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A Beautiful and Haunted Tune

"Welcome to Mississippi, Birthplace of America's Music." So say the highway signs. Indeed, what Mississippi has to sell is a legitimate claim to being the incubator of the country's most enduring indigenous music: the blues. And while it sometimes seems like the blues is thoroughly out of the American mainstream, relegated to festivals your weird uncle goes to, the fact is the blues undergirds virtually every facet of American music; no blues: no rock and roll, no jazz, no hip-hop.

Its echoes are everywhere, even commercially. There's a perfect irony in the fact that ads for Cialis and Viagra invariably contain blues riffs (John Lee Hooker's "Dimples," Muddy Waters's "I'm Ready"): hawking a man's inability to get it up without drugs paired with music rife with boasting about sexual performance. The original bluesmen boasted about sexual dexterity while living in a world that emasculated them. The black man existed to perform manual labor and his very survival depended upon an acceptance of his own subordination. Not surprising then that on the porch front or in the juke joint, far from white overseeing eyes, he proclaimed his prowess (again, no blues, no hip-hop). So to celebrate and cash in, the state of Mississippi has created the Blues Trail to attract a steady stream of tourists. Makes sense: Mississippi in the national consciousness often conjures darker, more tortured associations.

I fit the demographic of the typical blues tourist (I'm the weird uncle): male, 43, white. I've come to Mississippi to chase ghosts, a sucker for the sounds of this place. I've come to find the real Delta blues.

You can gain the Delta by transiting through Jackson, in the south, and head toward Yazoo City (surely deserving of inclusion on a list of greatest American city names). The schizophrenia begins immediately, at Jackson Medgar Wiley Evers Airport. Andrew Jackson was a president, so naming one's state capital and accompanying airport after him isn't terribly unreasonable; three other states have capitals named after presidents, and so, of course, does the United States of America. But Jackson's legacy is a decidedly mixed one—plenty to laud and yet, when looked at through the telescope of the 21st century, the fact that he made his wealth on the backs of slaves (he owned hundreds of them) and signed and vociferously supported the Indian Removal Act of 1830, it's enough to make one a tad queasy. But in 2005, Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist from Mississippi, had his name added to the airport, providing for a somewhat tense and odd coupling.

I instead enter the Delta from the north, transiting through Memphis. It's worth visiting Stax and Sun studios, but the obligatory stroll down Beale Street mostly means dodging the touts and tacky souvenir shops. It's no easy task imagining the bygone golden age of Memphis blues. Better to get Hwy. 61 south into the Delta and zoom past the derelict checkerboards of Dollar Generals and storefront churches. For the blues aficionado, the recognizable names come quickly: Lake Cormorant, where in 1941 the inimitable Son House recorded for the Library of Congress and was paid a Coke for his efforts; Robinsonville, where the legendary Robert Johnson spent much of his childhood. But the road you take there is called Casino Strip Resort Boulevard, which tells you everything.

And therein lies the rub: what blues tourists like me are after is authenticity. We wish to see things as they were. If our heroes date from the 1920s/30s, a dilapidated shotgun shack,

mantled with kudzu and with crumbling porch and ancient black man, outhouse and no electricity, is thrilling to see. Ensconced racism, cotton fields, and good old grinding Delta poverty: these are the essential ingredients that created the blues. So the shiny new Tunica casinos is an abomination.

But Tunica County, once the poorest county in the U. S., (Jesse Jackson dubbed it, “America’s Ethiopia”) has seen enormous growth in jobs and services because of gaming. For the blues tourist, it’s awful. But if you live here? Who wants to look backward to harder times, represented by the blues, when you must navigate the present and plan for the future? Mechanization has driven away farm jobs, so welcome gaming.

But the blues tourists instead head to spaces uncontaminated by development. My destination is Clarksdale, hometown of John Lee Hooker, Sam Cooke, Ike Turner, Willie Brown, and Junior Parker to name just some (Muddy Waters was born just outside town), and today the epicenter of blues tourism, home to juke joints, Morgan Freeman’s Ground Zero Blues Club, and the Delta Blues Museum. Between Tunica and Clarksdale, there are collapsing shacks, collapsing towns, derelict gins, and food deserts, the kind of Delta decomposition one looks for. It could be 1930, or 1975, or 1890. You can almost *feel* the blues.

Outside of festival season, when Clarksdale is packed, it can feel deserted, no matter the day or time. There’s a smattering of tourists, often Europeans and Australians, but otherwise Clarksdale takes on its traditional guise as sleepy southern town. Like a lot of tourist destinations, it attracts well-heeled outsiders in search of something they can’t get at home while the locals get on with the business of life. But because this is the Delta, a poor place in the country’s poorest state, the divide between us and them can be vast. There’s a second side of Clarksdale—very poor, very black—out where MLK intersects the state streets (Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana). Here I stroll at dusk, fighting insecurities. I don’t belong here, but I’m drawn to the evidence of hard times: crumbling facades, untended lawns, broken down cars. In short, the blues—real blues, without the music. But also, real people, and real friendly—smiling, offering seats, beer, a pull off a joint.

I linger awhile, taking in the hospitality and almost succumbing to a kind of lethargy that threatens to hold me in place eternally. But alas, I have to get going. I’m headed to Red’s juke joint, on a rusticated parcel near train tracks and a cemetery. Red tends bar in his shades, scowling and overseeing his tumbledown dive. Red doesn’t move much, but that’s because Red doesn’t need to move for anyone. He’ll give you an earful over the slightest infraction. If you’re, say, a twenty-something Norwegian, you take to the corner and cower. If you’re a local, you give it right back; when the music gets going, and folks dance and sing, Red’s feels like the center of the universe. (You only hope and pray that the state inspections folks don’t arrive until after the sets are over; the fact that the place feels like one solid breeze will take it to the ground only adds to the charm).

My first night at Red’s, I watch Robert “Bilbo” Walker deliver a three hour set. Bilbo takes breaks, which isn’t unreasonable as he’s just shy of 80. (Two nights later, I see a scorching set by Bill “Howl-N-Madd” Perry, who good-naturedly castigates the crowd, including the immovable Miss Mae, who gives it right back, while Bilbo sits in the corner glowering).

Red’s wasn’t my first planned stop. I’d intended to go to Po’Monkey’s, forty minutes from town, in the middle of nowhere. With apologies to Red’s, Po’Monkey’s has been called the last of its kind. In operation since 1963, it inhabited the shotgun shack of its owner, Willie Seaberry, a farmer who once a week worked the crowd while the music blared. “People don’t

realize this ain't my real job," Seaberry once said. "But they just want to say hello. I say hello back. Which ain't too hard, right?"

Po' Monkey's provided an authentic taste of the juke scene that birthed and nurtured country blues. It was a beacon, loud and bright in a landscape of darkness, flatness, emptiness. Written up in numerous publications, it was an obligatory stop on the blues trail. Unfortunately, I didn't make it to Po' Monkey's that evening; Seaberry died a week before I arrived.

But I pay my respects the next morning. Po' Monkey's stands quietly in the dawn light, already abuzz with heat. Stray empty bottles, rain-mottled cards of remembrance, sodden stuffed monkeys. Outhouse. Pickup truck, presumably Mr. Seaberry's. Otherwise, just tranquility. Sans that truck and it could be a hundred years ago.

When I leave, I go slowly. I don't want my tires to crunch too loudly. Silence seems appropriate; soon, the heat and sun and rain will do their work, one more building succumbing to an emptying ramshackle land.

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Dockery Farms, once a 10,000-acre cotton plantation, is a venerated site in Delta blues history, nicely preserved with self-guided tours and strategically placed speakers. It's today best known as the home of Charley Patton, "father of the delta blues." A century ago, Patton learned to play here. On Saturday nights, musicians set up in the "frolicking house" and tenants plunked down twenty-five cents to party all night.

Patton was married eight times, jailed just as often, scarred from a razor, and walked with a limp from a gunshot. He played guitar behind his back and with his teeth (no, Jimi Hendrix was not the first). In many of his recordings, you can hear his foot rattling the floorboards. But what gets people is the voice.

Patton spits gravel, as if he's inhaled the Delta dust and shouts it out in hopes of clearing not just his throat but also trying to rid himself of a place that relentlessly keeps him in check. In 1929's "High Water Everywhere," he does more than simply chronicle the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. He saw as the river washed over some 30,000 square miles of land and rose thirty feet, displacing thousands of African-American families. He must not have been immune to the biblical allusions: the washing up of snakes (serpents), followed by earthquakes, leading many to interpret God's retribution for sin (the blues was derided in black churches as "the devil's music"). It makes no difference that Patton recorded in obscure Midwestern towns such as Richmond, Indiana (for Gennett Records) and Grafton, Wisconsin (for Paramount). He *is* the Delta, so fully indicative of the place that as he tears through songs like "High Water Everywhere," it's exorcism as well as lament.

This was, is, no easy place.

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From Dockery's, it's a quick trip splitting cotton fields to the infamous Parchman Penitentiary, circa 1901. Dubious vagrancy laws requiring all blacks over the age of eighteen to prove employment fed a convict lease system in which a powerless black was levied a small fine for imaginary infractions. Unable to settle up, the accused saw his fine balloon, payable by a stint at Parchman. Once there, he could be leased into indentured servitude to a private planter who could treat the convict as he wished. Profit for the prison, second slavery for the black convict. The prospect of this no doubt hung over the black men of the Mississippi Delta, informing the way they thought, acted, sang.

Blues titans Son House, R.L. Burnside, and Bukka White did terms for murder here (White's "Parchman Farm Blues" is a classic); Sonny Boy Williamson did a stint for stealing a

mule. Recordings of field hollers, work songs, and women prisoners in the sewing rooms have been cited as the purest example of early blues.

A large arch emblazoned with “Mississippi State Penitentiary” today fronts the sprawling 18,000-acre complex. A female guard greets me at the gate: “Something I can help you with, baby?” she asks. The majority of the staff are female; the men, generally speaking, come as prisoners, not hires. I’d heard rumor there was a gift shop, selling inmate made products.

“Nope. But Angola . . . they got one there,” she tells me.

Angola Federal Prison. In Louisiana. 270 miles away.

“Any other way in?” I ask.

“No way you want. They’d eat you alive. This is the worst place in Miss’ssippi. And that’s sayin’ somethin.”

I head back to my car, trying to envision the musical history that took place here. This is another way the Delta helps—these fields: as they’ve been since the 1800s; that sun: beating down as it always has; this prison: repository of misery for more than a century. Even the prison staff, incredibly: almost entirely African-American now. During the convict lease era, African-American prisoners were given the role of trusty shooters, allowed—encouraged—to shoot down any fleeing prisoner (Parchman had no walls). The reward for successfully stopping a would-be escapee was freedom.

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Cherishing my own lack of servitude, my next stop is nearby Tutwiler, often cited as the place where the blues was first heard and named. It was here, at the Tutwiler train depot in 1903, where the composer W.C. Handy spotted “a lean, loose-jointed Negro [who] had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar . . . The effect was unforgettable . . . The singer repeated the line ‘Goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog’ three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.”

From Tutwiler, I add a diversion from my blues tour: Glendora, population 200, nearly 100% African-American, poverty rate 70%.

Once in Glendora, I pass a dozen men in front of what looks to be some kind of storefront, but what kind is difficult to say. The men say nothing, a change from the usual Mississippi hospitality. But I recognize it for what it is; it’s not hostility. Rather, it’s vacancy: midday, midweek, and they’re doing nothing. George Orwell, in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, wrote of the boringness of poverty, the grinding inescapabilty of it, the emasculation and degradation of being engaged in nothing: no job, no purpose. And they know why I’m here: I’ll visit the Emmett Till Museum and then return to wherever I’m from. Because there can be no question: I am *not* from here, and they are. Stuck, it seems.

Emmett Till was fourteen when he was beaten, shot, weighted with a 75-lb. fan, and tossed from a bridge for whistling at a white woman. He was so mutilated he was identifiable only by his ring.

The museum is housed in the cotton gin that supplied the fan. Johnny Thomas, mayor of Glendora, is the proprietor. Mr. Thomas is genial, but he seems tired. He was once voted County Supervisor, the first African-American elected to the position. But the governor refused to certify the results. That was 1985.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Where you from?”

“Baltimore.”

"Bultimo'. That place has problems, too."

He leaves me to browse the exhibits, an affecting presentation of the Till story, complete with plaster remake of Till's pulverized skull.

"The bridge where they threw him off . . .?" I ask.

Mr. Thomas points me in the direction of the Black Bayou Bridge. It's no longer carrying traffic, studded now with weeds and blocked on one end by trees. The insects are relentless. But I walk across anyway, taking in submerged cypress trunks in the brown and stagnant Little Tallahatchie. The steel gray sky contributes a heavy gloom.

The sadness of the place is pervasive: from the vacant stares of the town men, to the brutalizing of Till, to Mr. Thomas himself: kind and welcoming, but with the look of someone who's been fighting a hard battle for a very long time.

Suddenly, the clouds break. The sun becomes weaponized, stunning the mosquitos and dragonflies into torpor. But the cicadas continue their clamor. Underneath this dirge, I step to where the girders break, the one spot where it would be feasible to throw a weighty object into the river.

There's a weight to history, too, that strange moment of myth becoming fact, a reminder that Emmett Till was more than just a flashpoint, but, once, a human being. History is heavier in the Delta than most places.

I place my hands on the bridge. But it's too hot, the spot alive and on fire.

I leave. Because I can.

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I need some uplift. The music of John Hurt, one of my favorites, is light and bouncy. Hurt's deft and extraordinary picking style is instantly recognizable and feels light years from the rougher work of many of his contemporaries, such as Skip James, another of my favorites. There's a triad of James' songs—"Illinois Blues," "Hard Times Killing Floor Blues," and "Devil Got My Woman"—that for my money constitute perhaps the most arresting collection of tunes you'll find anywhere (surpassed, perhaps, only by the inimitable "Last Kind Words" by Geeshie Wiley, simply the most extraordinarily affecting tune anywhere; even my two young daughters, hardly blues fans, get transfixed by it, the whole car falling under a hush when we're driving together and I put it on). James was from Bentonia, in the southern Delta, about halfway between Jackson and Yazoo City. Because of his unique style, his music is often described as "eerie," "haunting," or "scary," played with open tuning and full of minor chords (and used to great effect in the Coen Brothers' paean to 1930s Mississippi, *O Brother Where Art Thou*?). Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, another Bentonia bluesman, described the Bentonia style this way: "Real lonesome, real haunting, real scary sounding when you do it like it's supposed to be done."

But Hurt is the opposite. Photographs of him invariably show a smiling, slight man with a serene face. Because he was rediscovered in the 1960s after initially recording in 1928, there's also film footage of him. It's impossible not to smile as you listen to or watch him.

Hurt was a farmer in Avalon, today little more than a few houses. Along a series of increasingly hilly unpaved roads is the Mississippi John Hurt Museum, about thirty miles from Glendora, through Money, where Till whistled at Carolyn Bryant and sealed his fate.

The museum, once Hurt's home, is a beige shotgun shack with a sloping porch threatening to topple over. If you chanced across it, you'd wonder how it's still standing. But that kind of disrepair makes the experience that much more memorable. Because of its remoteness, it's a destination undertaken only by diehard fans. But Hurt has legions of them, and his

granddaughter, Mary Frances Hurt, who runs the John Hurt Foundation, sees acolytes from all over the world.

"He really was that smiling man you see in the photographs," she tells me. "Daddy John never raised his voice. Not once. He spoke with his guitar. He was born in 19th century Mississippi—that kind of racism broke most people. But not Daddy John. Instead, he played. His music speaks to the heart."

I look at the house, the trees, the rusted battered pickup truck. Nearby is his gravesite.

"He was happy," Mrs. Hurt adds. "Somehow, he was happy."

Dedicated to preserving her grandfather's legacy, Mary Hurt takes pride in his musical accomplishments and in his humanity. But she wishes to take it further and create a center for urban youth, and she wants to build a shelter for battered women. But the elements that make the Hurt Museum such a destination for the blues traveler are proving major impediments: this is poor rural Mississippi, and funds and infrastructure, and hope, are hard to come by.

Back in Clarksdale, I get to talking to a guy from California who'd visited the museum.

"Damned window units. He didn't have air conditioning when he lived there."

"Maybe it's to preserve the items inside," I suggest.

"Ridiculous," he says. "Really detracts from the whole experience."

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I grab dinner at Abe's Barbecue ("Swine Dining" since 1924). It sits just off the intersection of highways 61 and 49, the crossroads of the most enduring story in blues lore. It's here where Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul for prowess on the guitar. The event is denoted by three metal sky blue guitars crisscrossing the highway signs, flanked by a Church's Chicken, a Sonic Drive Thru, and a "Beer and Bud Mart." But the unattractiveness doesn't dissuade the blues tourists, who carefully approach the busy intersection to snap their selfies. Considering that the story is certainly apocryphal, they'd do better to find a rural unpaved crossroads and imagine Mr. Johnson and the devil's midnight meeting there.

I stop in to the Cat Head, a "one-stop shop for everything Mississippi blues," run by Roger Stolle, a native Ohioan who quit a job in corporate America to move to Clarksdale and do whatever he could to keep the blues alive. There's no question he's helped; nowadays, in large measure due to Mr. Stolle's efforts, one can find live music just about seven nights a week somewhere in town. But it's not easy. For one, the blues isn't where most kids are and the older folks, well, they're getting older. When Red of Red's juke joint got a job a few years back laying carpet at the casinos in Tunica, he spied several of his patrons feeding their coins into slots. And there's only so many dollars to go around. As for Stolle and his store, "I had a financial cushion," he admits. "Without that, forget it. It's a struggle to keep afloat. It can be wearying."

"You ever think of heading back?"

"To Ohio?" He pauses. "The old highway signs used to say, 'Mississippi: Feels Like Coming Home.' It's true, and it gives me chills to think of it. I moved here for the music. But I live here for the people. And I'm not going anywhere."

I put a similar question to Mark and Cali Noland. Cali runs Griot Arts, a nonprofit providing after school arts programs and job training; all of the participants are African-American. The Nolands are white, in their mid-twenties, native born, and members of Clarksdale's First Presbyterian, which has an integrated congregation.

"Sometimes I think, *Screw the struggle. Clarksdale has so many problems*," Mark says. "But I have a heart for this place. I mean, you have to stay, right? Stay and fight for something."

This would be music to Johnny Thomas's ears, mayor of Glendora. "I'm 62," he says. "I've been on the marches. There's not much else we can do. Change has to come from the white community."

Indeed, while I've witnessed many respectful and genial interactions between whites and blacks, it's also true that in virtually every place I ate in Mississippi, I saw an entirely white clientele and an entirely black kitchen staff. Supremacy can be a hard thing to cede.

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I'm a blues obsessive. The tourism campaign has worked to scratch my itch—as has the lack of economic progress. But, like the blues, deep as the Delta topsoil, richest on the planet, I know I've hardly moved beyond the top layer. There are only more questions to answer. So I'll be back. But I leave it to Johnny Thomas, and the Nolands, and Mary Frances Hurt and Roger Stolle and everyone else in the Delta to find their own answers. I know they'll continue to try, and I know also that they're acutely aware that they live in perhaps the most maddening, magical, extraordinary place in the country: birthplace of America's music, a beautiful and haunted tune.