, he is one of the people selling to them. Ultimately, it is not The Harmonica Experience's job to revitalize the town. It is just indicative of a larger problem where the blues economy is segregated from the day to day lives of most Clarksdalians.

Watson, Big Bill Morganfield, Ronnie Earl, Sam Myers and many more…" this is an impressive list of names. It spans a lot of blues history and firmly establishes the credibility of the instructors.

Moton's points are not without merit, unfortunately[10]. It seems that the focus on blues businesses does seem to exclude local businesses in lieu of those owned by outsiders who have the capital and means by which to establish their own ventures. A thriving downtown does little to help those who live in abject poverty just blocks away. A new mayor was elected in 2017, and "blues tourism conspicuously does not appear anywhere in Espy's publicized 'People's Plan' for the city" (Motley 88). Locals voted against the blues oriented legislators of the past, indicative of a definite frustration with the state of the economy. Time will tell if this is effective.

While blues may have started as the voice of a disenfranchised rural community, it seems that now it is spoken for by polished promoters and those with strong economic interesting in tourism. Stolle and O'Keefe champion the blues as the economic salvation of a town that lives in desperate poverty. Still, the money brought in does little for black locals who own few of the tourist oriented businesses. Outsiders reap the greatest benefit of blues tourism. While rural African American artists have the greatest credibility as performers, they have little voice in the actual marketing of the medium, lending their image and likenesses to festivals put on by corporate interests and outside investors. This seems a continuation of the unbalanced power structure that has existed in the Delta since it was first settled. The strongest champions of the blues seem to be those who came to it later in life, rather than those who grew up in the Delta and know the blues intimately from birth. Clarksdale has benefited from blues tourism without a doubt; the issue is that the money goes to those who have the privilege and

[10] Interestingly enough, Moton has just opened up his own blues club, "Buster's Down Home Blues." It seems his criticism of blues tourism doesn't preclude him from becoming part of the community.

means to start businesses. For locals the economic blues are inescapable and overwhelming.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE IN BLUES PERFORMANCE AND RECORDING

The blues audience is often overlooked as a driver for musical change. Performers, either consciously or unconsciously, adapt to what they believe their audience will want to hear. A happy audience will be more invested in the performance, and thus is more likely to tip better. A performer's adaptations can take the form of changes to the music itself or changes in performance style and appearance. This is further complicated by the demographic shifts that have occurred over time in both the musicians and the audience. It is the goal of this paper to examine how the blues audience changed over time, how blues musicians adapt their musical repertoire to their live audiences, how recorded music has been aimed at particular groups of people, and how the on-stage persona of a musician impacts the show.

First, it would be worthwhile to try to nail down some basic terms and timelines for this investigation. Dick Weissman postulates that the music that we refer to as the blues began to evolve in the 1890's, citing the fact that "some blues singers have said that the song *Joe Turner* was the first blues song...Turner was a penal officer who transported convicts in Tennessee between 1892 and 1896, certainly the correct time period for the beginnings of the blues" (Weissman 19). Weissman goes on to describe how folk blues players often used unique song structures, though some used more

traditional arrangements, while the “classic blues” such as those composed by W.C. Handy in the 1910s and 20’s typically relied on more conventional twelve bar structures (Weissman 19). Weissman’s emphasis, through quotation marks, on the dubious nature of the term “classic” speaks to the complexity of putting labels on a fluid and evolving musical tradition. Also during this time period and into the twenties, female blues stars like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith dominated the popular music scene. At this time, blues was listened to in both live performance and in recorded music by a primarily black audience. Gussow states that, “between 1920 and 1960, more or less, blues music was black popular music” (Gussow 41). Then a fascinating demographic shift occurred. “During the 1960’s the popularity of blues music in Chicago dropped considerably. Delta-raised blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf gradually fell out of favor with urban black audiences, who derided their countrified and somewhat old-fashioned styles of performance as ‘gutbucket,’ ‘low class music’...Meanwhile *white* audiences began listening to blues musicians with greater frequency in Chicago’s black neighborhood taverns...the irony of this commercial shift is striking: while blues musicians like Waters had trouble packing black neighborhood *bars* in cities like Detroit and Minneapolis during the 1960’s these same artists found increased popularity among large white audiences” (Grazian 35). The folk revival of the middle sixties saw formerly forgotten rural blues artists suddenly “rediscovered” by young white audiences and thrust into the spotlight. The blues audience today has largely remained unchanged, except for age, since the sixties. The first white-majority blues audience was made up of college age whites in the 1960s. These are the baby-boomers who “discovered the blues” again. Paige McGinley states that today, “blues

tourists are...baby boomers, well-educated, middle to upper-middle class whites" (McGinley 184). These are the people who, for the most part, go out to buy blues albums and watch live blues performances today.

There is also a large contingent of white listeners who came to the blues in the early to mid eighties, many as a result of Stevie Ray Vaughan's crossover appeal. Vaughan managed to win over a portion of the rock audience, becoming a well-attested guitar god whose fame rapidly eclipsed his mentors like Albert King and Lightnin' Hopkins. "He'd have been remarkable in any era," says music writer Michael Leonoard, "but Stevie Ray Vaughan arrived just at the right time in the long history of the electric blues. The late 70s and early 80s were not halcyon days for the art form: Eric Clapton's star had waned with so-so albums such as *Another Ticket* and *Money And Cigarettes*, ZZ Top were delving into the sequencer-driven MTV-rock that made them millions but ripped up their roots: the rejuvenation of Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker and other elder legends was still some way off" (Leonard). Vaughan was, along with Jeff Healey and Johnny Winter, part of a group of white blues musicians who achieved much commercial success in a format older black artists had established many years before. Artists like the Rolling Stones, Cream, and Led Zeppelin covered many blues songs but they did it as rock groups paying homage to their idols. Vaughan and other members of his cohort played blues songs as blues artists. They claimed ownership of the blues while acknowledging the artists who mentored them[11]. Movies like *Crossroads* (1986)

[11] "Stevie Ray was different" Leonard emphasizes, "Refreshing, in that he looked even further back. Yes, Hendrix was a huge influence, but he also a keen student of Muddy Waters, Albert King, Freddie King, Chuck Berry, Lonnie Mack and Otis Rush. He incorporated the jazz stylings of Django Reinhardt, Kenny Burrell and Wes Montgomery." (Leonard).

helped contribute to the mythos of the crossroads itself, as well as establish Mississippi as the location where musicians lacking “soul” or “feeling” can go find some. In the movie, Ralph Macchio plays the role of Eugene, a white classically-trained guitarist who embarks on a journey to try and learn the blues. He is technically gifted but lacks the feel for the blues. On the road he lives a sort of compressed blues curriculum involving lost love, poverty, and prejudice. Joe Seneca is Macchio’s co-star, playing the role of the aging bluesman Willy Brown who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for musical excellence. Brown regrets this choice and begrudgingly tutors Eugene on the finer points of the blues lifestyle. The climax of the film occurs when Eugene “cuts heads,” a sort of musical gunslinging match against the devil’s own student, played by Steve Vai. Vai’s character is the epitome of the 80’s rocker, a flashy shredder. The duel pits Eugene’s newfound “soul” against flashy virtuosity. Eugene is able to synthesize the two genres into one guitar solo that defeats the devil and thus asserts the dominance of blues, of music with “soul”, against the prevailing musical trends.

Out of this film came a whole generation of youthful blues listeners who wanted to learn the blues, to see the real-life versions of the life they saw in “Crossroads.” Gussow reports that tourism and blues enthusiasts like Jim O’Neal and John Ruskie began showing people the location of historical crossroads and other blues oriented sites. “Crossroads tourism between the late 1980s and mid 1990s provided both pilgrims and their guides with vivid tableaux and powerful, sometimes transformative experiences” (Gussow *Beyond the Crossroads* 286). The white blues audience during this time is either intentionally or unintentionally pushing back against the pop music of the time. The blues deals with raw emotions that appeal to those dissatisfied with

increasing modernity. Young people in the eighties had to deal with rapidly changing technology and culture that gestured towards an increasingly futuristic existence. The blues, born a pastoral art form, goes the opposite way. Guitar effects and synthesizers are often eschewed in favor of "real" expression. To a young person tired of electronic music and seemingly vapid musical themes, the blues is an attractive art form. Faced with these complicated audience demographics, blues musicians have had to navigate in their musical repertoire, in the recording studio, and in their performance style and persona.

The songs blues performers choose to play live says as much about their audience as it does about them. The archetypal delta bluesman, such as Robert Johnson or his contemporaries, "had to act like what we might now retroactively call a human jukebox. You needed a range of material that you could pull out of the hat on a moment's notice, whatever the public requested" (Gussow 65). This is an often overlooked aspect of the delta blues performer's life. They had to have an audience-pleasing repertoire to make the tips that they survived on. Their own personal compositions took a backseat to audience requests. David "Honeyboy" Edwards recalls, "I'd play anything anybody asked for because sometimes you had to get on both sides of the street, play whatever the people want to hear...I hear one of them old records on the Seabird...then if people say, 'play that and I'll give you a quarter,' I could play it, I could make that quarter" (Edwards 72-3). The traveling blues singers were musical opportunists who possessed the skill necessary to adapt styles to match what the audience requested. They were rewarded financially for their adaptability. Edwards discusses playing for both white and black audiences and being able to provide what

they were looking for. The black audiences wanted the popular black music of the day and that happened to be blues. The white audience called for their own popular music, so country songs and even polkas. Muddy Waters, "listed a half-dozen Gene Autry songs in his repertoire" and, "[Robert] Johnson…'did anything he heard over the radio' but was especially fond of polkas" (Gussow 65). This need not detract from the reputation of the blues performers- they were survivors who possessed the skill necessary to adapt to the audience. This speaks to a certain blues ethos of doing whatever is necessary to make a living. The myth of the solo male blues singer as a tortured soul expressing his pain with a weary voice and a battered guitar is just that: a myth. It is a fiction designed to sell not only music, but a region. If the Delta can be seen as the wellspring of genuine music then tourists will come from around the world to look for "it." That mythical combination of place and poverty and memory makes the music special. Nuance does not sell. Robert Johnson is billed not as a great musician who played polka and also blues but as "Robert Johnson: King of The Delta Blues." [12]

Even within the modern blues repertoire, there seems to be a great deal of tension. Sociologist David Grazian recounts how upon becoming a regular of Chicago blues clubs, he realizes that, "the bluesy melodies I loved to hear at the club were not improvised by musicians swept away by the tragedy of everyday life, but were part of a calculated list of commonly performed standards, including 'Sweet Home Chicago' and, perhaps even more fitting, B.B. King's 'The Thrill is Gone'" (Grazian 12). The audience of a live blues show expects to hear these standards, and the musicians, in a calculated

[12] The first LP anthology of Robert Johnson's songs was titled, "King of The Delta Blues Singers" released 1961 on Columbia Records.

move to please their audience, include them in their setlists. The typical blues listener may not even realize how varied blues styles can be; to them, blues in capital letters is B.B King and Muddy Waters and the hits that they have heard over the radio countless times. The audience perception of what blues is drives the music. If the band can deliver "the blues" they will make their money, just as when the old Delta blues players had to deliver the popular hits to make their tips. It is an interesting moment of shared blues experience where old and new players both had to alter their musical repertoire in order to make their money. Bruce Iglauer relates a story that when Hound Dog Taylor opened up for B.B. King, he "didn't play as much slide as usual and didn't boogie like he normally did. He must have been thinking, 'I'm playing for B.B. King fans, so I should sound like B.B. King.' It's hard to imagine any blues musician less likely to sound like B.B. King than Hound Dog Taylor. It wasn't his best show" (Iglauer 59). It would have been more interesting to hear Taylor's recollections of this event but given that we have Iglauer's to work with, we will use it. Taylor compromised the quality of his music by trying to suit what he expected the audience would enjoy. This is evidence that Taylor took time to predict what style the listeners were most pleased with and even though that was contrary to his typical style, he tried to provide it. Grazian relates one telling moment where a patron requests "When my Heart Beats Like A Hammer," a relatively obscure song by B.B. King. The band does not know the song and the patron says, "'Oh, come on, what kind of bluesman are you?!' Later in the evening he continues, 'I can't believe they don't know B.B. King here!...Who is like *the* bluesman" (Grazian 5). This particular audience member is quite vocally calling out a blues band for not being the "human jukeboxes" previously discussed. The request is an evocation of blues

legacy and tradition–a facet of the music that is inescapable, that is intrinsically tied into the genre.

Many current blues players, are quick to point out their links to the past blues players who have taught them. “Odell Harris is one of my favorite partners who I don’t get to see too often,” Steve “Lightnin’” Malcolm, a white musician who often plays in Clarksdale, recalls, “he just had a little shack out there [In Nesbit, MS]” (Stolle *Mississippi Juke Joint Confidential* 118). “I finally moved to Mississippi for good…that’s when I met R.L. Boyce of Como, “Sean “Bad” Apple recollects. “I played with him and Martin “Big Boy” Grant and others throughout the North Mississippi Hill Country” (Stolle *Mississippi Juke Joint Confidential* 51). Both Apple and Malcom are white musicians who moved to Mississippi to play the blues and soak up the culture. Both came to Mississippi as young men, during the time when blues had reached a peak in popularity. They played with the “real deal” artists and often refer back to their time as students of the old masters. This lived experience is an instant way to build credibility in the eyes of the audience. Their blues are made more bluesy for having been influenced by so-called real blues players, typically older African American men. Current day musicians can at least play the songs of the greats to satiate their audience’s desire to be sold an “authentic blues experience.” Authenticity in the blues world is so difficult to dissect because it is such a personal definition. The authentic seems largely based on cliches and expectations. Grazian says that all definitions of authenticity are, “based on a mix of prevailing myths and prejudices invented in the absence of actual experience...while the search for authenticity may be rooted in our desire to experience a place in all its complexities, in truth, people tend to seek out a very small set of popularized images"

(Grazian 12-13). If an audience member only knows about blues through B.B. King, they will not know what to do when confronted with John Lee Hooker. The same goes for more contemporary blues songs. There is a blues archetype and it seems that the typical blues performer understands that they need to fit that in order to please the average blues listener. This archetype is different depending on where the performer plays. Rural bluesmen are typically portrayed as itinerant musicians who always have "rambling on their mind." They travel the rails and play on street corners, they survive by virtue of their talent and willpower. Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and the other Chicago blues royalty helped define the image of the urban bluesman; they were powerful figures who took blues from the cotton fields and brought it to the cities. They are self made men and women who became stars and idols to their listeners. Both the urban and rural archetypes engage in the idea of the "self-made man." This may be why the figure is so attractive to people. Cowboys occupy a similar position in cultural memory, though, just like blues musicians, the historical truths about them are less palatable than the romanticized image.

The recording studio is itself a sort of audience where the success of a song is not certain until the sales figures are tallied. When blues were being recorded in the 1920's the record companies, "designated virtually all their secular recordings by African Americans as 'blues,' in order to more efficiently market their black artists...even though many of those recordings were not stylistically different from their white 'hillbilly' counterparts" (Grazian 14). While this framing of the music was not the conscious choice of the blues artists, it is still evidence of a concerted effort to sell and market to African American listeners. It relies on the notion that music is unable to cross racial

lines, a notion that was thoroughly undermined by the crossover dynamics at work in the fifties and sixties, when rhythm & blues became rock'n'roll and blues–first folk, then electric–gained a substantial white audience. The record producers are another audience that must be pleased by the blues singer in order for their music to reach a wider audience. In August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), Levee is an up and coming trumpet player and aspiring recording star who tells a record producer, "you got to understand about that music. That music is what the people is looking for. They're tired of jug-band music" (Wilson 107). Though this is a work of fiction, it speaks to the power a record producer has. Levee's music could be the next musical trend but it will not go anywhere if the white producers are not willing to take a risk on recording it. Thus, many musicians played it safe and produced works that fit well into the established musical territory. They were happier taking the guaranteed income of a status quo song over the risk of the record not being accepted. This leads to the "foundational error...that we can accurately assess what blues performers like Honeyboy Edwards, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters played live by looking at their repertoire" (Gussow 64). These blues greats recorded what they thought would be accepted by the record companies. They were also unable to record much more than a three minute song due to the limitations of 1930's technology. Wald reports that, "Delta veterans like Son House or Charlie Patton were quite capable of writing complete songs, but normally did not bother. At a dance they could play a single blues guitar arrangement for twenty minutes or more" (Wald 132). Technology was unable to preserve the typical performance of the Delta blues greats so, in the studio, they had to cut down their songs significantly to fit the constraints of the medium. A three minute

version of a twenty minute song will obviously serve a different purpose. In the juke joint the twenty minute song gave audience members time to dance and drink and revel in the atmosphere created by the song and the environment. The three minute song would be aimed at someone who is seeking a different listening experience. This is why, Ward postulates, "even the most mediocre of the studio regulars working out of St. Louis and Chicago tended to compose cohesive pieces around a single theme" (Ward 132). The recorded blues were aimed at a different social stratum and thus had to be more polished to reflect the sophistication an urban audience demanded. The recorded songs were designed to be listened to and digested much more than the rambling twenty minute songs composed of "floating lyrics" or improvised blues couplets. It is a different way of enjoying the music and a different audience that is being targeted. An unintentional audience reached were white college students, some of whom went out to search for folk blues artists like Skip James, Son House, or Bukka White.

From the fifties onward, some blues musicians sought to find ways to target the new audience of young whites who were discovering the blues for themselves. One of the earliest was Big Bill Broonzy, who was "presented to white audiences as an Arkansas sharecropper...it is worth pausing a moment to consider how appropriate this setting was for a man who had already been a stalwart of the Chicago club scene for over a dozen years" (Wald 214)[13]. This is an example of a blues artist adapting both their stage persona and also the music they chose to record. The persona will be discussed in following paragraphs; here the thing to look at is the shift in musical style.

[13] Broonzy focused on white audiences in England and Europe, paving the way for future artists like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

Broonzy recognized that the young British audience wanted to hear more folk oriented blues and he adapted, taking up an acoustic guitar and playing the songs he grew up hearing rather than the polished Chicago numbers he was so accustomed to putting out. He released albums like *Big Bill Sings The Country Blues* (1957) targeting the white audience. Broonzy saw the audience desire for "old" sounds and then he changed his entire musical style to fit that niche. It is a calculated move and one that other blues singers tried to replicate. In 1964 Muddy Waters released *Muddy Waters Folk Singer*—an album of acoustic blues that was intended for white folk-listening audiences. Even "folk singer" is in the name. It is an attempt to capitalize on a burgeoning audience and one that did earn Waters significant praise, though the album never charted[14]. Waters continued his pursuit of white audiences by releasing *Electric Mud* in 1968. It was an album featuring Muddy Waters alongside white studio musicians and it made use of, "over the top electronic effects...the album is full of screeching instruments and pulsating organs" (Gordon 206). When asked what he was trying to do with that album, Waters replied, "really I was shooting for the hippies with that one" (Gordon 206). It was an attempt to cross Chicago blues with psychedelic rock and it did make it onto the *Billboard* and *Cash Box* charts. Thus, the attempt seems to have been successful[15]. The young, mostly white, rock audience was able to be reached by blues musicians who adapted their sound. However, Waters was unwilling to play the *Electric Mud* songs live and his club audiences remained primarily blues fans

[14] Bowden, Marshall, et al. "Muddy Waters: The Real Folk Blues/More Real Folk Blues, PopMatters." *PopMatters*, 12 Aug. 2002, https://www.popmatters.com/watersmuddy-realfolk-2496108222.html.

[15] The record was panned by critics who saw the album as a departure from the "real blues."

as a result. Later in his life, Waters disavowed the albums, “That *Electric Mud* record I did, that one was dogshit. But when it first came out, it started selling like wild, and then they started sending them back. They said, ‘This can’t be Muddy Waters with this shit going on–all this wow-wow and fuzztone” (Gordon 207). His response to criticism of the album raises a few points. He did not and does not like the album, but he took special notice when the fans began saying it did not sound like him. The people that bought his records wanted to hear his sound and he risked alienating his audience if he kept trying to seek out the rock record buyers. He seems to have recognized this and gone back to recording songs more typical of his style. *Electric Mud* can be seen as an exploratory record by a blues singer trying to expand beyond his typical blues audience. The record went too far by some people’s standards and Waters pulled back on the reins in order to appease the audience he currently had. Waters’s attention to audience is long established; in a 1942 interview the as-yet undiscovered Waters told Fisk University scholars, “He copied the styles of the guitarists to whom he listened to constantly on phonograph records…Many of the features of his playing were learned from [Robert] Johnson’s records…He explains that it is necessary to use two different repertoires to accommodate the demands of white and Negro dancers” (Work III, et al 118-119). Long before Waters achieved commercial success, he was listening to and emulating the recorded works of others. He learned to borrow what worked from others and began crafting his own songs in the image of successful records. He also realized that the white listeners to his music wanted a different repertoire and he adapted to meet their expectations. Both Waters and Broonzy clearly paid attention to what their changing audiences wanted to hear. Rather than staying static in their musical idiom,

they branched out to acoustic albums as a way of targeting folk audiences, and to electronic music filled with distortion as a way of targeting the rock and psychedelic rock audience. When given the opportunity to play to new audiences, the blues ethos mandates that attempts be made to reach them.

There is a complicated relationship between a performer's onstage persona and the audience's perception of not only the music but the so-called authenticity of the blues. As Grazian says, "all definitions of authenticity…[are] based on a mix of prevailing myths and prejudices invented in the absence of personal experience" and for a modern blues audience they expect a performer to be, "generally uneducated American black men afflicted by blindness or else they walk on a wooden leg or with a secondhand crutch...they are defiantly poor" (Grazian 12-13). The audience then expects a performer who, either through visual cues or behavioral ones, can demonstrate that they have gone through hardship. The stereotypical blues performer, at least to these audiences, will recount their sufferings musically and in doing so produce a "genuine blues." The fact is though, that few of the "real" blues performers of the past made such a spectacle of their hardships or even their rural roots. The Chicago blues musicians recorded songs like "I Got My Mojo Working" or "Hoochie Coochie Man" that proclaimed the singer's wealth and sexual prowess. These were the rock stars of the day- they drove Cadillacs and drank champagne. They might sing about their troubles, but at the end of the day the message that they put out is that they will be alright. They have come up from the Delta and beyond and become stars. In the older, Delta blues tradition, this sort of larger than life persona was still intentionally developed. David "Honeyboy" Edwards recounts how, "I was young and good-looking,

had a mouthful of gold. I had all gold teeth put up in the front; I did that for attention and style" (Edwards 122). This approach differs quite wildly from what a modern audience would expect. Edwards emphasizes his wealth and draws attention to who he is. He is not glum or worn down, he is flashing a million dollar smile at the audience and is ready to have a good time. Leadbelly, one of the renowned early blues stars, "suggested that he could be anything producers or bookers wanted him to be- smiling vaudevillian or hapless rube- provided they were willing to pay…[he] stood apart from his stage persona- and his years of incarceration- in his private communications" (McGinley 87). McGinley uses this quote and others to illustrate how "authenticity" was never really authentic. The blues singers are actors, in part, who try to figure out what the audience would respond best to. Big Bill Broonzy portrayed himself as a sharecropper who played acoustic blues so that white folk audiences would buy his music. This worked. The Chicago blues stars put on larger than life personas that caused the audience to envy them, to listen to their music to try and figure out how to achieve that level of wealth and success. The Delta blues musicians, long seen as suffering artists hounded by their demons, actually dressed in flashy ways to appear slick and sophisticated. It is all a theatrical performance intended to get the most out of the audience. Motley recalls watching, "the wildly talented Lucious Spiller play an un-spirited set for a room full of tourists at Red's… on that night each song had a gratuitous guitar solo where Lucious walked around the room and predictably played his guitar in tourists' faces—presumably to make them feel special and improve their photographs of the event (and thus Lucious's tips)" (Motley 93). Spiller's extended guitar breaks targeted the aesthetic preconceptions of the audience. If a tourist could get a close up photo of a "real-deal"

bluesman playing a guitar solo, they will have tangible proof of their bluesy journey. Spiller sacrificed the integrity of his songs in order to provide a more satisfying experience for his audience.

One method many blues musicians use to connect with their audience is humor and physicality. Hound Dog Taylor, who no one could accuse of not being a "real" bluesman, "loved being the center of attention, and consciously projected a persona that said, 'Don't take me seriously,' He knew he looked funny; he knew he talked funny; he knew that if he smiled that big smile, people would smile back; and he knew that if they had a good time, people would buy drinks for him" (Iglauer 43). Taylor does not emphasize the struggles that he has faced or the hardships he has endured. It is his task to bring a good time, through both his music and his personal antics to the audience. His jovial energy is calculated to bring up the mood of the crowd. Just as he feeds off the audience's expectations, the audience feeds off of his energy. If he is on stage projecting jovial energy, the audience will return it in kind. It is a non-audible call and response interaction. Taylor was acting, consciously trying to control the audience. McGinley connects early vaudeville performances to the blues through their theatricality–I would argue that the humorous elements are clearly there too. Howlin Wolf, "in contrast to the ferocity of his sound...is funny. Broadly, ridiculously funny. He pops his eyes and lasciviously licks his harmonicas and his guitar neck...he mimes the comic fear of the adulterer caught in the act" (Wald 214). These blues stars are entertainers almost as much as they are musicians. As a former player in the Delta, Wolf would have had to keep his audience entertained and part of that goes beyond music. He provides an intense musical presence and then lightens the mood through

humor and acting. A modern audience would not and does not expect this from their blues performers, but the tradition is there, as is the practice. In the opening pages of his book, David Grazian recounts a night where a performer, “starts to move: shaking his hip, executing a decades old moonwalk across the stage, and following it up with another 1980s breakdance maneuver...between lines he lets out a wail in his best James Brown imitation that just shakes the room, and the eyes of his energized audience follow his awkwardly large body” (Grazian XVII). While this was written in 2003, such stage practices are doubtless being performed today. This performer, Tommy McCrackin, has enraptured the crowd through his on-stage antics. It is a spectacle in so many ways, as McCrackin intends it to be. The rewards of putting on such a show are myriad: it is good marketing as people will talk about the amazing show they saw put on, it ensures the audience is having a good time regardless whether they are even blues fans, and it allows McCrackin to put a unique spin on songs that he is covering for the benefit of his audience. It is not a celebration of suffering or hard times. It is a vaudeville styled mixture of comedy, dancing, and music. While it may seem that this flies in the face of audience expectations, it satisfies the baseline desire to see a show and goes beyond that by providing unexpected humor and spectacle. I would venture to guess the vast majority of the audience loved what they saw, even if it differed from their definition of “authentic blues.”

In Clarksdale, all these factors and more contribute to a complicated audience-performer relationship. “My first 1990’s visit to Po Monkey’s [A juke joint in neighboring Cleveland Mississippi] featured a local African American audience, soul blues deejay,” remembers Roger Stolle, a major promoter of Clarksdale blues, “…by the time I booked

Big George Brock there in 2005, there were as many tourists in the audience as locals" (Stolle 76). This obviously speaks to the shifting audience for blues, and especially rural blues. As Po Monkey's and other local blues clubs became tourist attractions, they underwent numerous changes to make the new audience comfortable. Instead of featuring "soul-blues deejay[s] and adult movies" the club moved to show sitcoms (Stolle 76). This is a fairly dramatic shift from smut to nostalgic reruns, from soul blues records to live bands. A local audience is willing to go out to a club with a jukebox because the club is more than a music venue, it is a bar, a restaurant, a meeting hall, and most importantly–a community space. When Brian Foster interviewed African American locals in Clarksdale they spoke to, "poor treatment, nasty talking, just rude you know," when they ventured out to the restaurants and clubs downtown (Foster 78). "All them white folk," another local African American woman stated, "They be looking all upside yo' head" (Foster 82). Foster concludes that, "[African American locals] felt like a spectacle, and…Black residents of Clarksdale saw the town's blues places as white spaces…this meant that the clubs and performance venues were, in one configuration or another, owned, patronized by, and intended to cater to white people" (Foster 82). This means that some clubs and bars that used to be black community gathering spaces have been taken over by the white blues audience. New clubs have also opened up that do not have a history. They are clubs owned by whites for whites and African American patrons do not feel comfortable in these spaces. It is only natural for this to breed resentment and ill will from the local community that has been excluded from their historical spaces and the spaces that commodify their culture. The local juke joints exchanged their black audiences for white tourists–their authenticity for

marketability. Stolle, a former marketing executive, states, “Juke joint–two words often used, often abused. They contain an inherent promise of something real, something edgy, something from another time. Many music venues of suspect authenticity coin this phrase at one time or another, sometimes on a sign out front, other times in advertising” (Stolle *Hidden History of Mississippi Blues* 63). Stolle rebukes the “inauthentic” music venues that misuse the juke joint name. He refers to clubs as juke joints only if they are intimate and have African American owners. Red’s, one of the few black-owned clubs in town, is the only Clarksdale venue to receive the juke joint designation. Red’s club is the essential “real-deal” blues venue according to Stolle, though he warns, “that less savvy hypothetical couple[s] will drive up to the front of Red’s–which to be fair, barely resembles the front of anything–look at each other and put a foot on the gas” (Stolle *Mississippi Juke Joint Confidential* 94). This anecdote reveals that the most authentic club in Clarksdale is that which is least compromising to tourist sensibilities. It is frightening to tourists, a risky proposition for visitors, though it offers the “real-deal” experience. This is a shrewd marketing technique because it appeals to those who do have what it takes to visit Red’s. They are figured as intrepid adventurers who have what it takes to look the “real-deal” in the face. It is an implicit challenge to be brave enough, to step up to the plate.

Stolle may hesitate to call other venues jukes, but he shows no qualms naming the Juke Joint Festival, an event he puts on each year in April. His website states, “Juke Joint Festival is ‘half blues festival, half small-town fair and all about the Delta.’ It celebrates our past and living history by presenting dozens of blues acts — including many Mississippi and Southern greats. This is the real-deal Mississippi blues festival

that you've heard about in global media like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and PBS NewsHour" (Stolle *Juke Joint Festival*). The festival may feature "real-deal" acts but it also delves into carnival with funnel cakes and crawfish boils and pig races. Blues acts have to compete for attention with monkeys riding on the backs of dogs, which is hardly the pinnacle of authenticity. While the festival may be celebrating the idea of juke joint and blues culture, it goes beyond that to meet mass market tourist expectations. "In 2017, visitors from twenty-eight countries and forty-three states attended the Juke Joint Festival" reports Clay Motley (Motley 91). The blues festival audience, in this case, would appear to be made up of a wide variety of people. These blues tourists do possess the means by which to travel to Clarksdale, which speaks to their financial stability. Thus, it would follow that these blues pilgrims are among the middle class. McGinley goes further to say that, "some generalizations about blues tourists are possible…the tourists are, for the most part, 'baby boomers, well educated, middle- to upper middle class whites'...most are men…almost all blues tourists are white…International visitors, many of them from the United Kingdom and other parts of Western Europe, make up a significant portion of the blues tourists; The Shack Up Inn, one of the most popular lodging option in Clarksdale, reported that one-quarter of its visitors in 2009 were from outside the United States" (McGinley *Staging the Blues* 184). The Shack Up Inn's estimates likely hold true for the rest of Clarksdale as well. International tourists are commonly seen in town, entranced by documentaries and the promise of seeing the "Home of the Blues." Stolle supports this observation, stating in a recent interview that, "We have certainly an international crowd, which for Cat Head [Stolle's record and art shop] pre-pandemic, I would say in a calendar year, that could

be 30% of my business. Same time period pre-pandemic for the Shack Up Inn would be 50% of their business from overseas, mainly Europe" (Stolle). My anecdotal observations certainly bear this out. You are far more likely to encounter someone visiting from Japan or Europe than you are to meet black locals. African American tourists are rare. The Shack Up Inn reportedly was open for three years before it had its first African American guest (King *Race and Blues Tourism* 32). It seems the blues tourism world is more receptive to international tourists than it is to local African Americans.

The goal of this paper was to examine the role of the blues audience in the repertoire, recordings, and personas of blues musicians. As expected, this is a complicated topic to broach, especially given the demographic changes that resulted in a major shift in blues audience. What is immediately clear is that blues performers, on average, pay very close attention to their audiences. It is in the performer's best interest to provide a show that appeals the greatest number of people. The Delta blues players attempted to meet audience expectations by having repertoires that included not only blues songs, but also country, polka, and old-time numbers. Modern players attempt to appease their audience by playing blues standards by B.B. King and Muddy Waters, as this is typically what their audience understands as "classic blues." The restrictive "traditional" repertoire does pose issues for those trying to play original songs or those trying to put their own spin on the old blues standards. It is clear, just by the structure of recorded songs, that the live performance and the recorded performance are intended for different audiences. At the advent of recording technology, during the "race records" boom of the 1920s, a given recorded performance could not be longer

than three minutes, which meant a twenty minute song would have to be significantly altered. This led to more polished songs that asked the listener to consider the lyrics of the song as a narrative of sorts, in contrast to rambling live performances comprised of floating blues verses. These polished songs were aimed at urban listeners with the disposable income necessary to afford a phonograph and the associated records. It is no wonder that so many of the blues records were produced during the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to the more urban Northern states. Another big shift took place during the folk music boom of the late 1950s, when African-American audiences were supplanted and ultimately displaced by young white audiences. Performers tried to predict what this new white audience wanted, from stripped down acoustic albums all the way to psychedelic rock albums. The blues musicians were distinctly aware of their changing audiences and tried their best to accommodate them. The final part of this investigation centered around the stage personas of the musicians and how this interacted with audience ideas of authenticity. The general conclusion to be drawn is that all stage personas are to some degree artificial. They are staged by the performer to best meet the expectations of their audiences. Big Bill Broonzy chose to be identified as a sharecropper who played acoustic music to suit folk audiences. Others like Honeyboy Edwards and the Chicago blues players decided to flaunt their wealth and skills to invoke envy in their listeners. In that regard they aspired to the condition of role models. These personas include an element of showmanship and humor that is unexpected by modern audiences. There is significant historical evidence to support this fact as well as contemporary performances that rely on the same methods.

In Clarksdale the audience for blues is primarily white tourists who have the means to cross state and even international borders in search of “authentic” blues experience. Marketing for this tourist group excludes—or at least ignores–the African American locals that were the historical audience for blues music. Former community spaces are converted to tourist-oriented businesses where locals are made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Slick marketing is used to draw in tourists who have a sense of adventure, to make them feel part of a tradition that is said to be dying out. Cultural heritage is thus commodified into tourist experiences that bring money to hotels, restaurants, and music venues.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Clarksdale, Mississippi's blues scene, much like the blues itself, is a product of its environment. Racial, economic, and spiritual tensions shape the way businesses operate, the way that promoters market the town, and the way that the town's musicians choose to play to their audiences.

Business owners must operate in a town where the very layout is the result of Jim Crow laws that once excluded African American business owners from the downtown area, the heart of the contemporary blues scene. The net effect of this is that few Black owned businesses operate in this area, and Black Clarksdalians often feel excluded from this space. Downtown Clarksdale is an enclave specifically molded by developers to attract middle class tourists. Outside of this bubble, the "real" Clarksdale benefits very little from the money brought into the town by tourists. Business owners are often transplants from other places who open businesses because of their love for the blues genre. They have the capital necessary to open businesses and, more than likely, they were once blues tourists so they know what people want to see. Though these entrepreneurs typically love the community and its culture, they unintentionally fall into and perpetuate the systematic ways that Black Clarksdalians are excluded from the economy and especially the blues economy.

The town's promoters are faced with the difficult task of marketing a music so connected to pain and racial persecution. Roger Stolle, one of the main advertisers for the town, has made it his mission to spread the word about Clarksdale blues. His books, documentaries, and radio appearances are responsible for bringing many of the town's visitors. His characteristic phrases like, "real-deal" and "deep blues" tell tourists that they are going to see "authentic" blues acts without directly defining what this means. These phrases, and indeed others used by tourism forces, also function as euphemisms that distance the (typically white) tourist from the pain and injustices the region was historically known for. The Delta Blues Museum, while ostensibly focused on accurately telling the story of Delta blues, is guilty of romanticizing the legendary Faustian bargain made by Robert Johnson. The Crossroads marker, at the intersection of highways 49 and 61, is implied to be the mythical crossroads where the supernatural deal took place. This draws tourists to the area while simultaneously presenting Robert Johnson as a figure harried by supernatural demons, instead of the Jim Crow laws that had a much more tangible impact on his life. Thus, well meaning promoters often sacrifice historical accuracy for the sake of telling good stories that do not make tourists uncomfortable.

The blues audience is a fascinating population that has gone relatively unstudied despite the complex ways that they drive musical change. The modern blues audience is white and, for the most part, middle class. The folk revival of the 60's as well as Stevie Ray Vaughan's crossover appeal to rock listeners in the 80's is responsible for winning over many Clarksdale's blues tourists. Blues musicians have a long legacy of trying to adapt to what their audience wanted to hear. Muddy Waters, a seminal figure

in blues if ever there was one, was adapting his repertoire in the 1940's. In Chicago, he continued to chase trends by releasing acoustic and even psychedelic records. Performers are incentivized to please their audience in the hope that this will lead to tips and future bookings. As such, many contemporary Clarksdale musicians sacrifice the integrity of their music by including unnecessary solos and by playing songs that are not a part of the blues idiom. Ironically this is behavior traditionally displayed by historical artists as well, though modern day blues purists may bemoan the lack of "authenticity."

There is certainly room for further research into Clarksdale's blues scene. A comprehensive look at the audience, especially with regards to demographics, could yield some fascinating conclusions. Quantitative data about the town's tourism is very scarce–neither the Delta Blues Museum nor the town's director of tourism could furnish many details about how many tourists come or how much money they bring to the local economy. It is odd that the self professed "Home of the Blues," fails to measure what blues tourism means for the economy, especially in a town with few other industries. The role of the pandemic would also be worthwhile to examine. "Live from Clarksdale" was a program started by Colleen Buyers to stream live and local Clarksdale blues across the world. Its impact on the economy, and whether it brought new tourists to Clarksdale, would be very interesting to chart.

When Alan Lomax came to the Mississippi Delta in the 40's and 50's, it was with the aim of preserving a music, a culture, that was thought to be going extinct. People have been claiming the blues are dying off since pretty much the dawn of the genre. Despite these claims, blues has gone on. It is little wonder that the music designed to help people survive hard times has persisted. The audience may have changed, as

have the performers and the songs that they play but there are still blues. It will not die off, it will merely change. I do not know the future of Clarksdale's blues scene or how it will adapt to meet a rapidly changing world but I do not expect it to go anywhere.

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VITA

David Larson was born in 1997 in Encinitas, California. He grew up in the town of Temecula, California and attended the University of California Berkeley where he received a Bachelor's degree in English. While in Berkeley he began studying the blues tradition, a path that led him to the University of Mississippi's Southern Studies program. During his time in Mississippi, he began playing harmonica with a blues group based in Clarksdale. He lives in Gualala, California.