STILL SINGING THE Blues

The Mississippi Delta's history of hard times inspired the art form of blues music. Celebrating that dark legacy may be the region's ticket to a brighter future.

By Roland Klose

Photographs by Steve Jones

The All Night Long band at Ground Zero Blues Club

Ground Zero Blues Club

Nachos from Ground Zero Blues Club

IT'S lunchtime at the Ground Zero Blues Club on a typical weekday. The air is heavy and humid, and nothing seems to be happening around the crumbling, vacant buildings that make up downtown Clarksdale, Mississippi. Outside the club, an older couple from New Zealand chats up a pair of young women from Finland; inside, a few locals order catfish plates.

At the bar is a middle-aged biker from Kentucky who has been touring the South — didn't much care for Memphis, he says — but he's decided to linger in Clarksdale to check out an off-the-radar authentic juke joint. He's staying in the Riverside Hotel, a former hospital for African-Americans where Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues," died in 1937 after a car accident.

Drawn by the legacy of the blues, these visitors aren't far from the mythical intersection where Robert Johnson supposedly traded his soul to the devil so he could make magic on a guitar. Folks here have memorialized the Crossroads, where U.S. 61 meets U.S. 49, with a kitschy sculpture of three giant blue guitars, but there's no sign of Lucifer, unless he's hanging at the nearby gas stations or the Church's Chicken.

Located in an old warehouse that had stood vacant for 30 years, Ground Zero Blues Club was opened in May 2001 by actor and Mississippi native Morgan Freeman and Clarksdale businessmen Bill Luckett and Howard Stovall. Featuring four nights a week of live local and national blues acts, the club is designed to preserve and celebrate the town's reputation as ground zero for the blues.

Surprisingly, even though the area is steeped in blues history, the idea of opening a blues club actually came from outside the region.

"I learned, in my legal work, that there were some people from Europe who were interested in starting a blues club in Clarksdale," Luckett says. "I asked myself, 'Does it take people from Amsterdam or London to show us the way?'"

The partners' investment was a rare vote of confidence in a

Playing the blues

Bill Luckett, cofounder of Ground Zero Blues Club

community that's seen a steady exodus of talent and wealth for decades, and Luckett admits he and his partners have had their share of doubters.

That comes as no great surprise; Clarksdale, like much of the Delta, has long been in a state of decline. There's evidence of great wealth and gripping poverty, and not much in between. The never-ending hard times endured by many in this region gave birth to the blues and shaped our national culture.

The Delta, which stretches about 200 miles south of Memphis, is actually not a delta but an alluvial plain on which the Mississippi River and its tributaries have deposited some of the richest topsoil in the world. Through the years, it has remained one of the nation's best growing regions, with cotton still a dominant crop, especially in northwestern Mississippi. That agricultural legacy, though, also explains the poverty; cotton production used to be labor intensive, and most of the heavy work — the chopping and picking — was done by humans. When production was mechanized, starting in the 1940s, the jobs began to disappear. Millions left the Delta to find employment in Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago. Those who stayed struggled to eke out a life in a land that offered very little.

In places like Tunica County, Mississippi, situated about 40 miles north of Clarksdale, more than half the residents lived in third-world conditions well into the 1980s. Rev. Jesse Jackson called Tunica "America's Ethiopia," a label that stung — and stuck. It was common for national politicians to come to the Delta and leave a few sound bites and little else in their wake. But back in 1985, Jackson wasn't far off the mark: Housing conditions for some people were abysmal, with open sewage running in ditches, and children were going to bed hungry.

In 1988, pushed by Delta lawmakers, Congress authorized the creation of a commission to take a hard look at a broader region — from Cairo, Illinois, at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, down to Louisiana.

Starting in 1989, the Lower Mississippi Delta Development

Ground Zero Blues Club

Ground Zero Blues Club

Commission, chaired by then-Arkansas-governor Bill Clinton, held hearings documenting the plight and came up with a laundry list of solutions. One of its main recommendations — something also championed by the Memphis-based Center for Southern Folklore and others — called for building on and marketing the region's rich history and cultural legacy.

The commission spawned some initiatives and follow-up studies but fell far short of its promise. Stanley Hyland, PhD, head of the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy and professor of anthropology at the University of Memphis, served as principal researcher for the commission. He says Clinton opposed the idea of creating a permanent agency — something akin to the Appalachian Regional Commission — which could have served as a guiding force for all the disparate stakeholders in the Delta. Such an agency would have been particularly useful to the Delta, an area with a culture of individualism and isolation, where people don't "naturally come together," Hyland says.

"Clinton launched his [1992] presidential campaign by going up and down the Delta, but as president, he never really came back and built anything of great substance," he says.

Indeed, the biggest transformation in the Delta, the arrival of legalized gambling, wasn't even addressed by the commission.

In 1990, the state of Mississippi authorized riverboat casinos along "Old Man River" and the Gulf of Mexico coast, enacting one of the most liberal gaming laws in the nation. Tunica became the first Delta county to jump aboard, beginning an unprecedented land rush and the construction of giant mega-gaming palaces. Today, Tunica County has nine casinos, and it remains one of the nation's top gambling destinations. "America's Ethiopia" has attracted as many as 14 million visitors a year since casinos opened; gaming has generated more than $40 million a year in tax revenues for the county, according to Lyn Arnold, president of the Tunica County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Foundation. It has paid for new schools, new roads and sewers, an airport with an 8,500-foot runway, a health-and-wellness center, three community centers, and many other amenities.

Images from the Delta Blues Museum

Tunica casino strip

From the beginning, there have been clear winners in the gambling game. The landowners who unloaded flood-prone acreage made out like bandits. A Memphis businessman made a fortune by locking up billboard rights along U.S. 61 in the early 1990s; a Texas-based media conglomerate owns the signs now. The region's media still lean heavily on casino advertising.

But like any game of chance, there have been losers too. While some tourists who go to the casinos visit nearby Memphis to see Elvis Presley's Graceland and the clubs on Beale Street, the Tennessee city has trouble competing due to the lack of the draw of gambling. W.W. Herenton, who resigned as Memphis's mayor this July after an unprecedented 17 years in office, pushed for legalized gaming in Tennessee, hoping to stanch the loss of tax revenue, but he couldn't overcome the resistance from lawmakers in Nashville.

But if Herenton was looking for a magic bullet to solve the city's socioeconomic troubles, he may have been looking in the wrong place.

In her 2006 study of the Delta, Sharon Wright Austin, PhD, associate professor of political science at the University of Florida (and a Memphis native), says the casinos haven't solved the deep-seated problems of the region. Austin presented evidence in her book, *The Transformation of Plantation*

Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta, that contradicted the spin gaming promoters had peddled as gospel.

Casinos, she found, didn't have much of a positive impact outside Tunica County; moreover, even in Tunica, they really didn't address the structural problems of poverty. Because of the relatively low wages paid to employees, casinos did little more than transform the unemployed poor into the working poor, she says.

"Before the casinos opened, unemployment in Tunica County was always in the double-digits, even exceeding 20 percent. But it was always the case, during the period I researched, [that] even though unemployment was low, people were still poor and the poverty rate was high," Austin says.

So Tunica has looked for ways to diversify, to give tourists more reasons to visit and stay in the region. Golf has become a significant draw, for example, as Tunica now has three quality courses. And local promoters are embracing the blues in a big way: They have plans to open a $2 million Gateway to the Blues Visitor Center in 2010 along U.S. 61. The center, which will be based in a relocated train depot, will feature museum-quality exhibits on loan from Harrah's Tunica.

"It's kind of funny — when you grow up with it at your front door, you sometimes don't recognize the value it has for other people," Arnold says. "But we get a lot of international visitors who come through here to follow the Blues Trail."

"The culture and heritage of the Delta is something we need to be marketing," says Webster Franklin, president and CEO of the Tunica Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is leading the promotional effort. "What I hope happens is that we'll draw the blues enthusiasts to the state and give them an authentic experience while they're here, and that at the same time, they'll stay in our hotels and hopefully play a few slot machines. But the greater impact is if we can get many of those gaming patrons to learn a little more about the heritage of the area and get out and explore more. It'd be good for the economy of the whole region."

THE NEW TUNICA visitor center will join dozens of other places in the Delta celebrating the region's unique cultural contribution.

In Clarksdale, just a stone's throw from the Ground Zero Blues Club, is the Delta Blues Museum, which occupies a converted train depot. Visitors to the museum get a taste of the rich legacy of sound that came from here, a testimony to blues artists who have been iconic in American cultural history. Exhibits include Muddy Waters's family home, salvaged from the Stovall Plantation, as well as guitars, costumes, and other memorabilia from John Lee Hooker, Big Joe Williams, and Jimmy Burns. There's even a sign from the place where Robert Johnson performed his last gig and was allegedly poisoned.

Mississippi's been promoting its blues heritage for about three years now and is in the process of placing more than 150

If You Go ...

Arkansas Blues & Heritage Festival
October 7 to 9, 2010
Helena, Arkansas
www.bluesandheritagefest.com

Delta Blues Museum
1 Blues Alley, Clarksdale, Mississippi
www.deltabluesmuseum.org

Delta Cultural Center
141 Cherry Street, Helena, Arkansas
www.deltaculturalcenter.com

Ground Zero Blues Club
0 Blues Alley, Clarksdale, Mississippi
www.groundzerobluesclub.com

The Mississippi Blues Trail
www.msbluestrail.org

historical markers and interpretive sites, most of them concentrated in the Delta. Among the locations in Mississippi are B.B. King's birthplace in Berclair; the Holly Ridge gravesite of blues giant Charley Patton; and Greenville's Nelson Street, which became a hot spot for down-home Southern blues in the 1940s and early '50s. Detailed maps are available at various venues, at welcome centers, and online.

On the other side of the Mississippi River, Arkansas offers its own rich sampling of blues heritage. Like Clarksdale, Helena–West Helena has seen better days; visitors who cross the narrow U.S. 49 bridge on the way to the city's downtown pass dozens of abandoned and dilapidated structures, including an ornate high school that's been closed for more than a half century and is now engulfed in vines.

"If this was St. Louis or Chicago," quips a local, "it'd be condominiums by now. But this is Helena."

Near the levee there, the Delta Cultural Center occupies a beautiful, renovated train station that was originally built in 1912 by the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Its exhibits include accounts and artifacts about slavery, the forced removal of Quapaw Indians in the early nineteenth century, the Union's defeat of the Confederates in the 1863 Battle of Helena, and the calamitous Great Flood of 1927.

Up the street, at the visitor's center, tourists can learn about Arkansas blues legends like Sonny Boy Williamson, Louis Jordan, and Albert King, and watch the daily live broadcast of the *King Biscuit Time* radio half hour, the nation's longest-running blues radio program. One of the nation's largest gatherings of blues musicians, the three-day Arkansas Blues & Heritage Festival, is held in Helena each October.

Luckett, who's lived in Clarksdale for most of his 60 years, says it's still a revelation to him that so many people are drawn to something he took for granted for so long. "I still marvel at the places the folks come from," he says. "I've met people from the Czech Republic, from all over Europe, Asia, and Africa. Robert Plant, [Led Zeppelin's front man], has been in each of the last three summers.

"We had our detractors. We still have people who live in Clarksdale and badmouth it. But clearly, we're doing something right." AW

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