



CELEBRATE THE BLUES AT STARBUCKS! proclaimed the sign at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. I was catching a plane to Memphis, then driving south to Greenville, Mississippi, for the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, the second oldest of its kind in the country. I was going to explore the Delta, the wedge-shaped region in the north of the state between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. If I'd had a laptop with a wireless portal, I could have just stayed at the airport Starbucks, sipping a five-dollar cappuccino and singing along with Precious Bryant: "I'm broke and I ain't got a dime."

The blues, arguably the first truly American music, evolved from a Southern front-porch pastime into a global phenomenon. But for lovers of authentic blues, the Delta is still mecca. No one really knows when or where people started singing the blues, but it grew up in the Delta, where slaves sang work songs that were its ancestors. The Delta is still cotton country, with fields dotted with white bolls stretching over land enriched by repeated flooding.

Robert Johnson, the Devil, and Me

STANDING AT THE

CROSSROADS OF THE BLUES

BY ELIZABETH HOOVER

After the Civil War, sharecroppers kept singing their frustration, accompanying themselves on pianos, guitars, washboards, or whatever was at hand. In the early 1900s W. C. Handy, a black band-leader waiting for a train in the Delta town of Tutwiler, heard a man in rags slide a razor along the neck of a guitar, crooning he was "goin' where the Southern cross the Dog." Handy described it as "the weirdest music I ever heard."

After witnessing its popularity at dances, he realized it could also be incredibly lucrative. In 1912 he published "The Memphis Blues," the first song published with the word *blues* in the title, and the music spread. In the decades that followed, blues

Left: Jack Owens plays blues in Bentonia, Mississippi. **Right:** The Delta's great crop.

musicians jumped trains north, hoping to make it big, and white producers traveled south, looking for big acts.

Following their paths south from Memphis, you can stop at the still functional Abbay and Leatherman Plantation in Robinsonville, where the guitar legend Robert Johnson spent his early years getting laughed at by Son House, Charley Patton, and Willis Brown. Johnson married young and left the plantation; when he returned in the 1930s, he amazed Brown and House with his greatly improved skills. "When he finished, all our mouths were standing open," remembered House. "I said, 'Well ain't that fast! He's gone now!'"

From this transformation a legend was born: Johnson had sold his soul to the devil. He recorded only 29 songs, but his influence has been as long-lasting as it is far-flung. His meager stock of recordings was cherished by the likes of Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and the White Stripes. In "Me and the Devil Blues," Johnson sings,

HISTORY HAPPENED HERE



The bluesman barber Wade Walton serenades a customer at his Clarksdale shop in 1983; and a fragment of the massive Dockery holdings.



"Early this mornin', when you knocked upon my door / I said, Hello, Satan, I believe it's time to go." You can visit crossroads all over the Delta, each supposedly the spot where Johnson struck the deal.

These musicians left myth in lieu of written record; detective work is needed to distill the facts. Offering help along the way are places like the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, in a handsome restored 1918 freight depot near the empty Clarksdale station, where Muddy Waters caught the train to Chicago in 1943 and changed the musical landscape by plugging in his guitar. The museum has an amateurish quality about it, with typed signs glued on foam board to accompany a small collection that includes Fred McDowell's headstone and a guitar made by the band ZZ Top from a piece of cypress "salvaged" from Muddy Waters's cabin. The cabin itself is also on display, with an eerie wax sculpture of Waters.

While browsing in the gift shop, I heard music coming from a back room. I sneaked in and found three teenage boys—a guitar player, a bassist, and a drummer—working on a basic riff, though with their spiked bracelets and baggy pants they looked more punk than blues. Standing in the corner was an older man who introduced himself as Big T. Big T, or Terry Williams, explained that his class, given by the Delta Blues Museum Arts and Education Program, is as much about history as about technique.

"I want everyone in the class to be able to tell me who Muddy Waters is, who Sam Cooke is, who Howlin' Wolf is and why they started playing," he said.

In his 1949 song "Canary Bird," Muddy Waters sang, "Well, canary bird, when you get to Clarksdale, please fly down on Second Street / Well, you know I don't want you to stop flying until you take the letter out to Stovall for me." And you can still walk down Second Street to a bridge that leads to Stovall Farms, the plantation where Waters grew up. Nearby you'll find Wade Walton's barbershop, a low, rectangular building of white-washed cement blocks on Issaquena Avenue, which runs through the New World district, where live blues once thrived; now you can hear the music at Ground Zero, a club in an unassuming brick warehouse near the museum. Walton cut the hair of blues greats Sonny Boy Williamson II, Ike Turner, and Howlin' Wolf and was a musician in his own right. He recorded an album, *Shake 'Em Down*, in the 1960s and can be heard on a cut in the 1990 compilation *Clarksdale Mississippi: Coahoma the Blues*, playing percussion with his razor and strop. Walton died in 2000 and the shop closed. His barber chair is in the Delta Blues Museum.

From Clarksdale I drove down Route 61 to Cleveland, then cut east on Route 8 out to Dockery Farms, the original blues "think tank." This plantation, built in 1895 by a Memphis farmer, was a civiliza-

tion unto itself. At its peak in the 1930s this huge tract of land was home to 2,000 people, had its own railroad station, and printed currency for its commissary. Charley Patton, Son House, and Willie Brown all once lived there; Patton refers to Dockery by name in his "34 Blues." You can see the last standing of Dockery's three clapboard churches, the cotton gin, the commissary, and a seed house nestled among the weeds. The plantation is marked only by a blue plaque, one of the thousands you breeze by while traveling America's highways. But you can't miss the seed house that reads, in fading paint, DOCKERY FARMS.

A short drive southeast is Greenwood, a charming town dominated by a gray, columned courthouse, the first thing I saw as I passed over the Yazoo River into town. This is where Robert Johnson died in the summer of 1938. He was playing at a club called the Three Forks, which was on the east side of Highway 7 just outside Itta Bena, or at the junction of Highways 49E and 82, or anywhere where three roads come together. There he drank whiskey poisoned by his lover's jealous husband, or the jealous husband of a woman who was staring at him, or he drank bad moonshine. After his last song he fell to the floor in agony and was taken, or walked, to Bishop Town, where he was staying with a "widow woman." From there he was probably moved to a plantation and died a few weeks later.

of pneumonia, or poison, or, as his death certificate says, syphilis. He was buried in an unmarked grave at a black church in the area. He was not yet 30.

People have claimed to have located his grave, and three stone markers have been planted in three different cemeteries. I got out of my car at each and searched among the handmade graves, but the real pleasure was the drive on the back roads, where blooming cotton stretched for acres and my fellow drivers, models of Southern hospitality, honked and waved. The Morgan City site contains an impressive obelisk listing 27 of Johnson's recorded songs and inscribed with a line

from "Me and the Devil Blues": "You may bury my body down by the highway side." I preferred the more modest memorial near Quito, where someone had left a half-full whiskey bottle.

After all the traveling it was time for some live blues music, so I got on Route 82, to Greenville, the Delta's largest city and home to the area's most active live music scene. Willie Love and his Three Aces offered this advice to Greenville visitors in 1951: "Boy, if you ever go to Greenville, please go down on Nelson Street / Yeah, walk on the levee and have a lot of fun with most everybody you meet."

You are unlikely to hear much live blues on Nelson Street anymore. Greenville's fortunes changed with those of the rest of the Delta when the mechanized cotton picker made the sharecropper obsolete and sent hundreds of thousands of ex-farm hands streaming north. Riverboat gambling has helped revive the town, and the blues scene has moved to Walnut Street, closer to the casinos.

I stopped in at the Walnut Street Blues Bar, where Eden Brent, a petite woman with an astonishing voice, was playing her own songs as well as blues standards on the piano. The experience stood in contrast to the night before, when I had traveled down a dark country road to Po' Monkey's, one of the last rural "jook joints," sharecropping shacks that the plantation owners let the residents use to throw parties. They used to be places for live blues, but now R&B is served up by

a DJ. Despite being one of the only white people there and an obvious outsider, I chatted with a table full of women about the differences between North and South and even had a few dances.

The next morning I drove out to a large field six miles south of Highway 82 for the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, where people had been camping out in elaborate tents since sunrise. The festival has two venues, a main stage and a "jook house." The smaller stage is for local acts, and when I got there, a scrawny man in cowboy boots repaired with electrical tape was playing the guitar. A local pointed out King Ed-

wards, who leads a blues band at a club in Jackson, and Edwards took the stage with an acoustic guitar, the only one I saw all day. The main stage was dominated by big bands and electrified music, resembling R&B more than traditional blues. I was happy to see Edwards, who was playing solo, perform old-school Delta music.

Throughout the day I wandered back and forth between the stages but found

myself mostly at the "jook joint," where a crowd of about 50 had gathered and people were dancing. A handwritten list of bands was tacked to one of the poles. As the day cooled, the headline act, Bobby Rush, took the stage in a wild purple shirt. Rush is known for his flashy performance style, and as I watched from the sidelines, he crooned, "That girl is fine, fine, fine," while the dancers turned their backs to the audience, grinding their hips, and the lights flashed in time to the music.

Rush's pyrotechnics reminded me of a conversation I'd had with a farmer in Robinsonville. He pointed out modules, large machines that are now used to harvest cotton. "Run by a computer," he said. "Could be run by some guy in Argentina, for all I know." In the hundred years since Handy was captivated by the music of a man in rags, we have plugged in our guitars, used the music of protest to sell overpriced coffee beverages, and turned the family farm into agribusiness. But I know better than to get nostalgic for the days of sharecropping. The music will change with the landscape, its relics encased in roadside museums, but also living on in Big T's class, as a 13-year-old tries to break out of the basic riff into a solo—on his acoustic guitar. ★

THREE DIFFERENT CEMETERIES CLAIM TO CONTAIN THE ELUSIVE ROBERT JOHNSON'S GRAVE.

TO PLAN A TRIP

FOR INFORMATION ON LODGING AND A CALENDAR OF EVENTS, call the Mississippi Development Authority Division of Tourism (601-359-3297) or visit its Web site at www.visitmississippi.org. I found Steve Cheseborough's book *Blues Traveling* (University Press of Mississippi) an indispensable guide, full of detailed historical and cultural information as well as driving directions to out-of-the-way sites.

In late September, Greenville hosts the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival (www.deltablues.org), the oldest but not the only blues festival in the Delta. You can find information about the smaller festivals in Cheseborough's book or through the Division of Tourism. If you come for the Blues and Heritage Festival, make your hotel reservations early. There are plenty of chain hotels on Routes 61 and 49, but you can find unique accommodation in the Delta. The elegant Belle Clark Bed and Breakfast, in Clarksdale (662-627-1280, www.thebelleclark.com), is in the restored home of John Clark, the town's founder.

Coming from New York, where a seaweed salad can be a meal, I found Southern dining a revelation. Don't be afraid of the modest-looking barbecue shacks, general stores, and roadside stands. They offer up Southern dining at its finest, with hot-sauce-soaked pigs' feet, tamales, and fried catfish. I discovered the salty Southern delicacy of fried dill pickles at the Hollywood café in Robinsonville, near Tunica (662-363-1126). They were tart and crispy and, dipped in horseradish sauce, had an alarming bite. But they proved addictive.



The Hollywood café in Robinsonville.