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BLUES HERITAGE TOURISM AND THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

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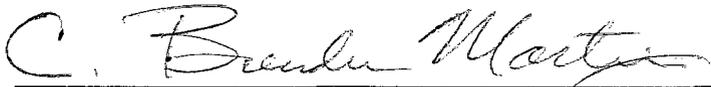
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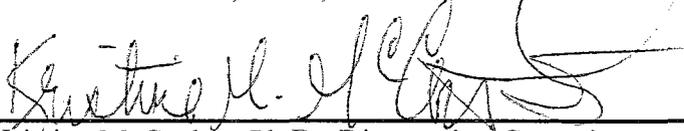
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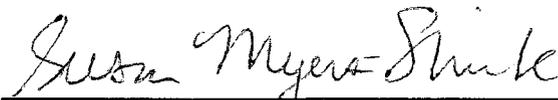
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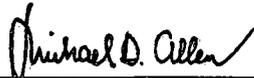
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Finally, I thank my family and Ellen for your unending support and for seeing me through this and all projects I undertake. I am indebted to each one of you for your love, humor, and inspiration, and for always helping me 'keep my eye on the prize.' I dedicate this dissertation to all of you.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the development and use of blues history and culture within modern heritage tourism efforts in Mississippi. I argue that a constructed blues narrative now serves as a powerful agent within Mississippi's modern identity. Reaping the economic benefits of blues tourism, many Mississippi Delta towns actively promote their ties to musicians such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. This development reflects post-World War II trends in the South, whereby distinctive regional cultures serve as commodities within struggling economies. In the Delta, the historical inequalities between black and white, severe poverty, health disparities, and the limits of economic revitalization through heritage tourism and casino gambling all present challenges to a state eagerly attempting to revise a historical legacy associated with racial oppression, separation, and violence. A key topic of consideration remains the degree to which local African American communities are part of the management and construction of blues tourism narratives in the Delta.

As an extension of Chapter Four, I collaborated with fellow PhD candidate, Angela Smith, to produce a documentary film titled, REFUSE TO FOLD: THE BLUE FRONT CAFÉ AND MISSISSIPPI BLUES HERITAGE TOURISM. This project analyzes a juke joint in Bentonia, Mississippi and situates it within a larger process of heritage tourism development throughout the state. By examining a living community and physical space in Mississippi, this film provides an aural and visual complement to the research and analysis presented in chapters 1-3. The modern fascination with blues culture in the South is often connected to historical mythologies that reify and confound

the lived experiences of blues practitioners and the diverse communities they represent. Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes, owner of the Blue Front, therefore serves as the film's central voice, revealing a complex narrative about blues music expression, Mississippi race relations, and cultural commodification.

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INTRODUCTION

REFUSE TO FOLD: HERITAGE TOURISM AND THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

In October 2006, I began working as a fieldworker for the Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail Project. Within a partnership between Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) and the Mississippi Blues Commission, I agreed to contribute research related to historic highway marker placement throughout Mississippi. As a new Ph.D. student at MTSU's Center for Historic Preservation, I was also fortunate enough to begin my dissertation work through this experience as a fieldworker for the trail. Spending countless hours in the summer heat, I criss-crossed the state searching for small chunks of land that would anchor a new effort to document, celebrate, and profit from Mississippi's blues history.

I was born in the Mississippi Delta and lived there until I was ten years old, so going back as a working historian has been rewarding and challenging. I remember as a kid the distinct racial barriers that existed in my town. There were, and still are, two sides of the tracks in this and other Delta towns: a white side and a black side. Race sits in the Delta like a humid cloud. Its presence is constant but with myriad shades of intensity. Black and white (though separated by a railroad line of demarcation) move among each other in daily routines. Each is familiar with *and* ignorant of one another. It is quite easy for a resident of this fascinating place to take for granted the economic, political, and social inequities that exist between the black and white populations. Seemingly, this is how it's always been on this flat, agricultural landscape.

The land itself creates identities and memories. Making a giant half-oval through upper Mississippi from Memphis down to Vicksburg, the Delta drips with heat,

mosquitoes, cotton, rice, train tracks, and wide view-sheds that hover above brown gravel roads snaking the flatland. A cotton field that butted up against my neighborhood was also home to a small patch of woods we called 'Old Hickory.' It's been this way since my mother was a child in the same neighborhood. We were forbidden to go to Old Hickory as kids because that's where the teenagers hung out. The combination of a cool name and the fact that we were not supposed to go there imbued this place with a sense of magic. We'd sneak off through the cotton field and ease up to the edge of Old Hickory to see what lurked inside. You could hear it from a distance; sounds of three-wheelers, go-carts, and motorcycles, humming in the middle of the wood cover. Peering closer, we'd see trails in all directions with jumping pits and water hazards and older kids flying by on their machines. It seemed to teem with activity any time I looked at those woods from the road and even now, with distance and the knowledge that these are simply a few muddy trails running through a tiny patch of woods, this place retains a sense of mystery for me. Inexplicably Old Hickory stands in a giant cotton field, uncut and protective of the secrets we created for it as kids. When I'm doing fieldwork down there, I still go to look inside and snap some pictures. The trails and feelings remain.

Refuse to Fold

I was intrigued to learn a few years ago that Mississippi had decided to utilize part of its African American history by promoting and selling blues music and culture. Everyone who lives there are at least familiar with the connection between blues and the Delta; blues festivals have been fixtures in small Delta towns since the 1970s. But with the creation of a Governor-sanctioned statewide blues heritage trail, a new era has begun in Mississippi. Perhaps it is too soon to fully appreciate or understand what this era

represents, but it is clear that blues now figures prominently within the marketed image and identity of the state. On the face of it, this is a tremendous development for a place claiming nearly the worst record of racial violence and race relations in the country. At this moment, an element so closely identified with black culture is used to attract outsiders to the struggling economy of the Delta and the rest of Mississippi. How did this happen? Why is it happening? And how do those whose culture endured so much violence, oppression, pain, inequality, and injustice perceive this development? As I started working for the Blues Commission as a researcher, I began to ponder these questions repeatedly. What I observed was part of a larger set of historical dramas working to define and reshape a landscape I loved and mistrusted simultaneously. I began to read this distinctive landscape as an active text just as I was reading the many arguments and ideas about race, culture, politics, and society in my archival research.

In 2007, working with Dr. Carroll Van West (Director of the Center for Historic Preservation at MTSU), Elizabeth Moore (Fieldwork Coordinator, CHP), Michael Gavin (Preservation Specialist, CHP), and graduate students (CHP) at MTSU, I submitted a statewide blues site survey report to the Mississippi Blues Commission and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This report recommended a range of sites, neighborhoods, and regions that might be eligible for the emerging blues trail and for the National Register of Historic Places. This experience further acquainted me with the rich variety of Mississippi cultures along with the complex and challenging interpretive agendas among the many vested interests attempting to capitalize on Mississippi's developing heritage tourism infrastructure. From this period of fieldwork, site survey, and interviews, I developed the broad outline for this dissertation, which

examines the historical development of blues heritage tourism in Mississippi with specific emphasis on the Delta region and a juke joint called the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, Mississippi. The modern statewide Blues Heritage Trail also serves as a vehicle to explore cultural commodification, authenticity, race, and constructed place identity.

Chapter One situates the development of blues tourism in Mississippi within a larger southern and international heritage tourism context. As blues tourism codifies Mississippi's image and identity through the marketing and promotion of specific themes, similar touristic processes have steadily emerged in the American South since World War II, thereby reshaping the region. Hal Rothman, an authority on tourism development in the United States, refers to tourism as a "devil's bargain," claiming its real beneficiaries in struggling locales are those small segments known as the "growth coalition."¹ While this form of development can stimulate local economies, its tendency to promote themes lacking historical depth often result in neatly packaged cultural products that satisfy consumer demand. As Mississippi uses tourism and casino gambling to stimulate and redefine its economy and identity, it also calls upon certain strands of its convoluted history to market itself to the rest of the world. This first chapter therefore ends with a discussion and analysis of Robert Johnson as an important modern Delta blues tourism icon. Johnson is perhaps the most famous blues musician from Mississippi. His image and story are routinely used within efforts to promote and market Mississippi tourism as well as specific sites in the Delta. Many blues historians are expanding the interpretation of Johnson, adding complexity to a narrative that traditionally emphasized myth and

¹ Hal Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

legend. Comparing older accounts with more recent work therefore helps to display the historical construction of Robert Johnson's blues narrative and its relationship to Mississippi's evolving tourism identity that still relies upon myth and mystery to attract visitors.

Chapter Two documents a history of the Mississippi Delta; a region referred to by historian James Cobb as 'the most southern place on earth.' The modern South relies upon a tourism image of uniqueness and authenticity to attract visitors. As a microcosm within this southern tourist landscape, the Mississippi Delta is one of the poorest regions in the United States and is still home to distinct racial divides, physically represented by the railroad line of demarcation between black and white in most Delta towns. It cannot, however, be accused of cultural poverty. Since Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, and Skip James released their records beginning in the 1920s, their simultaneous connection with the Delta resulted in the modern historic and touristic refrain, 'The Mississippi Delta: Home of the Blues.' While various strains of music conforming to the blues label exist all over the South and to points beyond, the Mississippi Delta was home to quite a number of now famous musicians whose records during the first blues craze of the 1920s and 1930s were later 'rediscovered' in the blues and folk revivals of the 1950s and 1960s. Mississippi now heavily promotes the Delta as a place of origin for blues generally. This chapter concludes with a brief portrait of Skip James, an artist from a town on the southern edge of the Delta called Bentonia. Throughout the 1960s rediscovery period, James' unique style contributed to what is known among blues fans as the Bentonia Sound. Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes and the Blue Front Cafe, the subjects of chapter 4, are directly connected to the historical legacy of Skip James and to the idea of a unique

Bentonia music tradition, which is gaining significant attention in Mississippi's new tourism economy.

Chapter Three examines the development of Mississippi's modern blues tourism infrastructure that actively relies upon the tenuous relationship between history, heritage, and myth through artists like Robert Johnson, Skip James, and Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes to generate tourist revenue. The Mississippi Blues Commission is the state-sanctioned entity that manages the Blues Heritage Trail Project. Its development is part of a set of loosely-connected efforts to introduce and use heritage tourism for economic development in Mississippi. This chapter begins with the Final Report of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC), a congressional project in the late 1980s that attempted to address and alleviate the many economic, political, and social challenges in the broad seven-state Delta region along the Mississippi River. Subsequent studies of Mississippi's own Delta further strengthened the LMDDC's recommendation to capitalize upon the regions' blues legacy through the mechanism of heritage tourism. A key topic remains the degree to which local African American communities are part of the management and construction of blues tourism initiatives. The chapter ends with an assessment of the Hopson Plantation/Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale, Mississippi. This site reveals important concerns related to the use and commodification of distinctive cultural attributes within Mississippi's heritage tourism designs. It received a Blues Heritage Trail Marker in 2008.

The Blue Front Café (Bentonia, Mississippi) is the subject of a documentary film in Chapter Four. By positioning the personal narrative of Blue Front owner and musician Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes at the center of an array of interviews with other local residents,

historians, sociologists, and museum educators from around the state, the film displays in detail many of the issues and challenges within blues tourism efforts currently underway in Mississippi. Jimmy constructs a complex narrative about his home town, his music, and his community and offers an important perspective about the Blue Front Café Blues Trail marker designation. He also talks about the ubiquity of race as an operative factor in his Bentonia community. This film anchors the research and arguments outlined in chapters 1-3 to a specific site on the Blues Heritage Trail. This visual case-study format allows the participants to speak for themselves, while the sights and sounds, the ambiguities and contradictions, and the nuanced density of one aspect of Mississippi's vast history is interpreted. The chapter begins with an analysis of the filmmaking process and creative collaboration with fellow Ph.D. Candidate Angela Smith.

The concluding Chapter Five begins with the Congressional approval of the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. The National Park Service has been involved in efforts to document the cultural assets of the Delta since the 1990s. This Heritage Area designation represents a key moment, opening the Delta to partnership and funding opportunities as it builds its cultural and heritage tourism infrastructure. However significant obstacles, including the historical inequities between black and white, severe poverty and health issues in the region, and the limits of economic revitalization through heritage tourism and casino gambling, all present challenges to a state eagerly attempting to redefine its identity and history. The degree to which local communities will actually benefit from the Heritage Area, blues tourism, and the many spin-off efforts remains to be seen.



Figure 1. Old Hickory from the outside. Photo by Author, February 2007.



Figure 2. Old Hickory on the inside. Photo by Author, July 2007.

CHAPTER I

HERITAGE TOURISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY SOUTH

‘THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA-- where roots run deep, and history and culture have intertwined to create a place unique to the world. For the thousands of visitors who come each year, the Delta is more than just part of something larger. More than a region or a feature on a map, the Delta is a land unto itself. And within its borders lie the things visitors seek:

- Back street juke joints churning out the Mississippi Delta Blues.
- Internationally known restaurants serving up fine cuisine and home-cooked delicacies.
- World-class gaming venues featuring marquee entertainment.’¹

Welcome to the new Mississippi; gaming hub, tourist destination and blues Mecca. It is estimated that 22 million people visited Mississippi in FY 2007 as tourists. They come for the casinos in Tunica, the beaches on the coast, and now more than ever for blues in the Delta and throughout the state. The Delta is a patchwork of contradiction. While many diverse ethnic groups have called this place home since the nineteenth century, racial conflicts and compromises between black and white predominate. Residents remain largely separated by cultural, economic, political, and racial barriers on a landscape where the horizon line is uniquely present and anchored by white bolls of cotton, while the ever-present river pushes in the west against a man-made wall. It is a land where gravel roads terminate in the parking lots of neon-lighted casino towers. It is

¹Aristotle Web Design. 2008. Mississippi Delta Tourism Association. On-line. <http://www.visitthedelta.com/>, accessed 03 December 2009.

also a place where the words ‘black’ and ‘white’ still carry deep sentiments of mistrust, hatred, misunderstanding, inequality, as well as closeness, dependence, and reciprocity.²

Mississippi’s decision to use blues culture for economic development reflects the modern utility and attraction of the new southern heritage tourism. It also represents an important development within the state’s racial history. Given the violent civil rights battles fought in its territory since the Civil War, the decision to formally recognize artists like Robert Johnson and African American contributions to Mississippi’s history and culture is significant; given that Mississippi’s Delta is, according to Delta State University Professor Stephen A. King, “a fractured community that highlights the dramatic differences between the powerful, white minority and the subjugated black majority.”³

Although blues festivals dot the landscape every year, the establishment of a Mississippi Blues Commission and associated Blues Heritage Trail introduce new recognition and interpretive opportunities. The statewide trail uses highway markers with historical text and photographs to commemorate blues-related sites. At the unveiling of the first marker on December 11, 2006, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour remarked:

“This marker is the first of a long line to come... The blues are a powerful part of Mississippi's heritage and America's musical history; the creation of the Mississippi Blues Trail is an appropriate way to capture this distinct part of our history and culture and also will undoubtedly serve as an economic development tool. People from around the country-indeed from around the world-will come to Mississippi to learn about and

²MDA, *Fiscal Year Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi*, February 2008, Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division, Research Unit, Jackson, Mississippi 39205, 1-48: 5.

³ Stephen A. King, “Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals,” *Popular Music and Society* 27 (December 2004): 10.

experience not only authentic Mississippi blues music but also the blues culture for years to come.”⁴

As this development includes the potential for a more dynamic historical and cultural narrative in the state, its direct relationship with the economic imperatives of heritage tourism also greatly complicate the endeavor. Impoverished areas like the Mississippi Delta are increasingly using heritage tourism to alter their challenged circumstances by attracting outside money with the allure of uniqueness. Given the real potential of this economic strategy, evidence suggests that heritage tourism also has the dual capacity to concentrate needed financial resources within hospitality sectors like chain hotels and newer infrastructure developed specifically for tourists. If local communities are not woven into planning and implementation efforts, heritage tourism can potentially corner a distinctive culture, sell it to outside visitors, and keep the treasure safely guarded and away from those whose culture is packaged, commodified, and sold.

Most Deltans, black and white, support heritage tourism.⁵ But just as the Mississippi Blues Commission (MBC), an entity appointed by the Governor, directs the trail, many other groups and organizations throughout the state also are actively attempting to promote and preserve Mississippi’s blues legacy. The MBC is administering this vast project, with input from prominent blues scholars and professors

⁴ Anatoly Kiryushkin, ed. “Haley Barbour Unveils First Marker of Mississippi Blues Trail,” 2006 *Jazz News*. On-line. <http://home.nestor.minsk.by/jazz/news/2006/12/1303.html>, accessed 08 December 2009.

⁵ Alan W. Barton, *Attitudes About Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: A Policy Report From the 2005 Delta Rural Poll*, Policy Paper no. 05-02, Center for Community and Economic Development (Cleveland, Mississippi: Delta State University, December, 2005), 23, 4, 22.

around the state, but some cultural organizations in the Delta view these efforts skeptically, claiming the MBC is too politically motivated and therefore cut off from the grassroots efforts that have been underway for years. Communication gaps exist between important cultural organizations, the state tourism office, and the Mississippi Blues Commission. While each group maintains a commitment to African American culture (and its economic potential), interaction among them is often stalled by perceptions of political favoritism and poor management.⁶ In other cases, financial discrepancies and lack of staffing and institutional support contribute to the tenuous involvement of organizations and universities within the management of blues heritage tourism.

The Mississippi Delta has long been associated with artistic achievement. The vast flatlands produce literary and musical narratives that recall the often harsh, yet romantic, rural nature of a region defined by agricultural production and distinct ties to ‘the river’. William Faulkner frequently commented on the uniqueness of the Delta, and painters and musicians continue to create moving portraits of a place seemingly frozen in time. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that all artists who write or paint the Delta seek only to memorialize the region without commenting upon its inherent contradictions and foibles. Early blues music and culture generated narratives that countered and challenged official power structures stemming from the realities of slavery

⁶ The issue of statewide miscommunication is evident through interviews and oral histories with: Jimmy Duck Holmes (Blue Front Café), LV Ball (Blue Front Café, Jimmy’s current protégé), David Evans (University of Memphis), Alan Barton (Delta State University), Shelley Ritter (Delta Blues Museum), Stephen A. King (Delta State University), Sade Turnipseed (BB King Museum), Wanda Clark (Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail), Adam Gussow (University Of Mississippi), Marvin Haire (Mississippi Valley State University.)

and Jim Crow. While blues cannot be divorced from its entertainment function, many blues artists and their myriad artistic themes can be viewed as rebellious and critical to established mores or norms associated with conventional hierarchies. It is important to review the process by which blues music and culture entered official efforts to market and sell the region to outside visitors. It is also necessary to analyze the construction of specific blues historical narratives that are now synonymous with an increasingly marketed Delta image.

Southern Heritage Tourism

Many regions in the modern South actively interpret, package, and sell their cultures as part of an economic strategy that places value on the perception of distinctly southern themes. Since 1945, new industry and federal defense investment have significantly altered southern economies, while tourism has been one of “six new ‘pillars’ of post-World War II economic growth” in the South.⁷ This has served many locales well, as cities such as Charleston, New Orleans, and Natchez utilize heritage tourism as a marketing strategy for economic development. The image of Charleston, for example, as a shrine for “enduring American (and southern) traditions” was crafted in part by elite female heritage preservationists in the 1920’s and 1930’s who “sought to celebrate the city’s historic character through the fine arts, literature, historic preservation, and folk

⁷ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 228; Richard D. Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 244.

music.”⁸ However, southern marketers of culture over the years often tended to reconfigure the past into nostalgia; operating southern battlefields and plantation museums, for example, without divulging the realities of the slave system that sustained such modern tourist landmarks.⁹

Indeed, the presentation of slavery in southern public settings remains a contentious and highly debated phenomenon. Civil War battlefield sites in the South traditionally eschewed appraisals that analyzed the causes of the war. Slavery stood outside the view of accepted interpretation, taking a backseat to overtures about a “quarrel forgotten”¹⁰ and restored national brotherhood. Only in 1995 at Fort Sumter did the National Park Service formally connect the issue of slavery with the underlying causes of the Civil War. This new narrative stood in stark contrast to the main line of NPS interpretation for the majority of the twentieth century, “which avoided all mention of the causes of the war in its exhibits, films, and publications.”¹¹

Incorporating slavery at battlefield sites represents a significant development upon an interpretive landscape too often choked by a reluctance to discuss and accept

⁸ David Goldfield, “Searching for the Sunbelt,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18 (October 2003): 5.

⁹ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 172.

¹⁰ Quoted in David W. Blight *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 384. At the 1913 Gettysburg reunion, President Wilson called the Civil War a “quarrel forgotten.”

¹¹ Dwight T. Pitcaithley, “Public Education and the National Park Service: Interpreting the Civil War,” *AHA Perspectives* 8 (November 2007.): 1. On-Line. <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0711/0711pro2.cfm>, accessed 08 December 2009.

certain challenging and painful chapters of American history. This reluctance may also prevent frank discussion and acceptance of modern race and class issues born of a complex past. The inclusion of slavery and race within southern public interpretive efforts contributes to the ever-shifting identity of the region.

Since before the Civil War, the idea of an exotic, mysterious, and romantic Deep South played well within the touristic mind of America. Early promoters and travel writers often concentrated on hot, dark, and damp landscapes punctuated by Gothic-styled structures recalling Old World Europe. Tourism promoters after the war continued to play up these gothic themes by vividly describing swampy bottom-lands dripping with hanging moss and mysterious dark faces still working and lurking in giant cotton fields.¹² Wealthy hunters also were attracted to the wild Mississippi Delta, whose quickly disappearing forests in the early twentieth century once held red wolves, black bear, cougar, and deer.¹³ Upon an interpretive landscape that witnessed the transformation of the sites of bloody battles into commemorative arenas for reunification and honor, the realities of slavery, race, and the continued subjugation of African Americans were hindrances to a region attempting to heal and to the increasing numbers of tourists seeking romance, relaxation, and frontier excitement.

Over the course of the twentieth century, southern plantation sites often presented a contented or invisible slave culture within a picturesque southern estate. Slave owners

¹² Rebecca Cawood McIntyre, "Promoting the South: Tourism and Southern Identity, 1840-1920" (PhD diss., University of Alabama, 2004), 73.

¹³ Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 234.

routinely appeared as benevolent masters overseeing an agreeable labor force. This interpretation prevented deeper questioning into the realities of slave life, plantation systems, and the cultural reverberations resulting from years of systemic racial and social inequity.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, interpretation of slavery and of the full consequences of racial discord and oppression at battlefields and plantation sites in the South remains a new idea, if it exists at all. In a study of 122 plantation sites in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small conclude that most maintain a white-centric focus while “eras(ing) or minimiz(ing) the presence, labor, and lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans.”¹⁴ While most sites may not exhibit overtly racist motivations, their existence within the confines of heritage tourism further enhances a reluctance to fully explore and interpret their complex and challenging histories. David Blight argues, “as a culture we have often preferred [the Civil Wars’] music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies.”¹⁵

Blight’s assessment highlights the tendency within tourism to present history in what Cathy Stanton calls a ‘linear-progressive’ narrative; history, in this sense, represents a steady march of progress with increasingly diminished negatives. Much like the consciously-forgotten stains in a family’s past, the lines of history that display a happy,

¹⁴ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁵ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 172.

progressive national psyche seem more palatable to many. When historic sites remove their own stains from their interpretative programs to please the tourist, they generate narratives that mute cultural tension or complexity, producing a benign and seemingly enlightened present. Such narratives can perpetuate cultural stereotypes while disconnecting past and present. In *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Post-Industrial City*, Cathy Stanton argues that although the interpretive program at Lowell (Massachusetts) historic site explores myriad experiences of industrial workers, the local desire to generate tourism revenue and positive experiences render assessments of modern realities devoid of important critical questions that might challenge fundamental tenets of industrialization and capitalism.¹⁶ Similarly, Colin Michael Hall contends that “issues of land rights, displacements and the marginal positions of Aboriginals in Australian society are sanitized for the benefit of visitor into a ‘safe’ social and political reality which does not lead the tourist to question.”¹⁷

The power of heritage tourism and its perceived ability to transform ailing economies is also evident in other parts of the world. In post-apartheid South Africa, the “tourism industry has experienced growth of over 100 percent...”¹⁸ As it attempts to confront the legacies of apartheid and balance opportunities between black and white,

¹⁶ Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Post-Industrial City* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Colin Michael Ray, *Tourism and Politics: Power, Policy and Place* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 179.

¹⁸ Sharon Davis, “Economy-South Africa: Are the Benefits of Tourism Just Skin Deep” (IPS-Inter Press Service, 2008), 1. On-line. <http://ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=33927>, accessed 08 December 2009.

tourism offers many South African localities a means to market themselves and attract needed revenue. In 2005, tourism accounted for nearly 1.2 million jobs. However, the money generated from tourism development does not always trickle to the groups and communities that are in critical need. Tony Binns and Etienne Nel observed that successful “ventures in Cape Town and Durban have attracted strong criticism on the grounds that they do not adequately involve community members, few benefits devolve to them, and that the developments are undertaken without adequate concern being given to affected communities.”¹⁹

David Lowenthal, author of *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, perceptively writes, “Credence in a mythic past crafted for some present cause suppresses history’s impartial complexity.”²⁰ Through the lens of heritage tourism, cultural images and expressions are fashioned into easily digestible forms and therefore run the risk of sustaining a public perception of culture that lacks depth. In their analysis of the commoditization process within various forms of tourism, Watson and Kopachevsky argue that “in assigning symbolic attributes to objects, one endows them with a life of their own, and, as in religious fetishism, the objects appear, and are regarded, as things having an existence and control over and above human choice.”²¹ As historically small, impoverished Mississippi Delta towns now regard blues tourism as a vital contributor to

¹⁹ Tony Binns and Etienne Nel, “Tourism as a local development strategy in South Africa” *The Geographical Journal*, 3 (September 2002): 240.

²⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

²¹ Stephen Williams, ed. *Tourism: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences, Volume I: The Nature and Structure of Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 268.

stimulate their ailing economies, the objects, cultures, and people used within tourism efforts are subject to a kind of fetishism that devalues developmental complexity for the pull of exotic mystery. Marvin Haire, associate director of the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at Mississippi Valley State University, argues that this “relieves [people] of the burden of looking at blues cultural heritage as a living reality.”²²

The historical relationship between southern culture, tourism, and heritage preservation has contributed to a lingering memory of the South and its people. In the mountain South, tourism efforts contributed to the maintenance of regional identity and preservation impulses. However, because commercial interests sponsored these tourism efforts, C. Brenden Martin argues that “simplistic and romanticized identities of mountain whites and Cherokee Indians” are presented to “fulfill tourists’ desires to experience local culture without the messiness and complexities of the real thing.”²³ Although tourism clearly impacted some mountain regions positively, a dominant tourism economy in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, for example, hampered diversification and stripped the region of its cultural distinctiveness.

The mystique of tradition is a powerful tool within any tourism economy. The promotion of traditions deemed authentic has long roots in various locales in the United States and throughout the world. This strategy accelerated throughout the rural South and mountain regions at the opening of the twentieth century. Just as domestic production and local craft trade networks escalated after the Civil War, Protestant missionaries

²² Dr. Marvin Haire, interview by author, 15 April 2009.

²³ Brundage, 266; C. Brenden Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-Edged Sword* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 195-196.

entered the South initially to work with and aid newly freed slaves. Their uplift efforts later turned to the rural white populations in Appalachia and mountain regions. As nineteenth century defenders of tradition championed the perceived simpler homespun life of colonial New Englanders,²⁴ so too did these missionaries and later settlement workers search for authenticity throughout rural Appalachia. Many viewed this region as a last bastion of Anglo purity in danger of losing its vital cultural assets. As local colorists, tourism promoters, and travel writers observed the southern reaches, a narrative of rural southern and Appalachian separateness coalesced around “the conviction that, relative to the rest of the nation, the Appalachian South was untouched by modernity.”²⁵ This myth of an untouched, pure culture also contributed to notions of primitivism that further solidified place and cultural identities.

Viewing particular regional groups as distinctive or pure accelerated in 1930s Depression America. As New Deal programs sent writers, artists, photographers, and the like into the varied American landscape, the returned images and themes often celebrated

²⁴In *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*, a well documented study of New England material culture, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explores the colonial revival and its influence within the formulation of an American narrative. For Ulrich, domestic objects reveal complex stories about their makers and the larger culture that used them. These objects, such as the spinning wheel, for example, not only played crucial roles in the domestic economy of New England; to cautious mid-nineteenth century defenders of tradition, they also “evoked a world that seemed simpler and more authentic than the one they knew.” Ulrich argues that in this period, “the mystique of homespun spread.” Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 6, 17.

²⁵Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Myth, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 55.

the ideal small town or sturdy rural folk. Culture collectors sought out ‘real’ examples of an American ethic, often claiming to find it in the country, on the farm, or in the work song of the African American prison gang. In an era of economic uncertainty, these rural images and narratives represented firmness and true exemplars of American certitude and salvation. The images of plain folk in traditional dress were comforting to a nation beset by incomprehensible financial turmoil and apparent urban disarray.²⁶

In the modern South, themes and relics signifying simpler times in the distant past are important features in the tourist economy. The popular restaurant, Cracker Barrel, hangs physical pieces of southern ephemera on its walls to create an inviting and nostalgic atmosphere for all who come for biscuits, gravy, fried okra, and sweet tea. Although the interstate running directly in front of the porch rocking chairs has been responsible for massive shifts in the southern economy, linking the region to the rest of the United States and literally paving the way for industrial and technological growth, Cracker Barrel invites the traveler to come in and participate in its southern ease and countrified simplicity.

Since Franklin Roosevelt called for a redevelopment of the southern economy during the New Deal, the federal government's hand in the South has remained strong. From direct intervention in southern cotton production during the 1930s, to large scale investment in defense contracts in southern states, the federal government assisted in the shift from a primarily agricultural region to that of a modern economy defined by

²⁶Michael A. Tomlan, ed. *Preservation of What, for Whom?: A Critical Look at Historical Significance* (New York: The National Council for Preservation Education, 1998), 66.

national security, industrial management philosophies and global ties. If the reluctance to accept a strong federal government has remained intact to varying degrees in the South since the Civil War, the region nonetheless has benefited from a continued federal role in its redevelopment and modern ascendancy as a popular destination for business, industry, and vacationers.²⁷

Robert Johnson: A Blues and Heritage Tourism Icon

As an important agent of economic growth since the New Deal and World War II, tourism continues to shape regional identities and cultural memory throughout the South. The specific example of blues musician Robert Johnson is relevant to the historical construction of Mississippi's cultural identity as well its blues tourism industry. 'Come see where Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil' is a popular touristic refrain as selected versions of his life story are routinely used to attract visitors to Mississippi's Delta. Consider the following tourism website from Greenwood, Mississippi:

Perhaps no Bluesman has remained more influential and more mysterious than Robert Johnson... who allegedly sold his soul to the devil for the ability to play the guitar like no other. He was just 27 years old when a jealous husband supposedly poisoned him at a juke joint just outside of Greenwood. No one knows for sure where Johnson was laid to rest, so three monuments mark his possible burial sites.²⁸

²⁷ Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, & the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

²⁸ Aristotle Web Design. 2008. Mississippi Delta Tourism Association. On-line. <http://www.visitthedelta.com/communities/greenwood/>, accessed 03 December 2009.



Figure 1.1. Mississippi Blues Commission Blues Heritage Trail site for Robert Johnson. Little Zion M.B. Church. Greenwood, Mississippi. Photo by Author, 2007.

Robert Johnson was first critically praised in printed media in 1937. However, his fame as a tourism icon continues to accelerate since the release of the album, *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (1990).²⁹ Since 1990 scholars have devoted considerable attention to a reevaluation of the historical and musical impact of Robert Johnson, situating him more firmly within his early twentieth century Mississippi delta context, and revealing a more complex musician, versed in many different styles, and not as widely popular within his cultural milieu as previous folklore and legendary myths

²⁹ Stephen A. King, "Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject," *Southern Communication Journal* 3 (September 2006): 236.

suggested.³⁰ Mid-century white jazz critics often concentrated on Johnson's perceived dark imagery and mysterious death, elevating songs that mentioned the devil and mythologizing Johnson's Delta environment. Many early writers also assumed that Johnson's songs were autobiographical, leading them to attach invented meaning to selected lyrics. Recent studies cite Johnson's influences from commercial recordings as well as from his musical peers. This differs from earlier interpretations that assumed Johnson's music represented the pure root of the blues style, unaffected by the outside world. Similar ideas are often employed within folk-art markets that seek out authentic examples of culture whose inspiration is seemingly devoid of any commercial or foreign influence, thereby adding value to the art product. During the high point of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, the acknowledgement of African American art was often met with critical analyses that constrictively racialized the artists and their work. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mary Ann Calo argues, "with very few exceptions, critics writing for mainstream publications expected to see racial qualities in black art and were disappointed when they didn't."³¹

³⁰Writers such as Patricia Schroeder, Elijah Wald, Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McColloch, interpret Robert Johnson firmly within the social and cultural realities of his day. Collectively they work to de-mystify the legend by unearthing the many ways in which Johnson's historical narrative has been constructed. Their agenda is not revisionism for its own sake, nor do they disregard Johnson's documented musical ability and international influence. Rather, their various projects recognize the previous power relationships that worked to produce the Johnson narrative.

³¹ Mary Ann Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars," *American Quarterly* 3 (1999): 590.

By comparing recent interpretations with earlier work, it is possible to observe the process by which Robert Johnson's story entered the historical canon and popular culture. This historical treatment also reveals the many ways cultural memory is constructed and produced; with early interpretations and critical reviews setting standards of analysis that shaped subsequent readings. As efforts are underway in Mississippi to use blues history and culture within a developing tourism economy, it is important to explore the shaped narrative of Robert Johnson and its relationship to the identity of the Delta, blues music and its constituent cultures.

The popular Johnson story reflects the tendency for traditionally dominant majority groups to interpret aspects of minority cultures according to their own selective standards. In the case of much twentieth century blues scholarship, white interpreters and enthusiasts have often read into blues what they wanted to read or hear, constructing a memory that highlights specific aspects of African American or folk culture, and rejecting others that did not fit their self-defined archetypes. Many critics have built upon what little is known about Johnson's life, singling out mentions of the devil in his recorded output, and writing critical analyses animated by mystery and, at times, wistful speculation. Such early critical interpretations influenced many in the academy as well as young, mid-century enthusiasts who helped to revive the careers of seemingly forgotten delta blues players. Thus, the constructed myth (explained below) of a mysterious, romantic, and tormented Johnson standing at a crossroads in the middle of the night and selling his soul to the devil to play guitar has figured well in the marketing of the man and the Mississippi Delta. The myth has also contributed to a sense of the African

American ‘other’ in Mississippi, personified by the whimsical, often confining narrative of Robert Johnson. Commenting on early blues revivalists and their attempts to define a unique Delta Blues tradition, Marybeth Hamilton writes, “at their most positive, they enriched understanding and broadened white horizons. At their worst, they fed on a faintly colonialist romance with black suffering, an eroticization of African American despair.”³²

In 1936 and 1937, Johnson recorded twenty-nine songs for the American Record Corporation. The sessions took place in San Antonio and Dallas, with Don Law acting as producer. Although one cut, Terraplane Blues, sold modestly in places like the Mississippi Delta in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Robert Johnson was not widely popular, nor did he initially achieve the commercial success artists like Leroy Carr enjoyed. In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2004), Elijah Wald argues that “until the 1960s, Johnson’s name was all but forgotten, except by his immediate neighbors, his playing partners, and a handful of white folk and jazz fans.”³³

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed steady scholarly and critical interest in Johnson’s life and music. Indeed, the life of this musician has now assumed

³² Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 243; see also Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot examines “the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.” *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

³³ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004), 188.

legendary status, mythologized in feature films, through musical tributes by various artists, on a United States Postage Stamp, and now through tourism efforts in Mississippi.³⁴

On March 3, 1937, *The New Masses* published a critique of the Johnson recordings from Texas. The article described the uniqueness of Johnson's sound and proclaimed him to be "the greatest Negro blues singer who has cropped up in recent years... Johnson makes Leadbelly sound like an accomplished poseur." On the heels of his recording session, Robert Johnson had his first official praise. It proved to be a critical foundation upon which a world-reaching mythology developed.³⁵

In 1938, jazz impresario John Hammond staged the 'From Spirituals to Swing' concert at New York's Carnegie Hall, to display the traditional roots of jazz by showcasing various black musical forms and musicians. Hammond, who is a central figure in the Johnson story, as well as in the careers of Bessie Smith, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen, "wanted to bring together for the first time, before a musically sophisticated audience, Negro music from its raw beginnings to the latest jazz." He equated country blues singers with a kind of fundamental authentic primitivism,

³⁴ The 1986 feature film, *Crossroads*, uses Robert Johnson as a focal point in its storyline. Artists who have covered Johnson's songs include Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, and Led Zeppelin. In 1994, Robert Johnson's image was one of eight American jazz and blues artists to appear on a United States Postage Stamp. Patricia S. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 4.

³⁵ Quoted in Pearson and McColloch, 18.

positioning them as root elements and influences alongside more sophisticated jazz expressions.³⁶

In order to display these roots of jazz to the urban white audience, he needed a representative African American voice from the South. After listening to the master copies of a recently recorded blues singer named Robert Johnson at Columbia Records, Hammond found his man. Indeed, John Hammond recounted, “although (Johnson) was virtually unknown to the general public, I considered him the best there was.” However, just as Hammond placed Johnson on the initial bill for the concert, he learned of Johnson’s death and recruited Big Bill Broonzy, “another primitive blues singer whose records I loved.”³⁷

The show started with the presentation of recorded West African music, which according to Hammond, “would be an effective way to show how American Negro music had evolved from African roots.”³⁸ Hammond also opened with two Robert Johnson records, “demonstrat(ing)” according to Elijah Wald, “the extent to which Hammond considered Johnson a uniquely great artist, for whom there was no substitute.”³⁹ Thereafter, African American artists filled the hall with their musicality. Piano players Meade Lux Lewis and Pete Johnson opened with some boogie-woogie. Sister Rosetta

³⁶John Hammond with Irving Townsend, *John Hammond On Record: An Autobiography* (New York: Summit Books, 1977), 199.

³⁷James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll 1947-1977* (New York: Fireside, 2000), 186; Hammond, 202.

³⁸Hammond, 202.

³⁹Wald, 229.

Tharpe, whom Hammond described as “a gospel singer and forerunner of Mahalia Jackson”, commanded attention with her performance. Taking the place of Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy sang his blues after performances by Sonny Terry and acts from the New Orleans jazz tradition. Hammond recalls, “Bill, who farmed in Arkansas with a pair of mules, shuffled out and sang about a dream he’d had in which he sat in President Roosevelt’s chair in the White House. The audience screamed. It had never heard anything like this.”⁴⁰

Elijah Wald writes that Hammond’s folksy description of Broonzy reveals a tendency to define early blues performers according to primitive standards. Because Hammond was in a position of power in this circumstance, Wald observes a perpetuation of the folk myth when applied to Broonzy’s later professional life. Hammond’s shuffling mule farmer was, according to Wald, a “fashionable” and sophisticated musician who “kept up with contemporary musical trends.” After moving to Chicago in the 1920s, Broonzy had recorded “over two hundred sides under his own name and appeared as an accompanist on many hundreds more.” Wald argues that Broonzy’s folk image followed him because Hammond wanted a down-home blues singer from the South who could demonstrate the primitive roots of jazz to the urban white audience, who also sought this image to satisfy their own desires. Granting him a degree of professional agency, Wald writes that Broonzy “consciously shaped himself into the living embodiment of his white fans’ fantasies” when he entered the folk scene of the 1950s.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hammond, 203, 206.

⁴¹ Wald, 227, 228.

The ‘Spirituals to Swing’ concert proved successful and Hammond was confident that “sophisticated jazz fans heard at last the sources of their music.” Even though Robert Johnson did not attend the concert due to his death on August 16, 1938, Hammond’s glowing appraisal of Johnson’s music and his contention that Johnson was the best example of delta blues authenticity were vitally important to successive interpretations. The fact that Johnson had died under seemingly mysterious circumstances deep in Mississippi also contributed to a murky storyline that gathered steam in later years.⁴²

In 1939, John Hammond introduced Alan Lomax to the music and emerging narrative legend of Robert Johnson. Alan Lomax was the son of acclaimed folk song collector, John Lomax, and as a young man he assisted his father in the ‘discovery’ of Huddie Ledbetter; better known as the blues singer, Leadbelly. The Lomaxes are considered the first family in folk song collection and interpretation and are fundamental to any discussion of American musical preservation. John Lomax’s early work on American Ballad and Cowboy Song traditions, and Alan Lomax’s contributions through the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song, are examples of their important work.⁴³

In the early 1930s, John Lomax explained that his mission while traveling and compiling southern African American music “was to find the Negro who had had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man.” It was imperative to Lomax that they find expressions of a perceived pure African American idiom. He continued,

⁴² Hammond, 206.

⁴³ Benjamin Filene, “Our Singing Country: John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past,” *American Quarterly* 4 (December 1991): 603.

“‘Learnin’ Greek and Latin,’ daily association with the whites, and modern education prove disastrous to the Negro’s folk singing, destroying much of the quaint, innate beauty of his songs.” When the Lomaxes took the freshly paroled Leadbelly to New York, for example, they publicized his authenticity, favoring folk blues performances over more modern or commercial numbers.⁴⁴

In *Folk Songs of North America* (1960), Alan Lomax described a juke joint blues player as the dancers’ “bard, the mouthpiece for their agony, and the more he squawled, moaned, sobbed, and violently beat his guitar, the happier they felt.”⁴⁵ This is relevant to the larger discussion of Robert Johnson because it reveals the extent to which concepts such as authenticity and cultural purity influenced the Lomaxes’ perspective. When Alan Lomax heard Johnson’s music for the first time in 1939, he felt that he “was one of two or three great originals of the blues—as remarkable a singer as he was a lyricist and arranger.”⁴⁶ Lomax therefore felt it was important to ask Muddy Waters in 1941 if he knew Robert Johnson and whether he was influenced by Johnson’s music.⁴⁷

In 1946, a jazz critic named Rudy Blesh included Robert Johnson in his *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*. Johnson’s ‘Hell Hound on my Trail’ was the last of seven ‘archaic’ blues songs reviewed by Blesh. He began the review by calling attention to the

⁴⁴John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), xxx; Filene, 611.

⁴⁵Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 577.

⁴⁶Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 13.

⁴⁷Filene, 610; Wald, 231.

songs' "strangeness" and described Johnson's voice as "possessed like that of a man cast in a spell..." Positioning Johnson as his last example of what he referred to as an 'archaic' blues player, he closed his first chapter on blues with sixteen lines of poetic imagery. The expressive language was different from Blesh's treatment of the other archaic musicians, who received a mixture of biography and technical analysis. The difference may be due to the lack of biographical information on Johnson at the time Blesh published this work. In place of this dearth of information, Blesh crafted a critique based on atmospherics and mood. Of 'Hell Hound On My Trail', Blesh wrote: "The images—the wanderer's voice and its echoes, the mocking, slow, pursuing footsteps—are full of evil, surcharged with the terror of one alone among the moving, unseen shapes of the night." With Blesh's 'Hell Hound' moving closer, he continued, "Wildly and terribly, the notes paint a dark wasteland, starless, ululant with bitter wind, swept by the chill rain. Over the hilltop trudges a lonely, ragged, bedeviled figure, bent to the wind, with his easy rider held by one arm as its swings from its cord around his neck."⁴⁸

It is unclear why Blesh chose this particular song to critique, but its inclusion within this book is of critical importance to the Johnson narrative. This early work influenced Samuel Charters, a blues writer who later wrote *The Country Blues* (1959), which is considered a landmark in blues scholarship. John Dougan argues, "Blesh's opinions and views on performers set a new standard that many later blues scholars (the result of reading Charters) continued to use."⁴⁹ Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch

⁴⁸ Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 113, 114-121, 122.

argue that as a result of Blesh's review, "Johnson was now a country folk artist who was haunted by the supernatural."⁵⁰

Gayle Dean Wardlow, a prominent Johnson scholar who located Johnson's death certificate, argues that 'Hell Hound on My Trail' was not a featured number in Johnson's repertoire. The fact that Blesh singled this song out is therefore problematic. Blesh's romantic review of this song contributed to its lasting connection with Johnson and his twentieth century association with the devil and mystery. Wardlow writes that songs with devil imagery were commonplace within blues lyrics well before Johnson recorded. Blues player Peetie Wheatstraw, for example wanted to be known as 'the Devil's Son-in-Law' and Wardlow contends that "Johnson apparently believed that this Satanic association would heighten his reputation among record buyers and juke house frolickers."⁵¹ Writing about Johnson's other song title that invokes the devil ('Me and the Devil'), Elijah Wald argues that, "as far as the lyrics go, this is meant to be a funny song"⁵² to a crowd interested in dancing; not solemnly contemplating their misfortune in Blesh's 'dark wasteland.'

Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues* (1959) was an important contribution to the blues revival that found its widest white audience in the 1960s and beyond. Charters

⁴⁹ John M. Dougan, "Two Steps From The Blues: Creating Discourse and Constructing Canons in Blues Criticism" (Ph.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, 2001), 109.

⁵⁰ Pearson and McColloch, 23.

⁵¹ Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1998), 197.

⁵² Wald, 274.

declared that the African American blues audience was not concerned with “artistic pretensions.” He wrote that Robert Johnson’s records sold poorly among African American audiences due to his “sullen and brooding” style. He went on to declare that “it is artificial to consider him by the standards of a sophisticated audience that during his short life was not even aware of him, but by these standards he is one of the superbly creative blues singers.” But Charters also continued in the vein of Blesh’s romantic treatment. He wrote that “the intensity of [Johnson’s] own performance reshaped the songs into a searing harsh poetry” with a “brooding sense of torment and despair.” Charters also claimed that even though “almost nothing is known about his life” the devil “seemed to be [Johnson’s] torment.”⁵³

It was upon this critical and scholarly foundation that young fans of folk and rock and roll greeted the release of the Columbia reissue, *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers* (1961). Because no photographs of Johnson existed publicly at this time, the album cover was a painting depicting an African American guitar player hunched over and sitting in a wooden chair with his shadow just below. Released during a folk music craze in the United States and Britain, *Robert Johnson* found a young and eager audience. For this emerging cohort of white folk and blues enthusiasts, Johnson represented an authentic voice from an earlier generation, as well as a window into a mysterious Mississippi Delta world full of music, exoticism, and even the romantic threat

⁵³Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1959), 207, 210.

of danger. It was a voice accompanied only by a guitar, which fit nicely within the acoustic folk revival.⁵⁴

The liner notes for this release also accentuated Johnson's apparent dark mystery. Frank Driggs, a jazz promoter and music historian, wrote in *Robert Johnson*, "a country blues singer from the Mississippi Delta that brought forth Son House, Charlie Patton, Bukka White, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson appeared and disappeared, in much the same fashion as a sheet of newspaper twisting and twirling down a dark and windy midnight street." Son House and Charlie Patton were actually older than Johnson and should be considered influences on his music. The combination of the stark image on the album cover, the mysterious liner notes, and the title, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, further solidified Johnson's reputation as *the* dark and tortured representative of Mississippi delta blues.⁵⁵

In a 2004 interview for *Acoustic Guitar Magazine*, Eric Clapton revealed his personal sense of alienation as a young art student in England. Robert Johnson's music represented a "landmark" as Clapton struggled to define himself at a young age.⁵⁶ Patricia Schroeder argues that "to disaffected youths in the 1960s, Johnson was a sign, a signifier

⁵⁴Pearson and McColloch, 27; Miller, 187. The 1960s folk and blues revival assisted in the process of reintroducing many aging blues musicians to the American public. As artists like Son House and Muddy Waters achieved public notoriety and new audiences, they also attracted the attention of blues scholars. While the Johnson legend solidified, these artists also were interviewed, providing a great deal of information about Mississippi delta culture.

⁵⁵Pearson and McColloch, 27-28.

⁵⁶ Kenny Berkowitz, "Mr. Clapton's Blues: The Original Blues-Rock Guitar God Pays Tribute to His Idol Robert Johnson," *Acoustic Guitar Magazine*, 3 August 2004, 2.

divorced from context, who represented rebellion against convention, the romance of life on the road, unfettered freedom, and the epitome of artistic self-expression.”⁵⁷

Just as Rudi Blesh did twenty years earlier, young white blues enthusiasts created images of their own Robert Johnson in the 1960s and beyond. After the release of *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, they had a physical and aural document to construct a mythical image of a black blues singer from Mississippi. Schroeder writes that “much of what was written about Johnson in [the 1960s and 1970s] was speculation based on lyrics—the tendency to construct biography from repertoire.”⁵⁸

Various scholarly projects throughout the 1960s and 1970s flirted with the supernatural when discussing Robert Johnson. Collectively they built upon earlier interpretations that selectively pointed to ‘Hell Hound’ or ‘Me and the Devil’ as proof of Johnson’s inner turmoil. In 1966, an interview by Pete Welding “quoted Son House as saying that Johnson might have bartered his soul to the devil.” If the quote is authentic, most modern writers connect it to the period in which Johnson left his delta home and returned with a story that he learned guitar from a blues player from Hazelhurst, Mississippi named Ike Zimmerman. Zimmerman apparently claimed that he achieved his talent while practicing in a grave yard at night. When Johnson returned, he impressed Son House and Willie Brown with his obvious talent, which may have prompted House to remark: ‘that boy must have sold his soul to the devil to play like that.’⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Patricia S. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 50.

⁵⁸ Schroeder, 69.

Pete Welding contributed the liner notes to *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers, Volume two* (1970).⁶⁰ He wrote, “no other blues are so apocalyptic in their life view. They are shot through with dark foreboding, and almost total disenchantment with the human condition.” In 1973, Samuel Charters published *Robert Johnson* and argued that “in six of [Johnson’s] blues he mentions the devil or the supernatural—voodoo, and it seemed to force its presence on some of his greatest music.”⁶¹

Since 1990, studies of Robert Johnson have often drawn upon the first-hand accounts of musicians who actually knew and worked with the man. Thus, Pearson and McColloch argue that contemporaries “heard his music differently than did the literary critics.” Muddy Waters explained that “[Robert] had a different thing. Where we’d play it slow, Robert Johnson had it up tempo. The young idea of it, y’know what I mean...” Robert Lockwood Jr., Johnson’s brief apprentice, stated that “Robert played the guitar like a piano...”⁶²

⁵⁹ Pearson and McColloch, 30-31.

⁶⁰ This reissue featured another painted image of an African American guitar player, this time with his back to the viewer and playing in front of microphone in a corner. The image was the result of stories that surfaced since 1961, some of which revealed that Johnson may have recorded facing a corner with his back to the producers. Thus, many believed Johnson was either hiding his technique or was afraid of the white producers. Some modern acoustic musicians believe that this may simply have been a technique to achieve better sound quality out of an acoustic guitar without the aid of amplification. Or, it is possible that Johnson did not want anyone to steal his technique. Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McColloch, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

⁶¹ Quoted in Pearson and McColloch, 34, 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51, 50.

Rather than speak poetically about a mysterious figure preoccupied by the supernatural, Johnson's fellow musicians talked about his playing style, often marveling at his speed or agility. They commented on his clothes or his proclivity to get into trouble when drinking. In other words, they talked about a flawed human being who was serious about his music and extremely talented. Elijah Wald dismisses the idea that Robert Johnson represented the sole voice for the internal struggles of the African American community in his day. He writes, "the point is that African Americans, whether in the Delta or not, have been just as varied in their musical tastes as any other racial group, and this was especially true during the blues era, when more music was available than ever before and styles were changing almost monthly." Although Johnson's records modestly circulated in 1938 and beyond, his music was not the most popular and his style was not in high demand.⁶³

The image of a romantic blues player, unfettered by society, and from a mythologized Delta, is further complicated when juxtaposed by the Civil Rights struggles occurring in Mississippi as Johnson's record was re-released to a broader public. Segregation and Jim Crow dominated the Deep South until the momentum of grassroots movements could dislodge their hold long enough for political and economic transition. Whites dominated court systems, political centers, and the law in a region with one of the highest percentages of blacks in the country. Mississippi was synonymous with violence and the worst of the racial oppression firmly established throughout the South. Through the apparatus of the first Citizen's Council and the development of all-white academies in

⁶³ Wald, 98.

the Delta, Mississippi erected a system to promote and defend segregation, while white supremacists committed the well-publicized murders of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers, to name just two. These hate crimes further established Mississippi as a dangerous racial battleground in America. As southern cities developed new industrial and manufacturing economies during the Sunbelt boom of the latter half of the twentieth century, the Mississippi Delta did not attract large-scale industrial investment due in part to the continued legacies of racial separation and violence in this region.⁶⁴

The Robert Johnson narrative reveals processes by which certain historic figures are romanticized and commodified, especially when tied to a unique socio-cultural landscape like the Mississippi Delta. It reveals the influence of early writers, such as jazz critic Rudi Blesh, who in 1946 employed dramatic, poetic language when analyzing Johnson's music. Recurrent nostalgic or romantic portraits often masked the more complex realities of the African American Mississippi Delta culture that produced Johnson. These early standards of interpretation worked their way into popular culture, by way of the folk boom in the fifties and sixties, and by the predominately white interpreters who often selectively constructed the Johnson story.

George Lipsitz writes, "It might seem paradoxical that large numbers of European Americans who have such a possessive investment in whiteness have an affective

⁶⁴ Adam Faircloth, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 249, 250; Kenneth T. Andrews, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 195; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4, 5; Arthur G. Cosby and others, eds., "A Social and Economic Portrait of the Mississippi Delta," Social Science Research Center, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (Starkville: Mississippi State University, Dec. 1992), 35.

investment in the art of Robert Johnson, a black man.”⁶⁵ It is similarly paradoxical that Mississippi, with vast swaths of its history and development tied directly to white control and power, now invests such energy and capital in selected African American heritages. Nigel Williamson traveled from England to the Delta in 2006 to see first hand the landscape upon which he grew up distantly idolizing. In a project and article for the *Guardian* (United Kingdom) about the Charley Patton marker unveiling, Williamson asked Governor Barbour how he felt about the “paradox about the state that gave us slavery, sharecropping and segregation now promoting the music created by those conditions as a tourist attraction.” Barbour’s response acknowledged the “deprivation and poverty” of the early blues musicians but said that “we’ve come to realize what a powerful economic tool this music can be” and that Mississippi’s next heritage trail endeavor will concentrate on the state’s Civil Rights legacy.⁶⁶ Williamson further described his experiences at the unveiling and around various Delta sites:

If it’s almost impossible to separate truth from myth when chasing the ghosts of the old bluesmen, there’s no denying the strange, compelling nature of the scenery that shaped their music. The stark and eerie quality of the blues seems to find an echo in the delta’s vast and empty flatness, broken only by occasional swamps of half-submerged trees and the still-inhabited sharecroppers’ shacks that are frankly more Third World than global super-power.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 119.

⁶⁶ Nigel Williamson, “In Search of the Blues” *The Observer* 28 January 2007, 1. On-line. <http://www.guardian.co.uk>, accessed 03 December 2009.

⁶⁷ Ibid.



Figure 1.2. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour at the first Blues Commission Trail Marker unveiling ceremony for Charley Patton. Photo by Author, 2006.

Time will reveal if blues tourism efforts lead eventually to the promotion and validation of modern cultural expressions like Hip-Hop; an African American musical form highly similar in spirit, if not thematically, to the social functions of earlier blues performance. For now, the blues historical narrative appears more attractive or useful for its apparent disassociation from lingering social and racial inequities in Mississippi; a safer cultural asset in the black and white hues of the distant 1920's and 30's.

CHAPTER II

DELTA HISTORY

Historian James Cobb declared the Mississippi Delta ‘the most Southern place on earth’ in his 1992 study of the region. This strip of flatland, roughly “two hundred miles long and seventy miles across at its widest point,” stretches from the bluffs out of Memphis down to its southern terminus at Vicksburg. In the nineteenth century, white southeastern landowners claiming this region had to tame thick, swampy bottom-lands to establish a cotton kingdom. African American slaves (and later sharecroppers) largely subdued this agriculturally rich landscape, and by 1850 they were the most numerous people in the region. Cobb writes, “by the middle of the 19th century, the Delta had already assumed an enduring identity as a region where a wealthy, pleasure-seeking, and status-conscious white elite exploited the labor of a large and thoroughly subjugated black majority.”¹

Since 1850, this region witnessed massive floods, the re-establishment of white rule after a brief period of black reconstruction, the mechanization of agricultural labor, violent clashes over basic human and civil rights, and economic hardship akin to Third World conditions. During the twentieth century Mississippi was perhaps the extreme microcosm of a South thoroughly identified with vehement anti-communism, religious fervor, white supremacy, strong social conservatism, *and* music, literature, picturesque landscapes, and deep history. Commenting on William Faulkner's preoccupation with the Mississippi Delta, Willie Morris wrote that Faulkner “needed ...the exotic, unregenerate,

¹ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3, 28.

profligate, hedonistic, tormented Delta as a counterpoise to his more severe and unextravagant hills.”²



Figure 2.1 Hopson Plantation, near Clarksdale, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi. Marion Post Wolcott. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF33- 030948-M2. (1940).

The Delta was representative of something more authentic, more troubling, and more mysterious than the rolling landscape of Faulkner's northern Mississippi, just as the mystique of Robert Johnson's shaped legacy continues to beckon outsiders. Mississippi is now home to a vibrant gaming industry and a developing tourism economy that utilizes African American history and culture as its central narrative. To local and state officials,

² Arthur G. Cosby and others, eds., "A Social and Economic Portrait of the Mississippi Delta," Social Science Research Center, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (Starkville: Mississippi State University, Dec. 1992), 7.

tourism offers many clear benefits to struggling regions. According to the 'Fiscal Year 2007 Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi' report, "the FY2007 portion of state sales tax returned to cities attributed to tourism was \$37.7 million, a 4.8% increase compared to FY 2006 levels." Tourism also accounted for approximately 123,000 directly or indirectly-induced jobs in FY 2007.³ However, as shown in Appalachia, South Africa, and Australia, heritage tourism development is also prone to uneven distribution of benefits within distinctive communities whose cultural narratives are often discreetly packaged and used to draw tourist revenue. This chapter situates these developments within the larger history of race relations, politics, and constructed identity of the Mississippi Delta.

Delta History

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a general movement of slavery from the mid-Atlantic and Eastern regions to the South and southwestern frontier. With the rise of cotton agriculture in the deep South, speculators found new areas to extend slavery while simultaneously opening new markets for eastern tobacco planters hoping to earn needed cash from the sale of their human property. Consequently, markets in southern port cities developed to broker these slave transactions. New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston, for example, each operated markets of human transfer, thereby helping to supply the enslaved labor that cleared, drained, and created the fertile southern fields for cotton production. Because the Mississippi Delta was largely inhospitable before cultivation,

³ Mississippi Development Authority, *Fiscal Year Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi*, Tourism Division, Research Unit, (Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi Development Authority, 2008), 5.

only those eastern slaveholders with enough money and labor could establish agricultural ventures there. Large plantations were fairly common in the Delta, as massive expanses of land had to be cleared and prepared for cultivation.⁴

Transforming this landscape from a swampland into a cotton kingdom was achieved through the use of enslaved labor. Out of a population of 57,862 in the Mississippi Delta in 1860, roughly 84% were slaves who provided white planters the means to extract wealth from the soils of this region, while establishing a society and culture defined by racial inequality, threats of (and outright) violence, and an economy with clear distinctions between a master and enslaved class.⁵ However, because taming the Delta and other southern agricultural regions required high populations of slaves in a given locale, unique African American cultural mechanisms emerged to cope with slave systems.

By hiding aspects of life from the master, slaves could maintain a sense of community wholly separate from that of the white world. Secret religious rituals and marriage ceremonies at night codified sectors of African American culture that could not be fully breached by the slaveholder. Slave medical practices also consciously diverged from southern white culture. Conjunction provided a means by which slaves identified and treated physical and emotional ailments within their communities and its use “was a

⁴ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8, 28

⁵ John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930: Settling the Southern Bottomland* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 4.

constant reminder that slaveholder power was only partial.”⁶ The conjurer in this sense acted as cultural spokesman and interpreter for the slave population. His methods were not bound by, and were often opposed to, white cultural and medical practice, which further solidified African American communal bonds. Conjurers also acted as spiritualists in slave communities. Combining their knowledge of traditional curing methods with predictive abilities not fully understood by their followers, these individuals exerted powerful influences on plantations and farms throughout the South. By employing root cures, fixing curative pouches and concoctions, and offering counsel to afflicted community members, “conjurers helped to encourage slave resistance throughout the Americas.”⁷

While music among slaves functioned to generate communal bonds as well as catharsis, it too acted as a form of resistance. The slave South was populated by a wide variety of African tribal people whose home cultures often differed markedly from one another. Their cultural development in America involved a complex mixing of diverse European and African strains. The use of rhythmic drumming was common in West Africa and the Congo, yet its expression by slaves in the America’s was quickly hampered by slaveholders who feared that drumming could cause insurrection. In this musical vacuum, slaves used the voice as an expressive and resistive vehicle. In *Deep Blues*, Robert Palmer argues that “through singing to themselves, hollering at each other

⁶ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 107, 108.

⁷ Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 180, 181, 182.

across the fields, and singing together while working and worshipping, [slave men and women] developed a hybridized musical language that distilled the very essence of innumerable African vocal traditions.” In areas with high concentrations of African-American slaves like the Mississippi Delta, distinctive music traditions emerged alongside other important coping mechanisms. Palmer adds however, “while some of the earliest slave musicians were making purely African music, others were learning European dance music in an attempt to better their positions in the slave hierarchy, and some became adept performers of European classical music.”⁸ This early variability in musical style and expression foreshadowed later developments in African American music, such as blues, that included localized, supra-regional, and commercial influences in the twentieth century.

Active resistance played a vital role in the development and maintenance of slave culture in the Delta and throughout the South. Conjuraton, music, and folklore helped to solidify communal bonds while religious conviction through African/Christian influences further prevented complete subjugation. Many slaves also routinely left their plantations, only to be pursued by patrollers, dogs, and the lash. But resistive behavior could not fully define slave life on the plantation. Within a given slave population, and depending upon the size of the population, slaves reacted to bondage in myriad ways.

When the news of emancipation moved throughout the South during the Civil War, many slaves exhibited uncertainty about how they should respond. Eugene

⁸ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago's South Side to the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 33, 39, 40.

Genovese argues that slave confusion about the meaning of freedom reflected the degree to which paternalism had taken hold in a given plantation.⁹ If a slaveholder had reasonable control over his labor force, his slaves might avoid action until word came from the master. Many masters could not conceive of life without slavery, attempting to maintain the status quo. In this case, a master could prevent slave desertion with threats of dividing families through sales or simply by not telling his slaves they were free. An ex-slave from Mississippi named Calline Brown (b. 1832) recalled that “we didn’t even know when the war was over. The white folks tried to keep it out of the ears about freedom. Some of the Yankees must have told my daddy about it.”¹⁰ Leon Litwack argues that the slaveholder frequently “acted to preserve his source of labor in the guise of protecting his former slaves from the inevitable hardship and snares of freedom.”¹¹

Although slaves understood their bondage and took direct means to affect change in their lives, the system of slavery still represented the framework within which men and women acted. Antebellum paternalism and racialized hierarchical attitudes remained in Mississippi even after the guns were lowered at Appomattox.

After the Civil War, between 1870 and 1900, the Mississippi Delta remained a frontier. Lumber and railroad companies were just beginning to enter the thick, swampy

⁹ Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1974.

¹⁰ George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series I, Volume 6, Mississippi Narratives, Part 1 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 236, 237.

¹¹ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 191, 182.

backcountry woods that served as barriers between the river and vast fields of cotton. As the federal government invested in flood control to protect agricultural development and the Delta's increasing population, lumbermen from the Midwest and North established businesses that later morphed into large plantations. The Illinois Central Railroad linked the Delta midway between New Orleans and Chicago, thereby opening the region to people, transportation, and goods. The region's economy was also in a state of flux during this period, forcing many white landholders to either sell or lease backcountry lands to ease debt burdens and to respond to the higher land taxes imposed by Republican governments after the Civil War. In such an environment, freed slaves actively purchased and rented from river-bound landowners eager to maintain their own economic, social, and political existence. John C. Willis writes, "rather than lose their backcountry lands forever, these men and women gave up control of the property temporarily by renting their lands to freedmen... The same backcountry that speculators now regarded as a poor risk for investment became a poor man's promised land."¹²

Before the advent of interior railroads, the Mississippi River and its steamboat landings served as the primary transport and population centers in the Delta. As railroads moved into backcountry counties such as Bolivar and Coahoma, population growth and white political power soon followed. These rail-lines largely determined the growth and success of future towns in the region as planters moved into interior fields cleared and cultivated by the hands of slaves and later freedmen. A severe economic downturn,

¹² Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10, 11; Otto, 9; John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta After The Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 4; Otto, 30.

falling cotton prices, and more restrictive credit practices sent many freedmen into debilitating debt and solidified their reliance on the white minority, resulting in the shift from renting and landownership to sharecropping. Beginning in the 1880s, Willis adds, “agricultural credit became an instrument for separating farmers from their property, and politics was shaped into a tool guarding the privileges of wealthy planters, businessmen, and professionals.”¹³

As Democratic governments realigned their systems of white political, economic, and social supremacy after Reconstruction, Delta railroad and lumber companies sent out advertisements and publications to the North and around the world touting their abundant lands, hospitable people, and lucrative opportunities. Through pamphlets like *The Call of the Alluvial Empire* (1919), settlers were beckoned to move south to take advantage of the newly deforested Delta soils and help build a cotton empire. As the population increased during this period, so too did cotton production rates. In Washington County, home to Greenville, Mississippi, cotton production increased from “30,362 bales in 1880 to 90,423 bales in 1897.” Although significant numbers of Chinese and Italian migrants worked in the Delta to supplement labor shortages during the growth of cotton agriculture, Mikko Saikku argues that “blacks and ‘non-Aryans,’ whether northern or southern, were not included in the targeted pool of potential bottomland pioneers.”¹⁴

While promotional pamphlets helped to attract agricultural pioneers to the Delta, cotton also lured many African Americans in search of work. However, they often felt the

¹³ Willis, 107, 113.

¹⁴ Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 125, 126.

stifling and violent features of Jim Crow when they arrived. The white south erected black codes that severely limited African American voting access until the 1960s, while the Delta developed along rail-lines that separated two distinct black and white sides of towns.¹⁵ John M. Giggie writes that during the post-Reconstruction period, “Mississippi...was first among all states in the nation in the overall number of lynchings...and, in the 1880s alone, recorded twice as many as any other state.”¹⁶ James K. Vardaman was elected Governor of Mississippi in 1903, strengthening an era of outspoken hatred for African Americans from the highest office in the state. Vardaman once quipped that blacks were “lazy lying lustful animals which no amount of training can transform into a tolerable citizen.”¹⁷

In 1902, Dunbar Rowland read his “A Mississippi View of Race Relations in the South” to the Alumni Association of the University of Mississippi. Rowland, the first director of the Mississippi state archives from 1902-1936, was a strong, faithful promoter of the Confederate Cause and actively served to maintain and represent this interest in Mississippi’s budding historical and archival philosophy. Defending the reestablishment of white rule in Mississippi after Reconstruction, Rowland argued:

¹⁵ Otto, 30; Erve Chambers, ed. *Tourism and Culture: An Applied Perspective* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 151; Arthur G. Cosby and others, eds., “A Social and Economic Portrait of the Mississippi Delta,” Social Science Research Center, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, (Starkville: Mississippi State University, Dec. 1992), 33, 21.

¹⁶ John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁷ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 117.

Out of the mass of conflicting opinions there have come two great ideas about which there is no difference of opinion in the South. The first is the necessity for the absolute social separation and isolation of the negro. He will never be accepted as an equal no matter how great his future advancement. He may gain the culture of the schools and acquire something of the polish of polite society, but he can never beat down the barriers between white and black. The demands of civilization must be obeyed. The second settled conviction is that the negro will never again be allowed to control the public affairs of a single Southern state.¹⁸

After a brief post-war period of land ownership and a modicum of political participation, African Americans in the Delta faced a cycle of debt, restrictive agricultural labor, and a society still resting upon foundations of white rule established through the legacy of slavery. Though residing in direct proximity to one another, and often maintaining close relationships, the white and black populations of the Delta remained largely separated culturally, socially, and economically at the turn of the twentieth century. Mississippi author Willie Morris recalled “it was mysterious and cruel and profoundly interior, that merging here in the Delta of the great European and African sources, yet vital and even life-given—as if we belonged together, and yet did not; the barrier between us acute and invisible. It was very strange and hard.”¹⁹

The post-reconstruction years also witnessed the emergence of the modern blues form from the cultural residue of slavery on plantations such as Dockery, just outside Cleveland, Mississippi. William Dockery settled in the Delta backcountry in 1888, and soon established a “nearly ten-thousand acre [cotton plantation] in the Sunflower River

¹⁸ Dunbar Rowland, “A Mississippi View of Race Relations in the South,” Read before the Alumni Association of the University of Mississippi, June 3rd, 1902, (Jackson: Harmon Pub. Co. Printers, 1903). Library of Congress, American Memory, “From Slavery to Freedom: The African-American Pamphlet Collection, 1824-1909,” 9.

¹⁹ Cosby, et. al., 6.

Valley...” The ‘Pea-Vine’ railroad line connected the plantation to the rest of the Delta and beyond. The vast acreage required intensive labor to cultivate the land and Dockery was eventually home to some 2,000 workers.²⁰ Charley Patton’s family lived on the plantation and he made a name for himself as a ‘musicianer’ later in the 1920s. Playing at evening frolics and dances, as well as traveling to nearby towns and rail-stops, Patton deftly resisted the confines of sharecropping life and established a degree of autonomy and mobility through his music. His popularity in his African American community, his influence on fellow bluesmen such as Tommy Johnson, Son House, and Robert Johnson, as well as his recordings during the 1920s and 1930s blues craze, helped to solidify not only his place within the pantheon of American musicians, but also to popularly tie Dockery Plantation to blues origin stories as the mysterious birthplace of a unique Delta Blues tradition. Robert Palmer interviewed Dockery Plantation owners Joe Rice and Keith Dockery (wife) in 1979. Recalling the often insulated black culture on large plantations in the Delta, they remembered, “we never heard these people sing. We were never the type of plantation owners who invited their help to come in and sing for parties. I wish we had realized that these people were so important.”²¹

²⁰ Otto, 22.

²¹ Palmer, 55; Dockery Plantation received a Blues Heritage Trail Marker in 2008.



Figure 2.2. Dockery Plantation Site, outside Cleveland, Mississippi. Photo by Author, 2006.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the cumulative effect of southern promotional pamphlets, the legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the concentration of high numbers of disenfranchised African Americans living under a resurrected system of white rule further solidified the image of an exotic, unique Mississippi Delta relative to the rest of the country. In 1931, *New York Times* reporter, George Gray, traveled to Mississippi to survey the problem of cotton overproduction and the resultant depression of agricultural systems in the South. Describing the Delta, Gray wrote, “the plantations stretch for miles behind the grassy levees, preserving something of the leisurely atmosphere of antebellum days. Here more than 90 percent of the cotton is raised by tenant farmers working other men’s land.” Low prices, the ravages of boll

weevil infestation, and the inherent tension between owner and tenant or cropper contributed to the hard times during the 1930s in the Delta. One planter reported to Gray, “our damnation is the tenant system...this devilish scheme of paying in advance, which means that you rarely get what you pay for. It was fastened on us at the close of the Civil War by force of circumstances, and it is wrong—wrong for the landlord, wrong for the tenant. It would break Henry Ford.”²² Ironically, as Jane Adams and D. Gorton argue, New Deal programs such as the Farm Security Administration and its Tenant Purchase Program further segregated the Delta by “separating [poor] black and white people who had lived intermingled as sharecroppers, creating housing patterns that remain inscribed in the 21st century landscape of the Delta.”²³

During wartime mobilization between 1940 and 1945, 43% of Mississippi’s agricultural population left to find industrial employment in northern cities. Planters began exploring alternatives to traditional cotton farming that could replace the hand labor of human workers. In 1944, Hopson Plantation²⁴ in Clarksdale, Mississippi was the site of the first mechanically harvested cotton crop in the world. Dick Hopson told an interviewer that “men from the eastern mills, bankers, in fact, just about every phase of

²² George W. Gray, “King Cotton’s Glutted Empire,” *New York Times* 27 September 1931, 1.

²³ Jane Adams and D. Gorton, “Southern Trauma: Revisiting Caste and Class in the Mississippi Delta,” *American Anthropologist* 2 (2004): 340.

²⁴ Hopson Plantation is now home of the Shack-Up Inn, which uses sharecropper shacks as bungalows for Delta tourists. Hopson is also a key stop on the Blues Heritage Trail. The marker presents the historical link between cotton agriculture and the development of blues traditions in the area.

the cotton business has been represented in those who have come to observe the picking operation this year.”²⁵ The new technology reduced costs from \$39.41 per human-picked bale of cotton to \$5.26 for a machine harvest.²⁶

As agricultural mechanization rose to prominence through the 1940s, Deltans were forced to confront the social and political implications. While many planters transformed their agricultural systems to fit the dictates of mechanized farming, they simultaneously chafed at the realities of African American out-migration and loss of control as a result of the new system. In response, many argued that blacks were ill-equipped to operate successfully within the changing economy, and that the plantation philosophy of paternalistic guidance and unequal rights was still the most viable option for those that remained around the vast farms of the Delta. This outlook reflected the developmental history of this region. White planters historically defended labor subjugation through the institution of slavery in the nineteenth century, thus contributing to a hierarchically-racialized social landscape in the twentieth century.²⁷

In order to maintain control of the African American labor force, many planters issued calls for reform and improved working, social and educational conditions while

²⁵ Bob Ratliff, “Historic Delta Research Changed Cotton Farming,” *Mississippi State University Ag Communications* 3 January 2008, 2.

²⁶ John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 111.

²⁷ Woodruff, 208; The resolutions from a Delta Council meeting in 1944 conveys attitudes towards Delta African American culture by the primary political organization in the region: Col. Alexander Fitzhugh, President Delta Council, “Delta Council: Addresses Presented to Delta Council Annual Meeting and Resolutions adopted by Ninth Convention, Cleveland, Mississippi, 3 May 1944.” Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

still employing the tool of paternalism. Efforts to improve the “Delta’s biracial problem”²⁸ were also tied to fears of labor organization and communist infiltration. The Delta Council was the association through which these planter debates and adaptive philosophies emanated. Initially formed in 1935, this early Delta Chamber of Commerce included planters and businessmen concerned with economic development and improved infrastructure. It was later revised and became the Delta Council in 1938 and soon shifted emphasis to solving labor issues in the changing Delta. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff writes, “the Delta Council clearly stated that no outside help was to be solicited—the Delta would change constructively and take care of its own problems. However, these improvements would occur without any change in the political status of black people.” Delta resident Oscar F. Bledsoe III argued during this period that “this perfect harmony is under attack by the New Deal, assisted by the President’s wife, the FSA, and the CIO.” He went on to say that African Americans “by nature, will segregate themselves in all their activities, and have no ambition for social and racial equality, of which there is no such thing. The negro believes in sharecropping half of his time...” and that sharecropping “is the fairest division of units of wealth production that has yet been devised by man.”²⁹

²⁸ Col. Alexander Fitzhugh, President Delta Council, “Delta Council: Addresses Presented to Delta Council Annual Meeting and Resolutions adopted by Ninth Convention, Cleveland, Mississippi, 3 May 1944.” Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi, 34.

²⁹ Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, “Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates Over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s,” *Journal of Southern History* 2 (May 1994): 266-267, 271, 274.

A resolution adopted at a 1944 meeting of the Delta Council reveals attitudes held by its prominent members during a period of war mobilization, out-migration, and changes in the agricultural system. This resolution called for higher educational and public health standards for the black community, and proffered a moral obligation to increase the economic prospects for the poorest laborers in the region. However, these pronouncements were couched within the paternalistic rhetoric of white supremacy:

In a thoughtful and sympathetic but realistic consideration of the Delta's biracial problem, recognition must be given to two fundamentals: First, that the best thought of the leaders of both races in the South is that the Southern system of segregation will promote the peaceable and cooperative relations of both races. This is a recognized *sine qua non* of Southern racial adjustment. Likewise, so far as the Delta is concerned, another *sine qua non* of peaceable and cooperative racial relations is political control by the white man.³⁰

Fearing influence and agitation for fair wages from outside labor organizations like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), the Delta Council responded with a curious mixture of seemingly progressive health care and educational initiatives, along with overt efforts to prevent black unionization and social mobility.³¹ Given the significant change in the Delta during this period, James Cobb observes, "the transformation of Delta agriculture left the region's planter-dominated social and political framework fundamentally intact."³²

³⁰ Col. Alexander Fitzhugh, President Delta Council, "Delta Council: Addresses Presented to Delta Council Annual Meeting and Resolutions adopted by Ninth Convention, Cleveland, Mississippi, 3 May 1944." Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi, 34.

³¹ Woodruff, 218, 219.

³² Cobb, 201, 207.

During the 1940s and 1950s, African American farm laborers worked to resist the plantation ethos of white control by gathering in churches and communities to explore labor organization, while advances in radio and car transportation introduced urban ideas to the Delta backcountry.³³ Woodruff adds that a growing collective consciousness induced many black Deltans to “file legal suits, stage boycotts, and openly defy the customs of segregation.”³⁴ As a precursor to Freedom Summer in 1964, African American-led organizations such as the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) in Cleveland, Mississippi, worked to register black voters in the state, while local leaders like Amzie Moore provided support and safe-houses for gatherings and meetings. Delta blacks conducted sit-ins to protest segregated restaurants, while Cleveland resident Francis Smith participated in marches to open Delta State University to African American students.³⁵ Smith recalled that during this period, Cleveland blacks:

couldn't go to sit down and eat at any restaurant. You had to use your own restaurant or either go to the back door. So...some of the younger black people...decided they wasn't going to the back door. So I remember one particular place...Simmons Drugstore and of course he had a fountain in the back, a large bar you could go in and...sit down and relax. The white could but not the black, so the blacks started sitting in and he discontinued his bar.”³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Woodruff, 218, 219.

³⁵ Rubin and Francis Smith, interview by Ambrose Webster II, Oral History #190, 19 June 2001. “Civil Rights Oral Histories.” Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

³⁶ Ibid.

After the *Brown* decision in 1954 declaring segregation unconstitutional, Mississippi responded with measures to defend the separation between black and white. Restrictive voter registration policies, for example, led to miniscule numbers of African American voters. The State Sovereignty Commission of Mississippi was created in 1956 to impede integration policies. When Clarksdale black activist Aaron Henry drafted a petition for local blacks to ask the school board to desegregate, “the Citizens Council arranged for all the banks in town to deny credit to anyone who signed.”³⁷ Henry also attempted to register his daughter at a white school in Clarksdale in 1964. His inability to enroll his daughter resulted in *Rebecca E. Henry v. The Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District*, a case filed by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of integration in Clarksdale in 1969. Nicholas Lemann writes that as a result, “the prosperous white citizenry of Clarksdale” developed “a contingency plan” to open “a brand-new private school called Lee Academy. It has never had a black student.”³⁸

Schools in the Mississippi Delta have maintained a racial divide largely in response to integration policies. Private Academies were thus a direct reaction to the various integration decisions since the 1960s. As many Delta towns are configured according to white and black sides of the railroad tracks running through downtown, private academies are predominately white and the public schools are predominately black or marginally integrated. While educational segregation is evident in other parts of

³⁷ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 310.

³⁸ Lemann, 321, 322.

the United States, research suggests that Delta schools are unique and may reflect entrenched attitudes that perpetuate racial divides.³⁹

In addition to increasing forms of political mobilization and labor organization during the twentieth century, the African American community provided support networks to cope with changing economic and agricultural circumstances. While these communities relied on churches and family to foster and build social capital, other venues provided important spaces for information and networking. Within a society whose custom dictated segregated social space, local juke joints served many important functions within African American communities in Mississippi and throughout the South. As discussed further in chapter 4, Jimmy Duck Holmes, musician and owner of the Blue Front Cafe in Bentonia, Mississippi, states that his juke joint has served as the ‘living room’ of the African American community in his town since 1948. This building stands next to a former cotton gin, a grocery store, and the Canadian National-Illinois Central rail-line. Bentonia plays an important role within Mississippi’s developing blues tourism narrative for its association with the Blue Front, as well as with the legacies of musicians Henry Stuckey, Jack Owens, Skip James, and now Jimmy ‘Duck’ Holmes. Like Robert Johnson, the musical influence of Skip James is global in scale, while his name and

³⁹ Suzanne E. Eckes, “The Perceived Barriers to Integration in the Mississippi Delta,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 2 (Spring 2005): 1-26. This study revealed perceptions among white private academy students and parents that public schools are lacking in discipline, academic rigor, and safety in one Delta town. However, according to Suzanne Eckes, “the predominately white private school has fewer certified teachers, course offerings, and extra-curricular activities” than the public school and that “the public school has equal or fewer (weapons or violent) incidents than the state average.” Eckes also concluded that “although parents indicated theoretical support for integration, their actions demonstrated avoidance of actual integration.”

shaped legacy assists in anchoring Mississippi's cultural and tourism identity ever-tighter to a blues heritage.

Skip James

Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James was born in 1902 in Yazoo City, Mississippi, and spent his early years on the Woodbine Plantation in Bentonia. Influenced musically by fellow Bentonian Henry Stuckey, James moved to the Delta in 1919 to work in lumber and levee camps while honing his musical skills. He returned to Bentonia in the 1920s working as a sharecropper and bootlegger as well as reuniting with Henry Stuckey to play various local parties and towns. The influential blues talent scout, HC Speir, secured a recording opportunity with Paramount Records and in 1931 James recorded eighteen sides including: "I'm So Glad," "Devil Got My Woman," "Special Rider Blues," and "20-20 Blues." Although a highly gifted musician, James was often ambivalent about living his life as a blues player. He spent time in a Seminary in Texas but moved back to Bentonia in the 1950s. His music was characterized by an open-tuned guitar drone, intricate piano runs, and high-pitched singing, conveying an intensely personal style. He later claimed that he could sidestep the perceived sin of playing blues because his heart was not fully taken by it.⁴⁰

In the 1960s, Skip James resurrected his music career during the folk/blues revival in the United States and Britain.⁴¹ During this period, Mississippi artists such as

⁴⁰ Stephen Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

⁴¹ In 1970, Biograph Records released *A Tribute to Skip James, Volume One, Greatest of the Delta Blues Singers*. (Biograph BLP 12016, 1970, LP) In the liner notes

James, Son House, Muddy Waters, Mississippi John Hurt and Bentonian Jack Owens played folk and blues festivals, universities, and overseas tours to enthusiastic, young, and largely white audiences. Their back-catalogs were often re-released, including Robert Johnson's 1961 re-issue, which further cemented his growing reputation as a mysterious and tormented Delta blues figure with evocatively wrought liner notes and reviews. After World War II, blues was not as popular as other forms, such as soul and r&b among African Americans. However, the music of artists like Skip James and Robert Johnson served as introductions to blues and to Mississippi for countless diverse audiences around the world. Blues and jazz critics continued to describe these musicians as the authentic, often primitive, voices of a unique and alluring Mississippi blues tradition. The liner notes to a 1963 Origin Jazz Library (OJL-5) release titled, 'The Mississippi Blues, 1927-1940' stated: "Here is one field in which the word Mississippi is still a superlative. The Blues, as with most things Southern, acquire their extreme and definitive form within the borders of that unique commonwealth. The State of Mississippi, together with the river land north to Memphis, produced far more blues singers, of greater breadth of style and of wider influence than any other...."⁴²

to this release, Chris Albertson wrote, "the reappearance of Skip James caused quite a stir in the blues world and, after Newport (Folk Festival), the veteran singer, his repertoire worked up considerably, began performing in major U.S. cities, winning high critical acclaim. In 1967 he toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival and one of his songs, 'I'm So Glad,' was recorded by the chart-making English blues-rock group Cream, that same year."

⁴² Quote taken from a web-photo of the 1963 release, *The Mississippi Blues, 1927-1940*, Origin Jazz Library, OJL-5, 1963, LP. Gayle Dean Wardlow (liner notes). On-line. <http://www.wirz.de/music/jamesfrm.htm>, accessed 03 December 2009.

Since Skip James' rediscovery in the 1960s, and now after the success of Jimmy Holmes' recordings, Bentonia is frequently referred to as the site of a distinctive form of Mississippi blues known as the 'Bentonia Style.' Holmes argues that the sound is "real lonesome, real haunting, real scary sounding, when you do it like it's supposed to be done." Based on his personal experience, feedback he often receives at his shows, and from the many music writers now describing his sound, Jimmy feels that he is carrying on the work of Bentonia natives Henry Stuckey (1897-1966), Skip James (1902-1969), and Jack Owens (1904-1997), and he is often referred to as the last practitioner of this style. Jimmy recalls that Skip James and Jack Owens called their tunings "cross-note, which is actually an open E or E minor."⁴³ This tuning produces a low drone on the guitar and is usually accompanied by high-pitched singing. Jimmy argues that this combination defines the Bentonia style of blues.

Blues scholar and ethnomusicologist David Evans conducted research and field recordings in Bentonia in the 1960s with Jack Owens. Evans argues that Owens and Skip James drew largely from an oral or folk tradition and the "unusual qualities" their cross-note "tunings generated...seems to have been localized" in the Bentonia area. While conducting his initial fieldwork in the area in the 1960s, he also found that Owens and his

⁴³ Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, interview by author, 26 August 2006, Bentonia, Mississippi; In 2007, Jimmy's second release, 'Done Got Tired of Tryin', was included on NPR's Top Ten Blues Album list. The review stated: "Bentonia, Miss., is known for its own specialized blues style, represented by the great Skip James, who was a Bentonia native. Jimmy "Duck" Holmes brings the style back and updates it on this, his second album, which includes an appearance by Bentonia's great harmonica player Bud Spires." NPR, "Top Ten Blues Album List of 2007," On-line. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17095982>, accessed 03 December 2009.

wife ran a juke joint from their house on the outskirts of Bentonia. Evans recalls that Owens cleared “away the furniture in the front room, maybe have benches along the wall, and then the kitchen was behind it and his wife Mabel would make sandwiches there and pass them out along with drinks, bottles of beer...through an actual hole in the wall into the actual juke area...the living room.”⁴⁴



Figure 2.3. Jack Owens on his front porch in Bentonia, Mississippi, ca. 1960. Photo courtesy of Professor David Evans, University of Memphis.

Mississippi’s unique identity even within a unique South relative to the rest of the United States, was further bolstered by the blues narratives written in the liner notes of record releases, through the many Civil Rights images on television, and within the

⁴⁴ David Evans, interview by author, 8 February 2008, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee.

minds of youthful fans captivated by the idea of authentic bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Skip James taming their own dark Delta landscapes with their guitars and voices. As discussed in the next chapter, the blues narrative is now being re-written through the engine of heritage tourism in Mississippi. This economic development strategy is occurring within the larger matrix of Mississippi's complicated racial history. Tremendous strides are evident within the basic decision to use components of black history within State-sponsored cultural efforts. The degree to which African American communities are actually shaping the developing blues identity of Mississippi through tourism remains unclear. The next chapter traces the recent history of blues tourism in the state, concluding with an analysis of the Hopson Plantation/Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale. Chapter 4 continues to explore the personal narrative of Blue Front Café owner, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, as well as issues surrounding the use of blues culture in Mississippi tourism in the film, 'Refuse to Fold.'

CHAPTER III

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A MODERN BLUES TOURISM LANDSCAPE IN MISSISSIPPI

On May 14, 1990, the final report of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC)¹ made its way to the desk of the President of the United States. The report, titled *The Delta Initiatives: Realizing the Dream...Fulfilling the Potential*, included the results of a massive research project that encompassed two-hundred nineteen counties and parishes of the Lower Mississippi Delta.² Bill Clinton, Arkansas Governor and Chairman of the LMDDC, wrote a letter to President George H.W. Bush detailing the urgent need to respond to the four hundred recommendations outlined in the Final Report. Rather than “just another government report to be added to countless shelves of government studies that have gone before,” Governor Clinton wrote that the findings and recommendations of the LMDDC represent “a Handbook for Action—one that can turn

¹ The LMDDC consisted of 58 members and staff. Its state commissioners were: Chairman Bill Clinton, Governor of Arkansas; Vice Chairman Ray Mabus, Governor of Mississippi; Secretary Ed Jones, Former U.S. Congressman, Tennessee; Charles Kruse, Missouri Department of Agriculture; Buddy Roemer, Governor of Louisiana; Lee Troutwine, Kentucky Department of Local Government; Dr. Rhonda Vinson, Department of Economic Development, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. David Wayne Brown, ed. *LMDDC, The Delta Initiatives, Realizing the Dream...Fulfilling the Potential: A Report by the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission* (Mercury Printing, 1990), 168.

² The Lower Mississippi Delta Region included 219 counties within the States of Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. National Park Service, “Draft Heritage Study and Environmental Assessment, Appendix A: Legislation.” On-line. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/volume1/abdxa.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009.

the Delta and its 8.3 million people into full partners in America's exciting future, full participants in the changing global economy."³

While the LMDDC Report did not represent a panacea for the Mississippi Delta, it did shed light on the many challenges to economic and social change in the region. Its Executive Summary acknowledged the inherent cultural and environmental richness in the seven-state Delta region, but concluded:

And yet, these are the people who by statistics constitute the poorest region of the United States of America; where jobs are scarce and jobs skills training almost unknown; where infant mortality rates rival those in the Third World; where dropping out of high school and teenage pregnancy are commonplace; where capital for small farmers and small businesses is severely limited; where good housing and health care are unattainable for many; where industrial technology lags a decade behind and funds for research and development barely trickle to colleges and universities; where illiteracy reigns as a supreme piece of irony: the region has produced some of the best writers and the worst readers in America.⁴

In an effort to address the above circumstances the report made recommendations related to "Human Capital Development, Natural and Physical Assets, Private Enterprise and the Environment." Heritage tourism was among its primary development strategies for the Delta region.⁵

Prior to the Final Report presented to Congress in 1990, the LMDDC joined the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi and the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis in 1989 to co-sponsor *Preserving and Promoting our*

³ David Wayne Brown, ed. *LMDDC, The Delta Initiatives, Realizing the Dream...Fulfilling the Potential: A Report by the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission* (Mercury Printing, 1990), 4, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Heritage: A Conference on Cultural Tourism in the Lower Mississippi Delta, in Greenville, Mississippi. Cultural surveys were sent to the nearly 300 representatives attending the meeting.⁶ Stanley Hyland, Director of Research for the LMDDC, recalled that in addition to chambers of commerce, “most of the participants were affiliated with community based groups and mom and pop operations although all tourism interests were invited.”⁷ The results were included within the LMDDC Final Report under the title “*Artistic Destination*” *Tourism: Music and Literature*. The ‘Situation Analysis’ outlined in the Final Report stated “A duo of Delta Legacies—a rich literary tradition and a musical heritage claiming the roots of virtually every form of American music—represent promising resources for promoting regional tourism. Both traditions enjoy a powerful mystique.”⁸

The Final Report drafted specific recommendations related to blues tourism, including the development of “a consortium or consortia that[would] serve to promote the region’s musical and literary heritage...”⁹ This need for a coordinated group working to promote blues heritage underscores an important, though ambiguous, reality of modern blues tourism efforts in Mississippi. State officials and reformers now work to promote, conserve, and use blues heritage as a primary development strategy in the Delta and

⁶ Luther Brown, “The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail,” An Implementation Proposal to The National Endowment for the Humanities, Delta Center for Culture and Learning (Cleveland, Mississippi: Delta State University, 2006), 32.

⁷ Quoted in Erve Chambers, ed. *Tourism and Culture: An Applied Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 151-152.

⁸ Quoted in Brown, “The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail,” 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*

throughout the state. Though a significant step towards integrating the complex story of African American contributions to Mississippi history and culture, these efforts still do not adequately engage the communities that created this distinctive cultural form. Organizations like the Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale) and the Highway 61 blues museum (Leland), found themselves at odds with the state Tourism office, the Mississippi Blues Commission, and the constantly growing gaming industry in Tunica and Greenville as they competed for advertising funding and tourist revenue. Those on the outside have expressed a mixture of skeptical optimism and confusion about the statewide blues trail, its construction, and its potential for capitalizing on the Delta's blues infrastructure.¹⁰

In the late 1990s, Stanley Hyland reflected on his experience as research director for the LMMDC. He argued that the project actively sought to develop recommendations based upon the cultural diversity and heritage of the region, while remaining inclusive in its research process and community meetings. Although these efforts resulted in continued heritage tourism development in the state, including the use of African American history, Hyland pointed out significant obstacles that hindered increased diversity and wider community involvement within subsequent heritage tourism initiatives.

¹⁰ Chapter 4 in this dissertation includes a documentary film titled, "Refuse to Fold: The Blue Front Café and Mississippi Blues Heritage Tourism." It utilizes the Blue Front Café, a juke joint in Bentonia, Mississippi, as a case study to explore issues related to modern blues tourism. The participants in the film help to clarify some of the complexities involved in the promotion and use of blues culture in Mississippi.

Hyland assessed this situation within the context of the broad seven-state Delta region. He argued that “three major sets of interests in this struggle can be grouped as the old landed aristocracy, the grassroots proponents of cultural and environmental heritage, and the large-scale gaming industry.” Each group sought to promote tourism based upon its unique socio-political interests. The established tourism and historical narrative of the Lower Mississippi Delta before the LMDDC study was therefore defined largely by chambers of commerce and representatives of the landed aristocracy. As Hyland continued, “these major images have served to orient the outside world that the South is a unique blend of the best of an agrarian society that has embraced the best of industrialism” with a “ruling elite manag[ing] economic growth.” He added that while this image was dominant for much of the Delta’s history, the region’s acute poverty and inherent diversity of local cultures directly counter it.¹¹

As Hyland recounted the often sluggish attempts to implement the recommendations of the LMDDC study, he asserted that the gaming industry took hold in the Delta almost overnight. While unemployment rates dropped from 19% to 9% in 1992 in Tunica after the gaming industry entered the poorest Delta county, many felt that gaming could be a panacea while the industry still maintained a primary allegiance to outside resources and investors. Hyland argued that “local development issues such as quality of local education, adequate housing and health care, and crime are secondary concerns.”¹² Sharon Wright Austin and Richard T. Middleton also studied the effects of

¹¹ Quoted in Chambers, 148-151.

¹² Ibid., 156-158.

the gaming industry on race and politics in Tunica. They contend that as poverty and unemployment rates dropped and per-capita income increased, “the 26.6 percent poverty rate [nevertheless] doubles the state and national averages because of the legacy of elite resistance to black economic and educational gains rather than their lack of political power.”¹³

The advent of gaming in Tunica certainly contributed to some economic improvement for local residents. The drop in unemployment rates and increased income are seen as beneficial to one of the poorest regions in the country. However, Austin and Middleton point out that Tunica still retains a relatively high poverty rate, possibly indicating that while more people have jobs due to casinos, these jobs remain low paying and do not significantly improve the impoverished circumstances of many residents. The relative speed with which the gaming industry entered Mississippi is understandable given the dire nature of the state’s economy during the twentieth century. A ten-year study from 1990 to 2000 indicated that while many social and economic conditions improved in Mississippi during this period, Delta residents earned 14% to 21% “less than the average Mississippian.” Humphreys County, for example, experienced a youth

¹³ Denise von Herrmann, *Resorting to Casinos: The Mississippi Gambling Industry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 64; In the Delta, ‘elite’ often refers to wealthy, white landowners who control vast agricultural acreages. In 1993, for example, the Boyd Gaming Corporation purchased 150 acres from a prominent farmer in Tunica County. This land, once the sharecropping home of Robert Johnson’s family, was worth approximately \$1 million in 1990. The acreage sold for \$25 million to the “owner of Sam’s Town Casino and Gambling Hall” in 1993. Sharon D. Wright Austin, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

poverty rate of 39.4% in 1998 compared to a 23.9% youth poverty rate in the state.¹⁴ In *Development Arrested*, Clyde Woods surveyed the many economic disparities between white and black in the Delta. Acknowledging the historic legacies of an agriculturally-dependent region, Woods writes “the very low rates of taxation on agricultural land serve to subsidize the planter while ensuring that badly needed social programs and infrastructure such as public schools and residential water systems are not funded.”¹⁵

While the LMDDC Final Report attempted to address the problems associated with systemic poverty along with social, political, and economic inequities in the Delta, its recommendations concerning the connection between blues tourism and economic development gained traction, while others remained only tenuously related to the various state and local efforts to transform challenged circumstances. Clyde Woods levied criticism against the LMDDC for not going far enough to address core issues tied to the Delta’s many problems. He asserted, “nothing in any of the written statements and interviews of LMDDC officials indicated that they were engaged in a significant challenge to the dominant plantation bloc production and policy regime.”¹⁶ Still, the LMDDC sponsored numerous public meetings and conferences that sought involvement among various interests, people, and viewpoints throughout the Mississippi Delta

¹⁴ Thomas M. Kersen, “The Changing Delta, 1990 to 2000,” Social Science Research Center (Starkville: Mississippi State University, July 2002), 16, 9.

¹⁵ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998), 249.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

region.¹⁷ These surveys and public meetings directly connected blues to the Delta's usable past; rendering it a viable, unique cultural product from which to market, sell, and benefit.

LMDDC Spin-Offs

After the LMDDC Final Report, various state and federal agencies continued exploring cultural, tourism, and environmental outlets to assist the Delta in its redevelopment. These efforts often took the form of independent studies and analyses with very loose, if any, coordinating linkages between them.¹⁸ However, like the LMDDC, most of them strongly emphasized the necessity of a usable blues heritage within any Delta economic development initiative. On May 31, 1990, the President of Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi received a report specifically addressing the need for DSU to take the lead within the effort to redevelop the Delta two weeks after the LMDDC issued its Final Report. The report to President Kent Wyatt stated, "Although this (African American Heritage) trail system is to be developed by the regional tourism entity, DSU certainly has a major role to play in site identification.

¹⁷ Brown, ed. *The Delta Initiatives*, 6.

¹⁸ The *Mississippi Great River Road Project Report* (1995) also stated that "little, however, has been done to promote the history of the Blues and its origination in the Mississippi Delta" and that "much more needs to be done to inform the public about the role of blacks in this region." Quoted in Brown, "The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail," An Implementation Proposal to The National Endowment for the Humanities, Delta Center for Culture and Learning (Cleveland, Mississippi: Delta State University, 2006), 33.

Leadership in putting together the regional group will ensure DSU's participation in this effort."¹⁹

In 1995, Congress authorized the National Park Service to conduct further research into the heritage tourism infrastructure and potential throughout the Delta,²⁰ thus building upon a key recommendation in the LMDDC Final Report. Section 1103 of Public Law 103-433:

“IN GENERAL.-The Secretary, in consultation with the States of the Delta Region, the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Center, and other appropriate Delta Region institutions, is directed to prepare and transmit to the Congress within three years after the date of the enactment of this title, a study of significant natural recreational, historical or prehistorical, and cultural lands, waters sites, and structures located within the Delta Region.”²¹

¹⁹ Arthur S. Johnston, III, Legislative Affairs Specialist, to Dr. Kent Wyatt, President Delta State University, 31 May 1990, report: “A Call To Action: The Role of Delta State University in the Development of the Lower Mississippi Delta Region,” Presented by: Arthur S. Johnston, III, Delta Commission Staff, 1989-90, Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi. This correspondence relates to Delta State's later efforts to lead heritage tourism efforts in the Delta. In 1999, The Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University was created to “help interpret Delta history and culture, especially in regards to the Blues, to the public, and to ensure that Delta heritage was accurately and completely portrayed in an acceptable academic manner.” The Blues Highway Association and efforts to create a Delta National Heritage Area were tied to the Center at DSU under the leadership of Director Luther Brown. Luther Brown, “The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail,” An Implementation Proposal to The National Endowment for the Humanities, Delta Center for Culture and Learning (Cleveland, Mississippi: Delta State University, 2006), 35.

²⁰ Ronald W. Johnson, “The Lower Mississippi Delta Study: A National Park Service Approach to a Region's Heritage,” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 32 (2001): 2.

²¹ The following was introduced based upon the LMDDC Final Report. It called for federal assistance to Delta cultural initiatives such as the development of Native American and African American heritage corridors and cultural centers. U.S. Congress, House, *To designate certain lands in the California Desert as wilderness, to establish the Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks, to establish the Mojave National Preserve, and for other purposes*, 103rd Congress, 2nd Session, (25 January 1994), Title XI-Lower

Within the general rubric of heritage tourism research, Congress mandated the creation of heritage corridors that could interpret and utilize Native American and African American cultures, including “a music heritage program with specific emphasis on the Delta blues.”²² In 1996, the National Park Service (NPS) conducted meetings with diverse public audiences “to begin a dialogue to meet the intent of section 1104 of the Delta Initiatives legislation.” Section 1104 authorized the NPS to assist small Delta museums to “make planning grants to State Humanities Councils in the Delta Region.”²³ In addition to the Draft Heritage Study, the NPS created a website titled *Nile of the New World* that included links to the NPS research about the Delta region, as well as a virtual tour map of the Delta, titled “Trail of the Hellhound: Delta Blues in the Lower Mississippi Valley.” Visitors to this site could explore photographs and text vignettes of various blues locations and artists in the region. This site was one of the many precursors to the Blues Heritage Trail concept now underway in Mississippi.²⁴

Mississippi Delta Region Initiatives, 42. On-line.
<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/documents/publicLaws>, accessed 10 December 2009.

²² Johnson, 2.

²³ National Park Service, “Draft Heritage Study and Environmental Assessment,” Appendix E-Volume 2, African American Workshops. Section 1104 of Public Law 103-433 was titled, ‘Delta Region Heritage Corridors and Heritage and Cultural Centers.’ On-line. <http://www.nps.gov/history/delta/volume2/apdx.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009.

²⁴ National Park Service website. On-line.
<http://www.nps.gov/history/delta/home.htm> and <http://www.nps.gov/history/delta/blues/>, accessed 04 December 2009. While the ‘Nile of the New World’ website was last updated in 2007, the Trail of the Hellhound website has been dormant since 2001.

The NPS-sponsored public meetings during this period called for a reevaluation of African American history and culture in the Mississippi Delta. The Draft Heritage Study introduced the need to “tell the story of repeated projects that are about and for African-Americans but fail to have valid and authentic inclusion of African-Americans.” While difficult to connect this recommendation to later inclusive efforts, the NPS acknowledged the necessity of involving local communities within the telling and packaging of their unique stories. The Draft Heritage Study also recommended “establish[ing] community funding resource centers to address preservation training and resource development.”²⁵ The public workshops in the Draft Heritage Study pointed to increased African American participation within a developing blues preservation and tourism initiative in Mississippi.

Ronald Johnson observed in 2001 that the NPS proceeded with an inclusive approach to involve Delta residents in public meetings during this period. While many residents supported the Park Service study, other outspoken voices were wary of federal influence in Delta affairs and fearful of increased regulation. Johnson argues that “the nature of this opposition may have contributed to the apparent lukewarm reception of the study by Congress and to the lack of legislative action regarding implementation of recommendations contained in the final report.”²⁶ This may have adversely affected

²⁵ National Park Service, “Draft Heritage Study and Environmental Assessment,” Concept 8 “Delta Blues Commemorative Area,” Volume 1, 3-6. On-line. <http://www.nps.gov/history/delta/volume1/concept8.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009.

²⁶ Ronald W. Johnson, “The Lower Mississippi Delta Study: A National Park Service Approach to a Region’s Heritage,” 4.

sustained attempts to generate the ‘valid and authentic inclusion of African Americans’ within the developmental phase of Mississippi’s blues tourism infrastructure.

In 2002, Randall Travel Marketing, Inc., a company in Mooresville, North Carolina that provides research and marketing support for the travel and tourism industry,²⁷ submitted a *Strategic Marketing Plan for a Mississippi Millennium Blues Trail* at the request of the Mississippi Tourism office and Mississippi Arts Commission. The study revealed that tourists were interested in a potential “product titled ‘The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail’ and that “the appeal is considerably increased when other attractions, heritage and historic sites are added.” In addition to advocating for a system of highway markers and a Delta organization that could manage heritage tourism efforts, the *Randall Plan* argued “that specific ‘Blues’ products be monitored, encouraged, and protected.”²⁸

After the *Randall Plan* was submitted to the state, the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University created the Blues Highway Association, a diverse group of culture workers, academics, Convention and Visitor’s Bureau and Chamber of Commerce representatives, as well as those interested in blues heritage. Led by Dr. Luther Brown, this group developed a list of recommendations calling for increased promotion and identification of blues sites in the Delta.²⁹ In December 2003, Delta State and the Blues Highway Association invited Brenda Barrett, then Coordinator of Heritage

²⁷ Randall Travel Marketing, Inc. On-line. <http://www.rtmnet.com/>, accessed 04 December 2009.

²⁸ Quoted in Brown, *The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail*, An Implementation Proposal to The National Endowment for the Humanities, 34-35.

²⁹ Luther Brown, *The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail*, 35.

Areas for the National Park Service, and Dr. Carroll Van West, Director of the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, to the Delta to foster Heritage Area planning and capitalize upon the recommendations set forth in the *Share Your Heritage Workshop* with the National Park Service. The Blues Highway Association sought to channel these points into a more elaborate justification for the creation of a Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, which in turn would “stimulate the local economy by stimulating heritage tourism” and “preserv[e] Delta culture, local businesses, and the Delta environment in a time of increasing homogenization and globalization.”³⁰

The idea for a Heritage Area managed by Delta State University built upon the post-LMDDC correspondence to DSU President in 1990 detailing the need for the university’s role within efforts to advance and manage blues tourism throughout the Delta. At this time Delta State and the Blues Highway Association actively pursued a leadership role within the initial stages of planning for a Delta National Heritage Area. Such Congressional designation would provide a link to the National Park Service, federal financial support, and establish a coordinating body to promote partnerships between the many agencies and organizations attempting to utilize Delta cultural assets for developmental purposes. Furthermore the Heritage Area designation would, according to a Blues Highway Association proposal, “insure a balanced approach to

³⁰ The Blues Highway Association, “The Mississippi Delta National Heritage Areas,” On-line. <http://www.blueshighway.org/bha.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009.

community and economic development, social transformation, and ecological sustainability.”³¹

All of these reports stressed the importance of a marketable blues heritage within the Delta’s economic redevelopment. If subsequent efforts to use blues culture were only tenuously linked to these recommendations, the idea to commodify this piece of culture nevertheless gained significant momentum. Considering Mississippi’s complex racial past, the trend to use blues as a marketable commodity was an important development. By using this strategy to draw visitors to the state, Mississippi acknowledged an African American contribution to its history and culture. Mississippi is therefore celebrating and validating black culture as it presents a repackaged image of itself to the rest of the world.

Twentieth century heritage tourism programs throughout the Deep South, however, reflect important tensions between preservation and cultural commodification. With the steady rise of tourism after World War II, many rural communities discovered the economic potential inherent within their unique cultural practices. Surveying the rise of heritage tourism in the Mountain South, Brenden Martin analyzed the complex interplay between the economic imperatives of tourism and the historic preservation movement. Although heritage tourism provides the framework for preservation efforts, thereby offering economic incentive to maintain the historic infrastructure of a given locale, it often does so within the restrictive confines of a commercialism based upon consumer demands for authenticity. Martin argues, “while it is true that tourism is the

³¹ The Blues Highway Association, “The Mississippi Delta National Heritage Areas,” On-line. <http://www.blueshighway.org/bha.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009. The Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area was approved in 2009 during the course of completing this dissertation. Its current status is discussed further in chapter 5.

source of most cultural and historic preservation efforts, tourism often creates and sustains romanticized, if not false, cultural identities that often have little to do with historical reality.”³²

Folk art markets rely upon the ideal of the authentic. Gary Allan Fine writes that “Americans yearn for authenticity, dismissing the plastic culture that critics find everywhere.”³³ In this view, modern industrial cultures mired in technological complexity have a need for simple archetypes that offer comfort and stability. This scenario is consistent with the reaction of earlier colonial revivalists and mid-twentieth century settlement workers and handicraft revivalists who sought nostalgic purity within past cultures and rural Appalachian southerners. These earlier efforts to preserve the ideal of authenticity within distinctive culture groups often resulted in stagnant interpretations of those cultures that rarely acknowledged their evolution, dynamism, and vitality.

In 2003, Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove (D) approved the Mississippi Blues Commission.³⁴ This early Commission began work on the Blues Heritage Trail that now covers the state. In 2004, the Mississippi legislature re-constituted the Blues Commission “to develop a plan to promote authentic Mississippi ‘Blues’ music and

³² Christopher Brenden Martin, “Selling the Southern Highlands: Tourism and Community Development in the Mountain South” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1997), 224.

³³ Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 56.

³⁴ Brown, *The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail*, 36.

‘blues culture’ for purposes of economic development.”³⁵ The MBC is made up of eighteen appointees, with a chairperson appointed by the Governor.³⁶ Commission members represent various business, culture, and educational organizations around the state. Mississippi’s current Governor and enthusiastic supporter of the Blues Trail, Haley Barbour (R), remarked in 2007:

the blues are a powerful part of Mississippi’s heritage and contribute to our appeal as the ‘Birthplace of America’s Music.’ When you couple the blues trail with the fact that Mississippi is the leading golf and entertainment destination, you begin to realize the range of unforgettable experiences from which visitors can choose.³⁷

Dr. Marvin Haire, associate director of the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at the historically black Mississippi Valley State University, argues that the Mississippi Blues Commission was never initially designed to foster or maintain significant local community input. If the Blues Heritage Trail cannot generate increased African American community involvement within the wider heritage tourism efforts in the state,

³⁵ Mississippi Legislature, *Economic Development and Tourism; Appropriations*, Regular Session 2004, Senate Bill 2082. On-Line. <http://www.blueshighway.org/commissionlegislation.htm>, accessed 04 December 2009.

³⁶ Chairman, Bill McPherson; MDA Mississippi Trails Director, Alex Thomas; Statutory Members: MDA Tourism Division, D. Craig Ray (Vice Chairman); H.T. Hank Holmes; Malcolm White; Marie Antoon; Ted Ownby; Dr. Luther Brown; Governor Appointments: James Butler, Sr.; Bill Seratt (Secretary); Charles Reid; Jesse Robinson; Edgar E. Smith, PhD; Lieutenant Governor Appointments: Senator Lydia Chassaniol; Senator Billy Hewes; Alternates: Ken P’Pool (Director, Division of Historic Preservation); Larry Morrissey (Director of Mississippi Heritage Program; Chrissy Wilson (Public Information Officer, Mississippi Department of Archives and History). Mississippi Blues Commission website, <http://www.msbluestrail.org/commission.html>, accessed 10 December 2009.

³⁷ “Mississippi Blues Trail Features Some of State’s Best Golf Courses,” 24 August 2007. On-line. <http://www.worldgolf.com/newswire/browse/10702>, accessed 04 December 2009.

Haire wonders “how the respective communities where the Blues was born and nurtured will fare as these trends unfold.” He adds, “given the state’s national ranking as last on most quality-of-life indexes, these trends do not sit well as viable models of economic development and revitalization. They seem to thrive on the continuation of depressed and underdeveloped Black communities.”³⁸

The effort to market and sell blues tourism coincides with significant challenges that are linked to the complex developmental history of the Delta. Although African Americans now enjoy significant levels of political representation in small Delta towns, larger county-wide political structures as well as land-based financial power still reflect white control. While a simple black vs. white dynamic cannot fully explain gaps in economic and political power in this region, it remains an overriding concern as various groups compete for the tourist dollar. Sharon D. Wright Austin, for example, argues persuasively that the current gaps in political and financial power in the Delta compel African Americans to use and accumulate ‘social capital’ to gain a competitive foothold.³⁹ Current tourism data clearly reflects the links between sustained community input and successful, dynamic heritage tourism initiatives.⁴⁰ Local groups in the Delta

³⁸ Dr. Marvin Haire, Director, Delta Research & Cultural Institute, Mississippi Valley State University, “Blues Heritage Tourism,” Personal Email, (6 May 2009.)

³⁹ Austin, 95.

⁴⁰ The following provide useful data and analysis of various heritage tourism examples. Erve Chambers, ed. *Tourism and Culture: An Applied Perspective* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997); Benita J. Howell, ed. *Cultural Heritage Conservation in the American South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990); Benita J. Howell, ed. *Culture, Environment, and Conservation in the Appalachian South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.)

may be able to utilize support outlets such as schools, churches, and community groups to communicate and work directly with local and state blues tourism efforts. Blues tourism has traditionally been susceptible to appropriation and confining mythologizing, resulting in the potential for ‘feel-good’ narratives that reduce the nuance and complexity of Delta cultures. As African American communities procure and utilize social capital networks to affect political and economic change in the region, their involvement within blues tourism initiatives remains vital. Sade Turnipseed, Education Director for the BB King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, also stresses the necessity for African American communities in the Delta to actively involve themselves in the management and promotion of current blues tourism initiatives to ensure local connection to the narratives produced.⁴¹

Music tourism contributes to the construction and maintenance of identity for struggling economies. Beale Street, for example, reinforces the modern place identity of Memphis. Its historical significance as an African American cultural center is now subsumed within the city’s tourism economy. Gibson and Connell write, “Beale Street had gone from black America’s Main Street to a reconstructed tourist attraction based on the black cultural expressions that were the core of the original place identities earlier in the century.” While this process contributes greatly to the economic potential of a region by generating distinctive and marketable identities, it can also further alienate the cultures most directly associated with the histories or identities being celebrated. During the Beale

⁴¹ Sade Turnipseed, interview by Author, 9 February 2008, Indianola, Mississippi. Ms. Turnipseed appears in the film, ‘Refuse to Fold’ in chapter 4. She elaborates her point about local African American involvement in blues tourism.

Street Urban Renewal Program in the latter part of the twentieth century, a 113 acre African American neighborhood was transformed into the Beale Street entertainment district. Dr. Carroll Van West writes that close to 560 buildings were eliminated to create the modern Beale St. landscape, thus significantly altering this neighborhoods original cultural fabric and “destroy[ing] a large part of what made the city the northern cultural entrance to the Mississippi Delta.”⁴² Gibson and Connell add that “urban renewal by cultural tourism,” similar to the Beale Street development, has the potential to have “negative impacts on black residents as gentrification has brought greater rents and other costs.”⁴³

The growth of blues tourism in Mississippi is occurring within a larger demographic change throughout the South. Since the 1970s, African Americans have been relocating to southern states in growing numbers. During the 1990s, James Cobb found that “the South’s black population grew by nearly 3.6. million overall, nearly twice the rate of increase for the previous decade.”⁴⁴ Recent studies also indicate that the Delta is experiencing this reverse-migratory trend. While the gaming industry pulls many younger African Americans from cites like Chicago, other non-economic factors influence decisions to move back to the largely impoverished Delta. Brown and Cromartie argue, “given the dire poverty that the region has long experienced, job

⁴² Carroll Van West, *Tennessee’s Historic Landscapes: A Traveler’s Guide* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 123.

⁴³ Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: On The Road Again* (Clevendon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 1, 12, 165, 46.

⁴⁴ James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263.

prospects for these returning residents are often bleak. Homeplace attachments are the primary reason that this population is returning to the region.”⁴⁵

As the ghost of Robert Johnson drifts over the modern Delta, with its dueling black and white track sides, extreme poverty and beauty, appalling and fascinating histories, the flatness of the land and the complexity of its people still render this place curiously attractive and comforting. As African Americans continued moving South, the 1990s also witnessed the growth of a southern Hip-Hop community, whose themes and rhymes deliberately celebrated a renewed black southern identity. Through grassroots efforts, mix tapes of local artists circulated between Memphis, Atlanta, Jackson, and New Orleans and solidified the South as a new center of Hip-Hop commerce.⁴⁶ African American scholar Thadious M. Davis views the reverse-migration trend as “a laying of claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity.”⁴⁷

Hip-hop is one vehicle through which modern African American communities are reclaiming their own versions of southern heritage. This music maintains linkages with older forms of blues expression that questioned aspects of society and culture through the use of double entendre and vernacular language. If significant local involvement within

⁴⁵ Robert N. Brown and John Cromartie, “Black Homeplace Migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta: Ambiguous Journeys, Uncertain Outcomes,” *Southeastern Geographer* 2 (2006): 211.

⁴⁶ Brian Dempsey, “Memphis Hip-Hop,” in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, On-line. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net>, accessed 04 December 2009.

⁴⁷ Thadious Davis quoted in Cobb, *Away Down South*, 265.

the creation and management of blues tourism narratives is not achieved, the Delta runs the risk of sustaining rooted racial hierarchies that marginalize African Americans and do not address linkages between the past and present and the complexity of living cultures, including Hip-hop. Additionally, if hip-hop remains disconnected from its earlier blues cousin in efforts to promote Mississippi and the South generally, younger African Americans many not see the value of associating with blues tourism.

In 2005, Delta State University sociologist Alan Barton completed a research project that assessed local attitudes towards heritage tourism in the Mississippi Delta. His *Delta Rural Poll* concluded that “residents would view a heritage area as a positive development for the Mississippi Delta region.” Barton observed that “local residents play a key role in ensuring that heritage tourists have a positive experience.” For Heritage Areas to be successful, Barton emphasized, “local residents must also demonstrate a commitment to maintaining their own heritage, and an interest in keeping their traditions alive.” The report also indicated that while most Deltans, black and white, support blues tourism, many African American residents do not support local juke joint tourism. This might indicate negative assumptions about juke joints, or that these establishments should remain firmly controlled within the African American community, protected from the perceived ills of tourism. Regardless, Barton called for more dialogue between tourism entities and local residents. He argued that “qualitative interviews could elucidate local perceptions of how juke joints differ from other blues establishments, and why local

residents do not want to open juke joints to outside visitors.”⁴⁸ Referring to the Blue Front Café as the “living room of the community,”⁴⁹ Jimmy Duck Holmes reveals the close connections between this physical space and the everyday, lived experience of his African American neighborhood in Bentonia. As shown in the following chapter, his perspective helps to extend Barton’s findings in the *Delta Rural Poll* as well as shed light on the potential and ambiguities within modern blues tourism initiatives.

Shack Up Inn: Blues Trail Site

As Blues heritage becomes increasingly embedded within economic redevelopment strategies in the state, the associated stories and narratives offer outside visitors the mystique of a re-constructed Delta landscape. The Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale, Mississippi is an instructive example of modern efforts to utilize certain aspects of African American history within a complex and often conflicted interpretive environment. Located on the Hopson Plantation, the Shack-Up Inn advertises the opportunity to “glimpse plantation life as it existed only a few short years ago” while staying in refurbished sharecropper shacks whose “corrugated tin roofs and Mississippi

⁴⁸ Alan W. Barton, *Attitudes About Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: A Policy Report From the 2005 Delta Rural Poll*, Policy Paper no. 05-02, Center for Community and Economic Development (Cleveland, MS: Delta State University, December, 2005), 23, 4, 22; Barton also appears in the film in Chapter 4. In 2008, he felt that the Blues Heritage Trail offered significant opportunities for the Delta and its residents, yet he was also uncertain about the connections between a new blues tourist economy and subsequent benefits to local communities and African American residents. Alan Barton, interview by Author, 8 February 2008. Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

⁴⁹ Jimmy Duck Holmes, interview by Author, 9 February 2008. Bentonia, Mississippi.

cypress walls will conjure visions of a bygone era” and “provide comfort as well as authenticity.”⁵⁰

In 1944 the Hopson Planting Company was a four-thousand-acre cotton plantation just outside Clarksdale. Sharecroppers living and working on this plantation were paid relatively well compared to other Delta farmers at two dollars per hundred pounds of picked cotton.⁵¹ But 1944 also signaled the beginning of the end of large scale hand-picked cotton production at Hopson and throughout the South. Although during World War II planters still needed black sharecroppers to run their vast farming operations,⁵² the successful demonstration of mechanized cotton production at Hopson reduced the need for large numbers of sharecroppers on southern plantations. Nicholas Lemann argues that “inevitably the nature of black society and of race relations was going to have to change” during this period.⁵³

World War II transformed not only America, but the socio-political landscape of the Delta as well. As African-American soldiers assisted the United States war effort on the battlefield and in northern factories, a renewed civil rights spirit reverberated throughout black America. The NAACP and organized labor organizations like the CIO and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) clamored for civil rights and Deltans

⁵⁰ The Shack-Up Inn reservation home page. On-Line. <http://www.shackupinn.com/main.html>, accessed 04 December 2009.

⁵¹ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 7.

⁵² Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 193.

⁵³ Lemann, 5-6.

were forced to confront the changes resulting from out-migration, mechanization and World War.⁵⁴

During the 1940s, many black Deltans understood the necessity of collective bargaining and many aligned themselves with organizations like (STFU) in order to demand decent working wages on the farms. Labor shortages during wartime provided many sharecroppers the opportunity to boost their wages by hiring themselves out to higher bidders during harvest. Nan Woodruff writes that these tactics, along with the vocal and technical support of the STFU, helped to “undermine the sharecropping system that planters needed to maintain.”⁵⁵ Jane Adams and D. Gorton also found that poor whites and blacks in the Delta often worked together to resist white elite domination.⁵⁶ Delta planters responded with vehement defenses of white supremacy and political control.⁵⁷ In addition to utilizing organizations like the Delta Council to maintain political and social order, Woodruff adds that some planters cheated their workers by stealing “parity checks, violat[ing] wage and crop agreements, overcharg[ing] commissary accounts, and cheat[ing] them on cotton weights.”⁵⁸ On the one hand, this

⁵⁴ Woodruff, *American Congo*, 191-192.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁶ Jane Adams and D. Gorton, “Southern Trauma: Revisiting Caste and Class in the Mississippi Delta,” *American Anthropologist* 106 (2004): 337.

⁵⁷ Col. Alexander Fitzhugh, President Delta Council, “Delta Council: Addresses Presented to Delta Council Annual Meeting and Resolutions adopted by Ninth Convention, Cleveland, Mississippi, 3 May 1944.” Capps Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, MS. Refer to Chapter 2 for further explanation.

⁵⁸ Woodruff, 196.

internal battleground in the Delta displayed the need for symbiosis between black and white, and on the other, the wide class and ethnic separation between the two.

The tenant and sharecropping systems that emerged in the Delta after the Civil War and during the twentieth century also contributed to health problems among workers. Housing patterns on large plantations changed from centralized slave quarter arrangements during antebellum years, to scattered cropper and tenant shacks throughout the increasingly-cleared and vast agricultural landscape. Many sharecroppers subsisted “on a diet of salt pork and flour obtained for credit from the plantation store” and the associated high malnutrition rates often resulted in “chronic illnesses such as pellagra, hookworm infection, and malaria.”⁵⁹ Disparities in health status exist to the present day in the Delta. Neaves et al. acknowledge correlations between income/education levels and general health status. In 2008, they found that African Americans living in the Delta displayed higher risks of diabetes, cholesterol levels, and hypertension in a region with the highest levels of each of these ailments compared to the rest of the country.⁶⁰

Hopson Plantation’s modern historic cache includes a Mississippi state highway marker, documenting mechanized farming at Hopson, a Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail Marker, relating cotton production and blues, and the Shack-Up Inn, which includes renovated sharecropper shacks and the ‘Cotton Gin Inn,’ a remodeled gin that now serves as guest rooms on the compound. Nearby Clarksdale’s blues tourism infrastructure is one

⁵⁹ Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 119.

⁶⁰ Tonya Neaves and others, “A Portrait of the Delta: Enduring Hope and Enduring Despair,” *Journal of Health and Human Service Administration* 31 (2008):10.

of the most developed in Mississippi, with the Delta Blues Museum, Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero blues club, Cat Head delta blues and folk art inc., Muddy Waters Home Site at Stovall Plantation, and the Hopson Plantation/Shack-Up Inn. Shack-Up Inn business partner Bill Talbot says the Inn evolved out of increasing demand from tourists, especially European visitors.⁶¹ These overseas blues and cultural tourists often make pilgrimages to places like Nashville, continue in their bus tour groups to pay their respects to Elvis in Memphis,⁶² and dip down into Mississippi's Delta to absorb blues at places like the Shack-Up Inn.

Recalling the installation of the initial shacks on the compound, Talbot explains that he views former sharecropper Robert Clay as a "folk hero" whose previous home-turned-bungalow can convey to visitors "how tough it was" back then while they have a "Deep South experience."⁶³ Lined up in a row directly across an open green space from the Cotton Gin Inn, the rustic shacks situate the visitor upon a re-constructed cotton plantation in the Delta. Farm implements, road signs, cotton bales, bottle trees, folk art, and musical instruments all contribute to the touristic experience at Hopson. The farm is

⁶¹ Shack-Up Inn reservations. On-line. <http://www.shackupinn.com/main.html>, accessed 04 December 2009.

⁶² This development is based on the personal experience of the author while working at the County Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition, Bill Luckett, co-owner of the Ground Zero Blues Club with actor Morgan Freeman, said in 2004, "We're going to keep massaging this thing so we can get some of those 67,000 buses that show up in Memphis and Tunica every year...to spend an extra day in the Delta." Sheila Hardwell Byrd, "Destination: Mississippi," *Houston Chronicle* (5 December 2004): 3.

⁶³ Shack-Up Inn reservations. On-line. <http://www.shackupinn.com/main.html>, accessed 04 December 2009.

in the middle of vast open fields, displaying the seeming continuity of the physical plantation landscape, past and present. The funky rusticity of the entire compound exudes blues-ness as The Shack-Up Inn website beckons native and international visitors to:

Travel the back roads between Highways 49 and 61 in search of Lost Superstitions and the spirits of Sam Cooke, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, Son House and Elmore James....As you sit in the rocker on the porch, tipping a cold one while the sun sinks slowly to the horizon, you just might hear Pinetop Perkins radiatin' the 88's over at his shack. Perhaps, if you close your eyes even Muddy or Robert or Charlie might stop to strum a few chords in the night.⁶⁴

While the Shack-Up Inn offers tourists a truly unique experience in the Delta, it simultaneously reconfigures time and space into a newly constructed reality. Faced with an infinite array of tourism choices, the flat Mississippi Delta landscape and its developing blues infrastructure offer visitors the idea of a 'real' experience—close to the earth and unique compared to the relative sameness of other touristic spaces. With blues and the Delta as central underpinnings, the Shack-Up Inn transforms former sharecropping shacks into cozy bungalows, while advertisements courting visitors promise 'authenticity.'

The modern spatial configurations of the shacks neatly package the Hopson Plantation complex for the tourist. Authenticity, therefore, is only applicable to this sites' own definition of itself and does not have much relation to the real, lived experience of a man or woman enduring sharecropping systems, and the racial inequities that created them, in Jim Crow Mississippi. While individual experiences varied widely throughout the Delta and the South, some general characteristics of sharecropping are evident. In *The*

⁶⁴ Shack-Up Inn reservations. On-line. <http://www.shackupinn.com/main.html>, accessed 04 December 2009.

Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America, Nicholas Lemann devotes two chapters to Clarksdale, Mississippi. Concerning sharecropping realities generally, he writes, “the sharecropper’s family would move, early in the year, to a rough two-or three-room cabin on a plantation. There was no electricity and no insulation. During the winter, cold air came rushing in through cracks in the walls and the floor. Usually the roof leaked. The families often slept two and three to a bed.”⁶⁵

The image below was taken by Marion Post Wolcott in 1939 at the Knowlton Plantation in Perthshire, Mississippi. It depicts a sharecropping family whose living conditions were echoed in varying degrees throughout the Delta between Reconstruction and the middle part of the twentieth century.

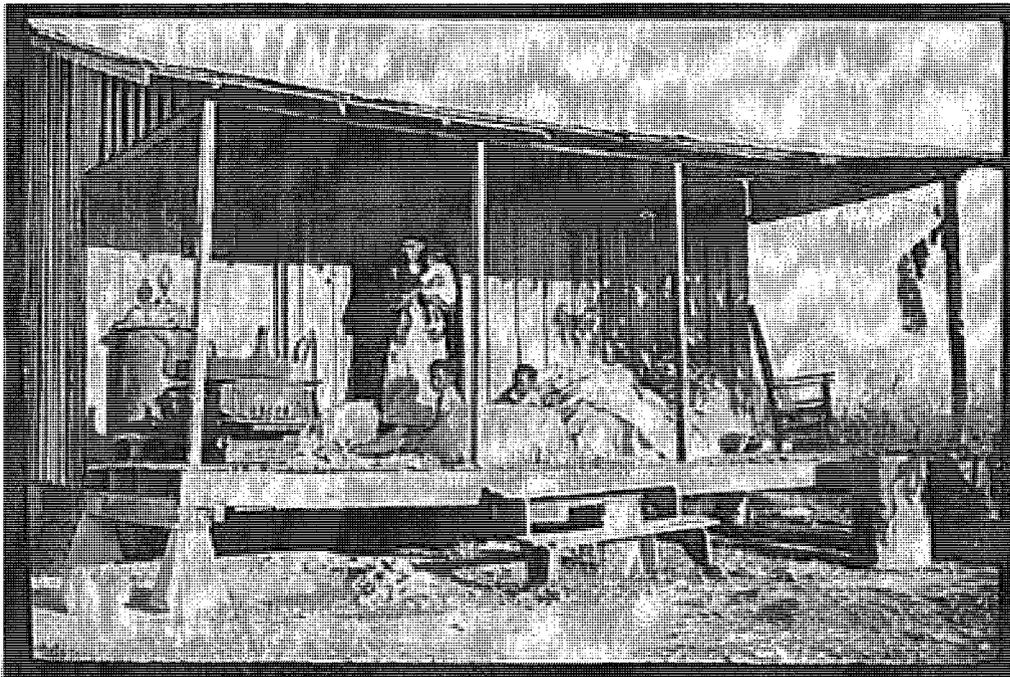


Figure 3.1. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF33-030572-M5 DLC (b&w film nitrate negative).

⁶⁵ Lemann, 17.

In 2005, Delta State University professor Stephen A. King published an article titled “Race and Blues Tourism: A Comparison of Two Lodging Alternatives in Clarksdale, Mississippi.” He argued that the efforts at Hopson also “reflect a larger struggle over who has the legitimate right or power to ‘tell the story’ of Mississippi’s blues culture to the outside world.” King points out, “as Hopson has transformed itself into a tourist attraction, the symbols of oppression have all but vanished. Thus, tourists who have little knowledge about the history of plantation life may not even recognize the relationship between plantation life and social inequity, nor identify the connection between plantation life and the blues.”⁶⁶ The ‘Pinetop Perkins and Hopson Planting Company’ Blues Trail marker, erected at this site in 2008, provides a brief counterpoint to the tidy rusticity of the re-constructed Hopson landscape. The following is a selected portion of text from the Hopson Blues Trail marker:

Here at Hopson in the 1940s, pianist Joe Willie ‘Pinetop’ Perkins managed to keep a foot in both worlds, working as a tractor driver and as a professional entertainer...As a tractor driver, Perkins played an important role in mechanization of cotton production, as the Hopson Planting Company was at the forefront of this transformation...In 1944 [the International Harvester Company] succeeded in harvesting a crop using only machines...resulting in changes including the replacement of the sharecropping system with wage labor and the destruction of the abandoned homes of displaced workers.⁶⁷

Sites like Hopson Plantation are situated within a tourism economy that is generating new historical and cultural narratives in Mississippi. As outside visitors

⁶⁶ Stephen A. King, “Race and Blues Tourism: A Comparison of Two Lodging Alternatives in Clarksdale, Mississippi,” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 1 (April 2005): 28, 34.

⁶⁷ Mississippi Blues Commission, Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail Marker, *Pinetop Perkins and Hopson Planting Company*, erected 9 May 2008. On-Line. http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues_trail/delta/, accessed 10 December 2009.

interact with these landscapes, they build a sense of place and history based upon what they see, hear, smell, read, and experience. The physical landscape at each destination shapes perception and offers a foundation upon which to establish meaning and understanding. The way the buildings at Hopson are aligned relative to the vast adjacent fields and plantation commissary and the internal constructed environment of each shack-turned-bungalow, all define the experience for the visitor.

If the Shack-Up Inn reconfigures its own narrative by the placement and contents of the actual shacks upon the Hopson landscape, the Blues Heritage Trail marker interpretation may serve to re-situate this location closer to its complex sharecropping past while the site's owners actively work to carve out a unique existence within Mississippi's attractive, if at times ironic, blues economy.

CHAPTER IV

NEW MEDIA AND THE MISSISSIPPI BLUES HERITAGE TRAIL

The film, *Refuse to Fold: The Blue Front Café and Mississippi Blues Heritage Tourism* is a documentary case study that interprets one site along Mississippi's Blues Heritage Trail. Blue Front owner and musician, Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes serves as the central voice in the film. While doing initial fieldwork for the Mississippi Blues Commission in 2006, one of my assignments was to talk to Holmes about a future trail marker for the Blue Front. Veering off Mississippi Highway 49 into tiny Bentonia, I could see the building across the railroad tracks that run through the middle of town. As I turned into the brown gravel parking lot, I noticed a few people chatting on the porch and watching as I excitedly snapped multiple-angled photos of the Café and surrounding landscape. Holmes appeared in the doorway soon after I inquired about him and he proved to be warm and open to my many questions. In 2007, fellow PhD candidate Angela Smith expressed interest in my work in Mississippi and suggested that a film study might be a good method to explore, document, and interpret Holmes' engagement with the place, the music, and the trail. Having no previous experience with this medium, I was intrigued and agreed to an extremely fruitful and educational collaboration. In 2007 and 2008, Angela Smith, Brandon Dempsey, and I interviewed Jimmy Holmes and various people connected to blues history and culture around Mississippi.



Figure 4.1 View of the Blue Front Café, located between a former grocery store and a former cotton gin, in Bentonia, Mississippi. Photo by Author, 2006.

Refuse to Fold is the focal point of this chapter, which also includes an analysis and justification of the documentary film process. As a case study the film extends the arguments and findings of the first three chapters. Although portions of the many interviews collected from 2006 to 2009 are included in the text of previous chapters, the film presents these interviews in greater detail, allowing those who are directly involved in blues tourism, interpretation, and performance in Mississippi speak for themselves. Given the nature of this project, it is important to let the reader also see the landscapes, hear the music, and listen to the voices of the people who make this study breathe.

History and Film

Ken Burns is perhaps the most well-known historical documentary filmmaker of the present generation. His work on the Civil War, Baseball, Jazz, World War II, and most recently the National Park Service (2009) illustrates the power and potential of utilizing film to interpret history. In *The Civil War* (1990) Burns solidified his now signature filmmaking style by using period photographs, narration, and music passages to explore the schism of America's internal war. The result, massive in scale and expertly executed, introduced countless audiences to a popular form of historical communication.

Millions are familiar with Burns' approach, but some in the academic world are skeptical of his methodology and tendency to overly-romanticize his subject. No stranger to employing innovative approaches to historical inquiry himself, historian Eric Foner argued that Burns' treatment of Reconstruction in the last segment of *The Civil War* series failed to recognize the "complexity and ambiguity" of the period by favoring a nostalgic interpretation of national reunification over an analysis of the inability of American society to directly confront lingering questions about race in the twentieth century. Foner suggested that "the result is a strangely parochial vision of the Civil War and its aftermath, and a missed opportunity to stimulate thinking about political and moral questions still central to our society."¹

Responding to *The Civil War* and the resulting popularity of Ken Burns in the mid-1990s, historian Leon Litwack called for a "productive collaboration" between filmmakers and historians upon the new historical interpretive landscape. He also

¹ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 190-192.

critiqued the popular impact of Burns's interpretation of the war. "The last episode [of *The Civil War* series]," wrote Litwack, "invokes the nostalgic reunions of the Blue and the Gray to underscore and celebrate national reunification and the birth of the modern American nation, while ignoring the brutality, violence, and racial oppression on which that reconciliation rested."²

Civil War historian David Blight acknowledged Burns' placement of slavery in the *Civil War* series along with an overriding military focus. The use of personal narrative, perspectives from various local communities and a diversity of voices all contribute to an epic moment in historical documentary filmmaking. Yet, with all of its reach and ability to introduce a stunning topical range, *The Civil War* is a product of its filmic medium, at times exhibiting the tendency to over-emphasize sentimentality and artistic choices that best conform to the television screen and a mass audience. According to Blight, the series conveyed the global significance and local tragedy of the Civil War, "but it is a point made as much with feeling, with music and sentiment, as it is with historical analysis."³

While film has the capacity to draw the viewer into past worlds with pictures, sounds, color, and voice, over-playing just one of these four basic components can skew the product from that of history to nostalgic entertainment. This medium is therefore extremely malleable and highly susceptible to manipulation. Music is an important and easily manipulated aspect of any filmmaking endeavor, allowing the filmmaker

² Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 138, 135-136.

³ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 122.

(historian) an ability to guide viewer reaction and interpretation of a scene or subject simply by choosing a song or music genre that creates a particular mood. This is cause for great concern among many academic historians, and rightly so.

It is easy for the viewer to become lost in a movie or documentary that evokes emotion or fortifies some aspect of the present with perceived lessons from the past. Film offers visual vistas that swirl and move. Caught up in the middle of this multi-faceted production, “even the expert,” says historian Gabor S. Boritt, “forgets to analyze the words, the photographs, the paintings. They belong, our senses tell us.”⁴ To many in the academy who defend the primacy of the written word on the page, this is the great danger in presenting history through film; subjects become visual worlds unto themselves divorced from reality. Gary R. Edgerton, chair of the Communications and Theatre Arts Department at Old Dominion University and coeditor of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, writes that “intimacy and immediacy (among other aesthetics) [are] inherent properties of the [television] medium.” Most audiences, whether watching cable television, a movie, or historical documentary, find some common ground between the dramas played out on the screen and their own lives. The inherent qualities of televisual communication therefore presuppose a particular relationship between the viewer and the medium. Edgerton continues, “when successful, audiences closely identify with the historical actors and stories being presented, and, likewise, respond in intimate ways in the privacy of their own homes.”⁵

⁴ Toplin, ed., 93.

If the televisual medium itself engenders particular modes of communication and memory that are often susceptible to manipulation, advances in technology, as well as in the analysis of history in film, have also introduced significant opportunities for the historian. With the rise of the new social and public histories in the 1970s, the notion of linear narratives and singular versions of historical reality drew criticism. Documentary filmmaking grew apace during this period, contributing to a reevaluation of historical evidence and narrative. Barbara Abrash⁶ and Daniel Walkowitz argue that documentary filmmaking has the ability “to compel viewers to see film and photographs as produced by people and institutions with points of view, agendas, and particular ideas of what makes a good subject.” Film is uniquely suited to amass a variety of source material to tell otherwise overlooked or nontraditional stories to a broad public using alternative interpretive modes. In this way, Abrash and Walkowitz continue, rather than defending or making claims at one truth, “as part of the politics of ‘representing reality,’ historical films should offer meditations on reality.”⁷ Film therefore provides the historian another means to analyze, interpret, and present a particular subject within a broad range of empirical and narrative approaches.

⁵ Gary R. Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* (New York: Palgrave for St. Martin's Press, 2001), 9.

⁶ Barbara Abrash is Director of Public Policy Programs, Center for Media, Culture and History & Center for Religion and Media at New York University

⁷ Barbara Abrash and Daniel J. Walkowitz, “Sub/versions of History: A Meditation on Film and Historical Narrative,” *History Workshop* 38 (1994): 212, 213.

Film Process

As Smith and I began our film, we both spoke at length about academic rigor and its place within documentary filmmaking. Our subject involved music and I was particularly concerned about how to use this important component to further convey our visual narrative. My advisor, Dr. Carroll Van West, also was adamant that this film, like the rest of the dissertation, must be subject to peer review. As we conducted interviews in the field and started the initial editing, the process proved quite challenging.

Film demands infinite choices. Historical papers involve collecting and sifting through myriad sources of evidence while constructing arguments and interpretations. Similarly, a film is constructed by generating and asking questions for interviews, gathering relevant footage, consulting archival sources, and then deciding what tiny proportion of this research is appropriate for the developing narrative. Along the way, careful attention must be paid to how visual material is matched or related to sound; what music or voice-over might strengthen or lessen a transition from one interview or landscape sequence to the next, for example.

We decided to incorporate a variety of perspectives about Mississippi blues tourism in this film. Each on-camera interview lasted roughly an hour, with participants answering questions related to their professional positions, their opinions about the use of blues tourism for economic development, and how involved local communities are within the promotion of blues-related themes. We provided each participant a general idea of our research agenda beforehand as well as some types of questions they might encounter during an interview. As we incorporated this footage into our developing visual narrative

we confronted several challenges inherent in the filmmaking process. For example, because we used a ‘talking-head’ approach (in which a talking interviewee appears on screen while landscape or context imagery fades in and out), the viewer does not hear the questions the interviewee is responding to. As different interviewees appear on-screen, we had to approach the editing process cautiously to maintain narrative cohesion and to ensure the integrity of each participant’s point of view. As we presented the participant in a given film sequence, we had to think about how our questions or prompts shaped their responses during the interview and how they related visually, conceptually, and thematically to the other participants and stylistic choices in the film.

As part of the peer-review process, edits of *Refuse to Fold* were presented at the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association Conference (2008) at Fall Creek Falls, Tennessee, and at the George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites (2009) in Portland, Oregon. These venues provided us the opportunity to observe and respond to the reactions of different professional audiences viewing selected edits of the film.

In Portland, a group of National Park Service employees and college professors engaged in a lively post-screening discussion that revealed some important strengths and weaknesses that we missed during the editing process. For example, an ambiguous juxtaposition occurred when we chose to place certain interview sequences of the B.B. King museum director of education (African American female) and the Project Coordinator of the Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail (white female) next to each other. Both interviews divulge important perspectives about the use of black culture in

Mississippi heritage tourism efforts. We consciously chose to place these participants in close proximity to one another to visually represent the many nuances of Mississippi's developing blues tourism infrastructure. While this decision proved effective generally, the inclusion of an additional piece of footage showing the blues trail project coordinator saying that race is not an issue within the management and development of the blues trail added an artificial distinction to this particular sequence.

While the African American director of education spoke at length about the ever-present racial problems in Mississippi and the fact that black communities must be part of (and actively seek out opportunities to affect) the narrative of blues tourism in the state, she also movingly described the concept of pain within the black community resulting from a history of segregation, violence, and second-class citizenship. These points are of critical importance in the film and they help to contextualize the charged atmosphere around Mississippi's blues tourism efforts.

In the very next sequence, the white project coordinator responded to a question about race and her experience working on the blues trail and her on-camera reply, without the original prompt from us, created a seemingly adversarial relationship between the two interviewees. She replied that she does not think about race as she works on this project and that she hopes the trail will help to build bridges between communities in the state. This is also an important perspective from someone attempting to manage one aspect of Mississippi blues tourism.

The film attempts to convey some idea of the complex racial components of blues tourism through the many perspectives of the interviewees taken together. As imperfect

as it is, the film seeks to capture the nuances, contradictions, and ambiguities of this historic development in Mississippi. Upon reviewing this segment, Smith and I felt it was important to let the entirety of the film speak in this way, rather than attempt to introduce the concept of racial tension through the forced interplay between two particular individuals. We therefore made the decision to cut the short additional piece of footage to ensure the integrity of the interview scenario and the larger narrative.

From the beginning of this project, Smith and I created a methodology through which our strengths and weaknesses could be accentuated or mediated by our collaboration. The film thus far is the result of a continual process of editing, review, revision, and rethinking. Given my extreme lack of knowledge concerning the technical aspects of filmmaking, I am indebted to Smith as an expert collaborator. Throughout this process I've learned that as a viable tool within the field of public history, film demands reflection in practice, collaboration, an interdisciplinary approach, and the need to share authority with those whose point of view or culture serves as the basis for the visual narrative.

Blue Front Café: A Case Study

From morning until late at night the Blue Front Café is a locus of gathering in Bentonia. Jimmy Holmes often receives calls from locals at his home on Sunday mornings asking if he'll 'open the café.' This gable-fronted concrete block building sits between an old cotton gin that now serves as an automobile repair shop, and a wooden structure that served the community as a grocery store beginning in 1948, the same year the Blue Front opened. The historic route of the Illinois Central Railroad runs directly in

front of the Cafe. The building has a blue and gray paint scheme with a metal Coca-Cola “Blue Front Café” signs on the outside. On the inside, the space is divided into three rooms: main barroom/music/dance space; kitchen area and bathroom, barber shop. The mostly African American clientele begins arriving in the morning, buying small snack items and beer throughout the day, and visiting on the front porch and parking lot in the warm months. Jimmy says that 95% of his regular clientele are local African Americans. “Every now and then a local white will come in, but most of the white clientele come from Yazoo City, Jackson,” other states, and increasingly from other countries.⁸

Bentonia is located in Yazoo County, on the southernmost edge of Mississippi’s alluvial flood-plain Delta. Jack Owens, local native and musical mentor to Jimmy Holmes, was featured along with Bentonia and the Blue Front Café in a 1995 television commercial spot for Levi’s blue jeans. With a population numbering close to 500, Bentonia is also synonymous with musician Skip James and a distinctive form of blues known among aficionados as the “Bentonia School.” Ethnomusicologist David Evans wrote that this style “is distinctive for its high melismatic singing and complex melodies, its minor-keyed, intricately picked guitar parts, and haunting, brooding lyrics dealing with such themes as loneliness, death, and the supernatural.”⁹ First held in 1972, and

⁸ Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, interview by author, 26 August 2006, Bentonia, Mississippi.

⁹ Quoted in Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History, from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago’s South Side to the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 117.

then revived on a yearly basis in 2006, Bentonia also hosts the Bentonia Blues Festival at the Blue Front Café in June.¹⁰

Jimmy Holmes strongly maintains that the Blue Front is the “living room” of his community in Bentonia. The walls that create a relaxed gathering space for friends, relatives, and locals in town now carry the written signature marks of visitors from Belgium, Britain, Germany, St. Louis, California, and elsewhere. These signature rites solidify a certain brand of ownership for the visitor while they confer a sense of importance upon a building, a man, his community, blues, and all the myths that render Mississippi’s history complicated and fascinating. Holmes also keeps a guestbook with signatures of visitors from all over the world.

¹⁰ Kelli Bozemen, “Where in Mississippi is...Bentonia? On the Southern border of the blues-rich Delta lies a tiny community with a worldwide musical reputation,” *Mississippi Magazine* (Jan-Feb, 2007), 1.



Figure 4.2 Exterior view of the Blue Front Café. Jimmy “Duck” Holmes plays guitar on the porch. Photo by Author, 2006.

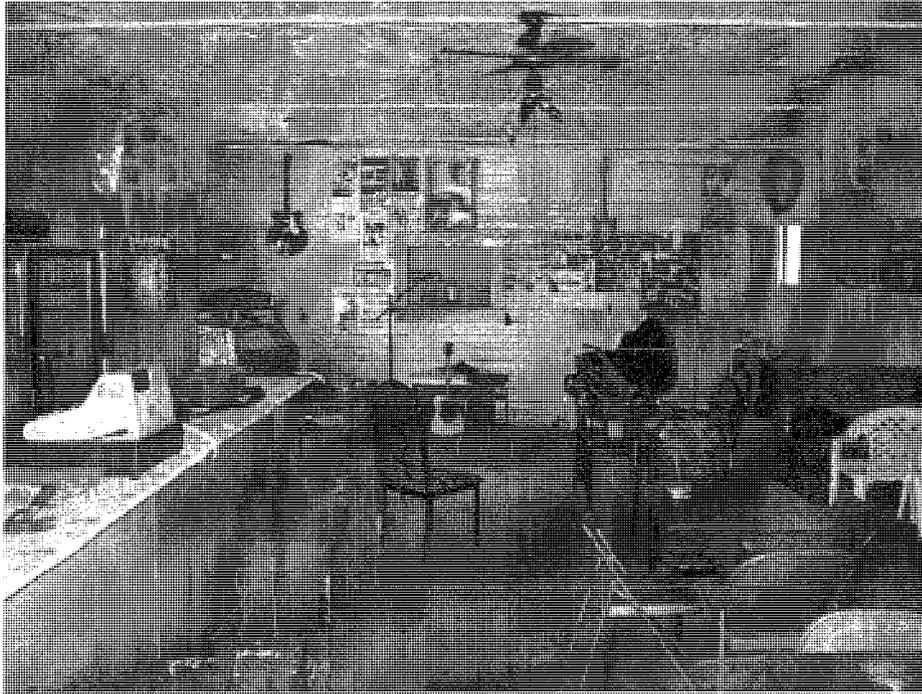


Figure 4.3 Interior view of the Blue Front Café. Photo by Author, 2006.

As *Refuse to Fold* displays, Holmes is careful to relate his reasons for keeping the Blue Front open to his mother's and family's experiences operating a black-owned business in Mississippi between 1948 and the present. As he describes his mother's experience, he also recalls his own childhood growing up in Bentonia. He presents a close family often enduring harsh circumstances in the segregated South, and as a musician he relates these experiences directly to the essence of blues music. While he refuses to use race as a scapegoat, Holmes is careful to say that blues is an expressive vehicle for both positive and negative aspects of life and he connects his artistic outlook and desire to keep the Blue Front open with the experiences of his mother and family. Race, therefore, is woven into the complex and often ambiguous modern landscape of blues tourism. "Not speaking from a racist perspective, [but] in order to really sing or play blues, you have to have experienced it." By subtly mentioning race, Holmes

connects his perspective to the larger black historical experience in Mississippi. “You've got to know what it means to have one pair of shoes and only wear them on Sunday. You've got to know what its like to go to school with no running water, no cafeteria... White kids pass by you on the school bus and throw [things] out the window at you, or the driver cuts in the road at you.”¹¹

Holmes clearly appreciates the renewed interest in his music and in the Bentonia musical tradition. Surprised by the (mostly white) outside visitors that come just to see the Blue Front and to meet him, he welcomes the attention and patiently repeats stories about Skip James and Jack Owens. In my first interview with him in 2006, I asked if anybody else around Bentonia was attempting to play his style of blues:

“No. Now there is a young white guy who can run some of the Skip (James) chords, could run some of the Jack Owens chords, from a *musical* standpoint... If you follow...its different. From a professional, *music* standpoint. As far as being able to play it from a Jack and Skip standpoint, no. Because it's done with a feeling. You've got to know where you're coming from.”¹²

Jimmy also describes attempts by some local white officials to close the Blue Front, saying that they “hated the place” due to their own perceptions of what went on there. He argues that this view was largely based on ignorance about the black community in Bentonia. In 2007, the Blue Front received a Blues Heritage Trail Marker, thereby

¹¹ Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, interview by author, 9 February 2008, Bentonia, Mississippi. Also present at this interview: Brandon Dempsey and Angela Smith.

¹² Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, interview by author, 26 August 2006, Bentonia, Mississippi. Since that time, a local barber named LV Ball, who appears in the film, ‘Refuse to Fold,’ approached Holmes to learn his blues style. Holmes stated that Ball is the first African American actively seeking him out to learn this music.

solidifying its presence within the well-publicized blues tourism economy in Mississippi. When asked how he feels about it, Holmes replied, “when I look at that marker, I think about my mom....I'm just a remnant of what Jack Owens [his musical mentor] and my mom did.” He adds that local attitudes about the Blue Front seem to be changing as a result of the historical marker and media interest. “Once [the local government and white community] became aware that the state was supporting [the Blue Front’s historical legacy] 100%, I guess they decided to get on the bandwagon. Plus it brings a lot of attention to Bentonia.” Holmes speaks at length about how strong his mother was during periods when many would have closed their own business. He recalls that the Blue Front became the sole financial support for his family's farm when his parents could not secure loans from other institutions and he offers this as the reason he now has a house and some land.¹³

Holmes hopes to preserve the Blue Front and his music, as well as an understanding of the struggles, successes, and legacies of his family and his community. In this sense, Jimmy seeks to keep the ‘living room’ of Bentonia intact while negotiating and benefiting from the marker and the new tourism that have fostered interest in the Blue Front and in the Bentonia Sound. As Holmes is proud of the Blues Trail Marker, he also weaves the historical experiences of his family, the importance and complexities of race, and the potential and challenges of blues tourism into his own understanding of what the marker represents. He argues that to play his brand of blues, one must understand its origins by having experienced them. Jimmy therefore grafts the long

¹³ Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, interview by author, 9 February 2008, Bentonia, Mississippi.

history of his family and community onto his awareness of the present while constructing and defending his own definition of authenticity within the changing landscape of Mississippi blues tourism.



Figure 4.4 This image displays the interview context inside the Blue Front Café. Pictured are Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, Brandon Dempsey (sound engineer), and Brian Dempsey. Photo by Angela Smith, 2008.



Figure 4.5 Side one of the Mississippi Blues Commission Blues Trail Marker. Blue Front Café. Photo by Author, 2008.

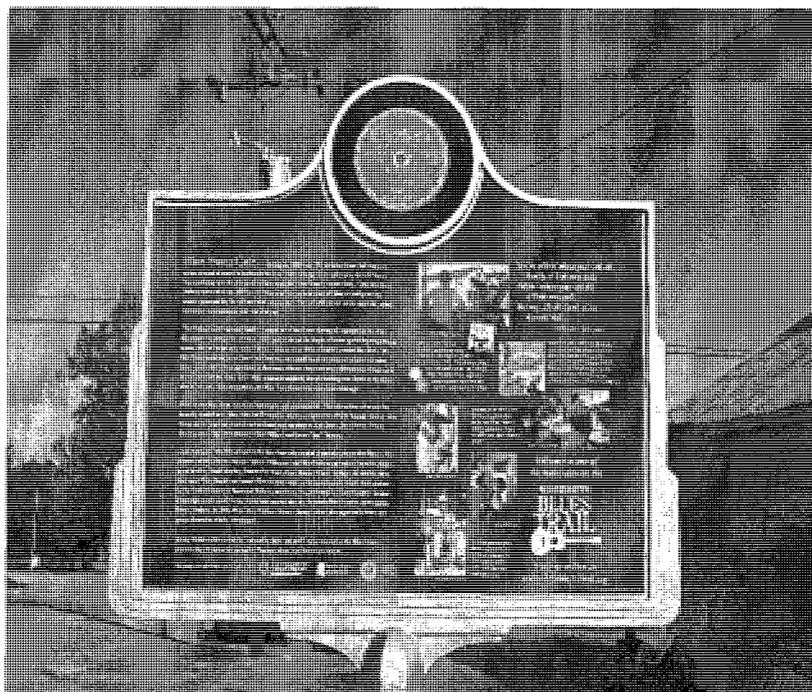


Figure 4.6 Reverse side of the Blue Front Café MBC Blues Trail Marker. Photo by Author, 2008.

The next portion of this chapter presents the narrative of Jimmy Duck Holmes, along with other relevant voices commenting on Mississippi Blues Tourism, in the film *Refuse to Fold*. Holmes reveals a complex story about his home town, his music, and his community. Questions about why artists do what they do, their perspective about their work, and their place within their community constitute primary analytical elements in this documentary study. Holmes' perspective provides an important window into historical issues surrounding the Blue Front, as well as modern blues tourism, race relationships, and cultural commodification. The film was edited in the Mac program *Final Cut Pro*. The following are brief biographies of the participants in the film, along with filmmaker credits.

Participants:

Jimmy “Duck” Holmes: Owner of the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, Mississippi, Jimmy Holmes is also an internationally known musician, releasing *Back to Bentonia* (2006), *Done Got Tired of Tryin’* (2007), *Gonna Get Old Someday* (2008). Jimmy’s parents opened the Blue Front in 1948 and this building has served as, in Jimmy’s words, ‘the living room of the community’ for Bentonia since then. Jimmy actively continues the music tradition passed on to him by fellow Bentonians, Jack Owens, Skip James, and Henry Stuckey, and many blues fans around the world consider Holmes the last living practitioner of a distinctive ‘Bentonia Style’ of blues.

LV Ball: LV Ball is a barber and musician near Bentonia, Mississippi. Having grown up playing music throughout his life, he approached Jimmy ‘Duck’ Holmes to learn Holmes’ distinctive style of blues. An enthusiastic student, Ball is eager to carry on this blues tradition, playing it live and teaching it to the younger generation of musicians. According to Holmes, LV Ball is the first African American to approach him wanting to learn this style of blues.

Wanda Clark: Vice President of Hammons and Associates Advertising agency in Greenwood, Mississippi, Wanda Clark also serves as the designer/manager of the Mississippi Blues Commission Blues Heritage Trail marker project. In this capacity, Clark works with local Chambers of Commerce and communities, blues artists, and historians to manage marker placement, design, and unveiling ceremony activities.

Sade Turnipseed: Director of Education and Community Outreach, BB King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, Sade Turnipseed is also the founder and publisher of the Young Publishers Global Network (YPGN) and Producer and Host of ‘Delta Scene,’ a television program that explores issues related to the arts, education, and politics in the Mississippi Delta. Turnipseed has lectured on Pan African Studies at various universities and currently serves on the Board of Directors at the Blues Foundation of Memphis, Tennessee.

Adam Gussow: Associate Professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi, Adam Gussow has written extensively on blues, including *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) and *Journeyman's Road: Modern Blues Lives from Faulkner's Mississippi to Post-9/11 New York* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007). Gussow is also a well-known harmonica player, having apprenticed with Mississippi-born blues player Sterling Magee in the duo *Satan and Adam* in New York and around the world.

David Evans: David Evans is the Director of the Ethnomusicology/Regional Studies doctoral program of the Rudi E. Scheidt School of Music at the University of Memphis. He is a key figure in blues scholarship, publishing *Tommy Johnson* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1982), and *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to the Blues* (New York: Perigee, 2005). Evans is also a performing musician and has produced numerous field and studio recordings for the University of Memphis. Evans is credited with some of the initial fieldwork completed in and around Bentonia, Mississippi in the 1960s.

Film Credits:

Brian Dempsey: writer, director, producer.

Angela Smith:

Brandon Dempsey: sound engineer, camera

CHAPTER V

A NEW HERITAGE

In March 2009, the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act created nine new National Heritage Areas in the United States.¹ Among others, this piece of legislation, signed by President Barack Obama, designated the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area (MDNHA) and the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area (MHNHA), increasing the total number of Heritage Areas in Mississippi to three. Since 2004, the Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area represented the state's only heritage area. Its current mission "is to promote understanding of and to conserve and enhance the heritage resources of the six counties of the Mississippi Gulf Coast by telling the area's nationally significant story to residents and visitors through activities and partnerships that celebrate the area's unique history, people, traditions, and landscapes."²

As one of the newest designations within a loosely-connected national network of forty-nine total Heritage Areas in the United States, the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area sets in motion a planning device to further shape Mississippi's

¹ The National Park Service defines Heritage Areas as: "places where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. These regions are acknowledged in Congress for their capacity to tell nationally important stories about our nation." Douglas P. Wheeler, Chairman, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas: A Report by the National Park System Advisory Board* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2006), 2.

² Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area. On-line. <http://www.msgulfcoastheritage.ms.gov/CMP/MAINSECTION/ABOUTUS.aspx>, accessed 10 December 2009.

conservation, environmental, and heritage tourism infrastructure. This Congressional approval also serves to market the Delta as a distinctive region worthy of visitation and preservation. The National Park Service ‘arrowhead’ design, which also comes with the Congressional designation, connects the region to a celebratory heritage narrative that promotes the protection of unique geo-cultural spaces on the American landscape.



Figure 5.1 National Park Service Arrowhead logo and National Heritage Area sign. (<http://www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/AREAS/MISS.HTM>)

This chapter utilizes the passage of the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area (MDNHA) as a vehicle to conclude this dissertation. Now in its infancy, the MDNHA is an important development for Mississippi and for the continued reshaping of the Delta’s image and its many historical narratives. Like blues tourism generally, while the passage of the MDNHA cannot be viewed as a panacea for the Delta, it provides yet another layer within the developmental matrix of modern Mississippi.

Congress designated the first American National Heritage Area in 1984. In 2009, a total of forty-nine heritage areas were either in operation or approved by Congress. As a protective and economic mechanism, a National Heritage Area recognizes “living landscapes”³ that contribute to America’s national story. This status provides selected regions access to federal funds that are matched by private and non-profit investment. Because the designation carries with it ‘national’ significance, Heritage Areas are also

³ Wheeler, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*, 3.

designed to stimulate regional economies through increased tourism and public-private partnerships. According to a report by the National Park System Advisory Board,

Heritage Areas:

are the management responsibility of the people who live there. The Federal government provides technical and limited financial assistance, but it does not assume ownership of land inside heritage areas or impose land use controls. Partnerships created to administer heritage areas cross political boundaries, coordinating the efforts of large numbers of organizations. These broad collaborative relationships have demonstrated a capacity to leverage significant funding and support for large-scale preservation projects, which require long-term commitments to build an enduring stewardship ethic.⁴

In 2003, the National Park Service argued that for every dollar the government invested in heritage areas, the private sector invested two dollars, totaling \$261,658,931 (private investment) as of 2003.⁵ In struggling economies that also have unique American stories to tell, this potential for local management and investment is both attractive and highly sought after. In the Blackstone Valley of New England, for example, heritage area designation provided a faltering regional economy access to initial federal financial support whose “programs to develop tourism, clean up the River, create heritage museums, restore theaters, build a bike path, and plan a river access system” attracted “significant” private investment.⁶

⁴ Wheeler, 3.

⁵ Robert Billington, “A Case Study of the Blackstone River Valley: Federal Investment Attracts Private Investment in Industrial Historic Sites.” Unpublished, Submitted to the *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 9. On-line. <http://www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/REP/investhist.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.

⁶Ibid.,14.

Politically, Heritage Areas enjoy bipartisan support. In a *Washington Post* article on November 30, 2007, Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio) claimed that an \$8 million government investment in a heritage area in his state generated \$270 million in regional revenue.⁷ Such a healthy public-private ratio appears positive and for many it proves that the heritage area concept works. However, others view Heritage Areas as further evidence of abusive government control. In a 2007 article published by the conservative Heritage Foundation, Cheryl Chumley and Ronald D. Utt charged that heritage areas pose a direct threat to private property rights “through the exercise of restrictive zoning that may severely limit the extent to which property owners can develop or use their property.”⁸

Because the National Park Service is the partnering organization within Heritage Area designation, its governmental affiliation attracts criticism from groups who are protective of private property rights and fearful of government regulation. Other groups decry a lack of standardized procedures for establishing Heritage Areas, thereby possibly generating excess bureaucracies and waste. A 2005 study conducted by the Congressional Research Service found that in addition to wide support from Congress and local areas seeking economic recovery, some critics contend that “heritage areas may have difficulty

⁷ Paul Kane, “Heritage Areas vs. Property Rights: With Designations on Rise, Conservatives Sound Alarm,” *The Washington Post* 30 November 2007. On-line. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/29/AR2007112902160.html>, accessed 10 December 2009.

⁸ Cheryl Chumley and Ronald D. Utt, PhD, “National Heritage Areas: Costly Economic Development Schemes that Threaten Property Rights,” *The Heritage Foundation* 2080 (23 October 2007), 4. On-line. http://www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/upload/bg_2080.pdf, accessed 10 December 2009.

providing the infrastructure that increased tourism requires” and that “other areas may need additional protective measures to ensure that increased tourism and development do not degrade the resources and landscapes.”⁹

As new Heritage Areas are added to America’s landscape, it is reasonable to wonder if these designations are losing some of their relative importance in the eyes of tourists and critics. In this view some may ask, why not declare the entire United States a *heritage area*?

Charles Flynn, Executive Director for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, defends his heritage area, arguing that it “relies on consensus-building and voluntary participation, instead of government control and/or compulsion. Its’ partnerships create great efficiencies, as a small amount of NPS funds leverages a tremendous amount of local, state, and private investment.”¹⁰

In 2004, Michigan State University conducted a study to evaluate the economic impact of seven Heritage Areas.¹¹ While secondary effects of heritage areas depend upon

⁹ Carol Hardy and David Whiteman, “Heritage Areas: Background, Proposals, and Current Issues,” *Congressional Research Services*, Library of Congress (November 23, 2005): 5-6.

¹⁰ Charles Flynn, Executive Director of Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, interview, 31 May 2009. National Heritage Area website, National Park Service. On-line. <http://www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/interviewyuma.htm>, accessed 10 December 2009.

¹¹ The following Heritage Areas participated in this study: Augusta Canal National Heritage Area, MotorCities National Heritage Area, Cane River National Heritage Area, Essex National Heritage Area, Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area, Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor, and Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area. Daniel J. Stynes and Ya-Yen Sun, “Economic Impacts of National Heritage Area Visitor Spending; Summary Results from Seven National Heritage Area

the size and structure of the local economy, this report summarized, “direct effects accrue primarily to hotels, restaurants, amusements, and retail shops in the area” and that “about two thirds of the spending and associated economic impacts would be lost to the regions in the absence of the heritage attractions.” In addition to these economic considerations, the study emphasized the import of more indistinct factors, stating, “the greater values of [tourism and economic development programs] will often be their contributions to historic and cultural preservation, education, and community identity and partnerships.”¹²

On March 30, 2009, President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, lawfully creating the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. This law included a provision for a “local coordinating entity” composed of fifteen members. The provision was a substantial change from the original house bill, H.R. 928, which provided for a coordinating partnership that included one member from: Mississippi Valley State University, Delta State University, Alcorn State University, the Delta Foundation, the Delta Council, the Mississippi Office of Tourism Development, and the Smith Robertson Museum in Jackson.¹³ All original members in H.R. 928 are mentioned in the new 2009 law except the Mississippi Office of Tourism Development. In its place, and in addition to the original six of the seven previously mentioned, the

Visitor Surveys,” Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies, (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2004.)

¹² Stynes and Sun, ii, 27.

¹³ Congress, House, *A Bill to establish the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area and the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area, and for other purposes*, 111th Congress, 1st Session, 2009-2010, H.R. 928, 6-9. Section 109 a-b of this bill also states that the coordinating entity shall not “interfere with the right of any person with respect to private property; or any local zoning ordinance or land use plan.” H.R. 928, 10-11.

following are now included in the law: “1 member shall be appointed from the Office of the Governor of the state; 1 member from the Mississippi Arts Commission; 1 member from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; 1 member from the Mississippi Humanities Council; and up to 5 additional members shall be appointed for staggered 1- and 2-year terms by County boards in the Heritage Area.”¹⁴

The 2009 law also stresses the need for partnerships, typical for National Heritage Area legislation, and provides a coordinating entity to ensure local and regional management of federal funds and resources. It recognizes the perceived threat to private property rights due to governmental involvement and thereby implements measures to protect these rights and safeguard individuals from unnecessary federal encroachment. \$10,000,000 is appropriated for the Heritage Area from Congress with the caveat that “not more than \$1,000,000 may be available for any fiscal year” and that “the Federal share of the cost of any activity carried out using funds made available under this title shall not be more than 50 percent.”¹⁵

Unpacking this legislation and attempting to implement it upon Mississippi’s often contentious landscape will be challenging. The apparent strength of heritage areas often stems from regional partnerships that also promote education initiatives at the local level and strategic planning to leverage private investment alongside government funding. Due to the Mississippi Delta’s unique historical development as outlined in

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *An Act to designate certain land as components of the National Wilderness Preservation System, to authorize certain programs and activities in the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture, and for other purposes*, 111th Congress, 1st Session, 2009-2010, H.R. 146, 278.

¹⁵ H.R.146. Section 8008, 285.

previous chapters of this dissertation, this unpacking period could take myriad paths. While it is too soon to know the precise contours of this next phase of development, existing economic and racial discrepancies may serve as barriers or continue to drive wedges between organizations and entities that would benefit from federal funding, local/regional partnerships, and increased visitation.

Dr. Luther Brown, Director of the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University, and a key player in the initial movement to request a Delta Heritage Area, remains optimistic about the new MDNHA designation and feels that it has the potential to promote more collaboration among varied interests and organizations. Since heritage tourism is an important component of heritage area development, blues tourism therefore stands to gain from this designation as well. Brown argues that in addition to the marketing possibilities for the Delta, “the MDNHA can help promote better understanding that the blues is both music and culture, and it can help interpret that culture to the visitors.”¹⁶ However, he also references the fact that although the MDNHA legislation creates a coordinating entity, there is no specific mechanism to call the first meeting. Brown continues,

some parties may not even know that they are named in the legislation, and some others have misconceptions about their roles. Given the historic tensions among and between some of the parties, even calling the first meeting is problematic. There will also be the issue of historic black/white inequality and exploitation, and this will not be a small issue.¹⁷

¹⁶ Dr. Luther Brown, “Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area,” Personal Email, (5 August 2009.)

¹⁷ Ibid.

Dr. Brown's optimism and guarded concern regarding the potential of the MDNHA reflect the tenuous footing of Mississippi's latest effort to rebuild its economy and identity. The developments of the recent past do cast a new light on Mississippi. Dropping out of the bluffs from Memphis on Highway 61, the driver views tall, shiny casino towers where the horizon line only a few years ago met the worked haze of a cotton field. Where sharecroppers once toiled long, brutal hours under a Jim Crow system of segregation and inequality in the soupy heat of the Delta, neat bungalows stocked with the increasingly familiar ephemera of a mythic cultural landscape confirm a touristic desire for 'authenticity.'

A site once deemed dangerous for whites and outsiders, the Blue Front Café now proudly displays a blue historic marker celebrating its existence. Its owner and subject of the film *Refuse to Fold*, Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes, welcomes this new and somewhat confusing attention. He does so with a firm grasp of his own complex history, beginning with his mother fleeing the great flood of 1927 to his hometown of Bentonia, continuing with his memories of racial separation as a child, and moving still with his connection of the Blue Front to a living African American community of influential elders, local friends gathering in a familiar 'living room,' and now outside (mainly white) strangers eager to touch and hear something of the real blues. Perhaps these visitors are seeking something they fear is being lost or harder to find in what James Cobb calls our "emergent global mass culture."¹⁸ Ironically, heritage tourism marketing is a primary facet of our modern

¹⁸ James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 330.

mass cultural world and the engine through which visitors increasingly learn about places like the Blue Front Café.

Whether blues tourism, the heritage area movement, or casinos can help correct Mississippi's lingering economic, racial, and cultural challenges is unclear. Certainly boosters of tourism and gaming believe in their sweeping potential. A palpable momentum is clearly evident as the passage of two new heritage areas, blues historic markers peppering sites and streets in small towns with crowds to cheer them, and economic spikes around the casinos by the river generate a sense that something is changing in Mississippi. Cleveland, home to Delta State University, now refers to itself as an "oasis," where "the blues is realized within the flat, dusty landscape and the weathered hearts of countless generations."¹⁹ Blues, rusticity, and romance are intimately interwoven within Cleveland's well-designed tourism brochure as well as throughout the Delta's disjointed, yet gradually more coherent marketing efforts.

These efforts fit within a larger set of regional and international marketing strategies that seek to promote uniqueness and authenticity as they attract outside visitors. The many promotional forms and the ways in which certain locales present themselves to the world create the modern heritage tourism industry. The Mississippi Delta uses the blues, gambling, agriculture, and literature; Appalachia uses the banjo wrapped in the trinket-sheen of mountain souvenirs; Australia uses aboriginal culture and the allure of its 'outback', while South Africa uses elephants, landscape, and adventure to lure tourist dollars. The rich, complex texture of these places cannot be summed up in such terse

¹⁹ Cleveland/Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce, *Cleveland Brochure*, (Cleveland, Mississippi, 2009), 1.

statements as these. Yet, the pull of heritage and history remains strong and ever-expanding, notwithstanding their differences. Blues, a music and cultural product laden with emotion, celebration, double-meaning, suffering, entertainment, and diversity now stands as a powerful regional, national, and international commodity. The land long associated with this music is now declared a National Heritage Area precisely because of this connection.

These developments are both potentially positive and negative. Equating blues with Mississippi's modern touristic identity is a tremendously important development, yet its capacity to adequately include and benefit the economically struggling African American communities in the still segregated Delta is not so clear. The commodification of certain cultural attributes within heritage tourism models upon an already stratified economic and racial landscape both shapes and significantly complicates this region's identity, image, and history.

Heritage tourism is a powerful global phenomenon, especially in economically distressed areas. The growth of this developmental strategy has also witnessed a parallel growth in the literature of tourism studies. While this data continues to diversify, general trends regarding the development and effects of heritage tourism in specific locales are evident. For example, as discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, the presentation of the Civil War at sites in the South historically offered interpretations of a gallant struggle between two heroic (white) peoples who, in the end, reunified and restored the patriotic American ideal. Such a widespread treatment ignored the many nuances of this tragic period in American history, deeply stunting healthy debates concerning the potential and

limits of American freedom, race, citizenship, and nationhood. Eric Foner suggests that this reunification spirit accelerated in the 1890s “as part of the glorification of the national state and the nationwide triumph of white supremacy.”²⁰ Only in the very recent past have we begun to come to terms with the many complex reasons this war was fought, namely slavery. It was not until the late 1990s that the National Park Service interpreted slavery as a primary cause of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

In the years since apartheid ended, South Africa continues to utilize heritage tourism strategies to develop its economy. Binns and Nel write that “in many areas of the world, the reality of economic crises has provoked a search for locally driven and innovative growth alternatives, which are frequently referred to in the literature as ‘local economic development.’” One important aspect of local development in South Africa is a focus on tourism. Binns and Nel further argue that while tourism has increased the economic potential of certain South African sectors, with public-private investment helping to address discrepancies stemming from apartheid and high poverty rates, “it is, however, difficult to avoid reaching the conclusion that the poorest elements of the community in reality do not truly own or have much control over the development process.”²¹ In “The Impacts of Tourism on Rural Livelihoods: Namibia’s Experience,” Caroline Ashley argues that measuring the success of tourism programs and strategies in rural locales in South Africa means more than increasing employment and income levels.

²⁰ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 204.

²¹ Tony Binns and Etienne Nel, “Tourism as a local development strategy in South Africa,” *The Geographical Journal* 3 (September 2002): 236, 244.

To maximize the benefits of tourism and provide opportunities for broad-based economic development, Ashley stresses the need for “a *considerable role* for local people in decision-making.”²²

This is not to paint certain groups as helpless victims, or deny their agency within struggling economies that use tourism for economic development. Evidence suggests that many diverse groups welcome tourism strategies in an effort to pull their regions out of poverty or distress. The Delta Rural Poll, conducted by Dr. Alan Barton at Delta State University, revealed in 2005 that “over 80% of [Mississippi] Deltans [polled] would like to see tourists visiting literary sites, and over 70% support tourism to blues clubs, festivals and museums.” However, very few Deltans support juke joint tourism. Generally, “a higher percentage of white Deltans support heritage tourism than blacks, except to civil rights sites, which garner support from over 90% of African Americans.” The Poll also found that most participants believed that Delta children “do not understand local heritage,”²³ revealing the need for more educational opportunities and strategies that coincide with tourism efforts.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, many in Mississippi strongly feel that blues tourism and casino gambling are the mediums to redevelop the state’s economy. Their presence and utility are now real components of the landscape. However, given the

²² Caroline Ashley, “The Impacts of Tourism on Rural Livelihoods: Namibia’s Experience,” *Overseas Development Institute*. (London 2000), 30. On-line. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/2035.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.

²³ Alan W. Barton, *Attitudes and Perceptions of Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta*, The Delta Rural Poll, No. 06-01, Center for Community and Economic Development (Cleveland, MS: Delta State University, 2006), 3.

relative infancy of their de jure status, questions remain as to how they will affect Mississippi's economy, culture, and historical identity in the long term. To what degree, for example, does blues tourism promote a more integrated regional historical narrative and community? Will the combination of gaming and blues tourism eventually promote a one-dimensional portrait of the Mississippi Delta, shorn of its inherent complexity? The success of these trails, tourism strategies, and casinos depends upon the development of true partnerships in the Delta and throughout Mississippi. African American communities must be more integrated into these efforts, just as the other demographic populations in the state must be. As Sade Turnipseed, Education Director for the B.B. King museum in Indianola, Mississippi, argues in *Refuse to Fold*, this integration must reflect active efforts made by the black and white communities in the Delta.

There now exists great opportunity for the African American community to help shape the texture of its collective identity promoted to the outside world through dynamic, nuanced presentations of culture, including a usable blues heritage. However, it is important to realize that this integration is further hampered by the economic, political, and health discrepancies that exist among populations in the region. Similar to other distinctive areas that now actively use heritage tourism as economic development, including "Appalachia, Native American tribal lands, the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, and highly racially segregated urban areas," the Mississippi Delta is an identified locus of poverty.²⁴ According to Peter J. Hotez, in the wide seven-state Delta region, "for the blacks living in the Delta and elsewhere in the American South,

²⁴ Peter J. Hotez, "Neglected Infections of Poverty in the United States of America," *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 3 (2008): 1.

several parasitic and congenital infections rank among the most important neglected infections of poverty, especially in post-Katrina Louisiana.”²⁵ This health factor is one of many contributing to systemic poverty and continued inequities between populations in the region. Such unequal footing may therefore prohibit struggling communities from engaging in heritage tourism development efforts, thereby strengthening certain points of view and stories over others.

A cynical interpretation of the recent developments in Mississippi might view blues tourism as yet another appropriation of black culture in a state with a dismal race record, where the violence of Civil Rights struggles were the most heinous, where past governors, state archivists, and traditional political organizations like the Delta Council each trumpeted political and social control of black men by white men. Going further in this direction, the healthy skeptic may criticize Mississippi for welcoming casino gambling and cultural commodification as ‘quick-fix’ cures for economic and social ills that stretch back to the cloudy nineteenth century. The skeptic might even look askance at the fact that the Delta Council, the organization that worked during the middle of the twentieth century to control the black population through segregation and white supremacy, now serves as the primary contact for the coordinating entity charged with writing the management plan for the new Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. Though the Delta Council now has African American representation, the degree to which the historical and cultural reverberations from the organization’s past will influence

²⁵ Hotez, 3.

modern perceptions and thinking regarding its leadership role in the heritage area remains to be seen.

These concerns are valid and important, for Mississippi contains within its borders the history to confirm them all. But, as with the entire South and the rest of the United States, Mississippi also has tremendous capacity to learn from its past. While its scars are pronounced and painfully real, its potential has always simmered under the surface with art, music, humanity, complexity, and mystery. Long struggling cultures will still struggle, yet aspects of their daily living now stand as pieces of Mississippi's evolving public identity. The Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area might just be the apparatus to stimulate partnerships, educational opportunities, and more fully integrated tourism narratives. If more people are truly part of such a process, Mississippi may then live up to the emotional depth and spirit produced by the creative efforts of so many of its daughters and sons.

In *Refuse to Fold*, Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes speaks at length about what his blues mean to him. As he talks about the historical marker celebrating the Blue Front Café, he counters every word of gratitude, optimism, and bemusement with a story from his childhood about how strong his mother was and what it was like growing up in Jim Crow Mississippi. In one sentence he also conveys the potential and ambiguity of what is happening in Mississippi right now. In the glow of new attention now focused on the Blue Front Café and his own internationally-acclaimed music, Jimmy reflects succinctly,

“you can’t judge how a man feels on the inside, but they [local white officials] support me 100% [now] when it comes to the Blue Front.”²⁶

²⁶ Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, interview by author, 9, February 2008, Bentonia, Mississippi. Also present at this interview: Brandon Dempsey and Angela Smith.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview with Jimmy “Duck” Holmes

August 26, 2006

Location: Blue Front Café

Benton, Mississippi

Interviewer: Brian Dempsey

Dempsey: We were talking about the fact that you’re from this area, this is where your family is from, this place has been in existence since...What year did you say again?

Holmes: 1948

Dempsey: If you could talk a little bit about your family, how this place got started...maybe talk about your parents and how they ran the place (Blue Front Café), and what kind of social atmosphere this was when it started, and through what it is today.

Holmes: I can’t remember when they came on-board...my mother always told me they started operating in 1948. And it was a juke-joint combo. A lot of partying, blues music, and of course they sold a little of everything. A little grocery...flour, meal, canned goods. If you came to town on a Saturday afternoon, you came to the Blue Front. You could get

drunk, then carry some groceries home, because like I said, my parents sold a little bit of everything. And in the back of it (Blue Front) was a barber shop. It's still back there. Course, the guy's been cutting back there forty some years. I'll take you back and show you...He's been there as long as I can remember. When I remember...he only ever cut on weekends. He had his regular costumers and after his costumers started getting old and dying off, and got to the point that he would cut every other weekend. Like I say, that's been there forty some years to my knowledge. But anyway, my parents started running it in 1948 as a juke joint. My father (unclear, but he's talking about social security and his father's self-employed status)...social security, pay it if you want to...nobody came out. And believe it or not, when he passed he didn't have social security because he always worked for himself...sharecropping, farming, and he eventually starting farming for himself and (unclear). And out of this place (Blue Front), strangely enough, my mom and dad raised ten kids of their own and she raised four siblings. Which means, this place was taking care of fourteen kids. (They got along) with a small farm and a two bedroom house. People ask me now, why I really got interested in music, and I don't know if I really got interested in playing the guitar or not because nobody was (interested/played—unclear) in my family that I know of.

Dempsey: Really, nobody played in your family?

Holmes: No. Now my mom told me years ago that my dad ran around in his younger days with some guys that played music. He ran around with a guy called (Bird Slater?) that played piano. And another guy called Adam Slater, who was Bird Slater's brother, he played a little guitar. And my dad ran around with a guy called Henry Stuckey, who's supposed to be the daddy of the of the particular blues sound known as the Bentonia blues. But now, whether or not my dad could play, I've never seen him play but my momma always told me he ran around with those guys.

Dempsey: Did they sing...did your parents sing?

Holmes: My mother around the house, like most mothers did during those particular times. They would moan and hum particular spiritual songs. And I remember her telling me about this guy, Blind Lemon Jefferson, I can't remember the song. She would hum a song that he recorded. My daddy, like I said...he was a very quiet man. Matter of fact, Henry Stuckey, introduced me to my first guitar in 1957; which was his, now.

(unclear)... was actually the first guitar I saw. He was a neighbor of mine; probably stayed about fifteen or twenty yards from me. He would play for us sometimes...me and my siblings and his kids on Saturday night. And I don't know if my dad wanted someone in the family to play music, cause he had run around with guys that played music.

Anyway, Henry Stuckey introduced me to my first guitar in 1957-- mid to late fifties.

Dempsey: Did he give you this guitar?

Holmes: No. This guitar...it was the first...just kind of picked it up. I was only ten years old. And I think that same particular year my dad bought me a plastic guitar. And I think it was for Christmas. It was a long time ago. But anyway, we were going to tune it for the next morning, but the next morning (unclear)--Anyway, an old plastic box with what you call cat-gut strings...plastic strings and I strummed around with it till it wore out ...how many months, how many weeks. And like I said that was my first introduction to the guitar, which was back in the fifties. And probably, the early sixties I had an uncle that lived in New York. And I didn't know this, but when I went to visit him one summer, I learned that he messed around with a guitar. He had one and I used to strum around with his, and he would play. This was the early sixties, '64 or something like that. And I would go work (to New York) in the summers, I believe until '66. And (unclear) start visiting him in New York...he played a lot of John Lee Hooker stuff. After I started visiting him in New York. Then the guitar itself sort of got on the back burner for another...with me, I'm saying, for another ten, at least eight, nine years.

Dempsey: How long would you stay in New York?

Holmes: Just during the summer. You know, at that time, summer break was three months. But anyway, I don't think I was really determined to play. It just was something

that was there and I would mess around with it. Anyway, the guitar as far as I was concerned sort of went out of the picture. Then sometime in the late sixties, mid to late sixties, I kind of met Jack Owens. The way I met him, he ran a juke joint. Now he had a juke box too, but a lot (unclear) came to hear him play the guitar.

Dempsey: He ran this juke joint in Bentonia?

Holmes: No, he ran one out in the country. And he played music sometime with his guitar and then he would sometimes play the juke box. And I don't, that kind of subsided for a while and just by instinct, during the (seventies?).... I guess the seed...got planted back by Henry Stuckey. The seed got planted in me back in the fifties. And I guess (unclear) from (what) I'd see my uncle do, that kind of watered it...(unclear) Jack Owens, a little bit more water. And then for some reason sometime in the early seventies I got interested in playing the guitar. In the early seventies. Now I had already been familiar with one, but I never, from day one, had no intention of recording, being professional, making no money out of it, playing for the public. It's just something in my mind I could do. Play that guitar. Just knowing how to play it. Strangely enough, I had no particular style of music that I wanted to play. I just wanted to play that guitar.

Dempsey: So you didn't always...when you were a young kid, did you ever remember hearing blues in your house, on the radio. Did ya'll listen to it...?

Holmes: Well my mom and dad always had public businesses. They had little small things in front of the house where we were living, what you call a juke joint, which is two rooms and they had a juke box...matter of fact they had that during the same time they were taking this one (Blue Front) over. They had a pool table and juke box, and she would cook. And I would hear (unclear) nothing but blues music. Whether it was Bentonia style or Delta style, I don't know. But it was always blues.

Dempsey: Do you remember what particular blues artists from that time period?

Holmes: Remember Little Son Jackson (sp?) ... (Jimmy recites the lines) "the night papa Brown was makin his rounds", uh, more or less a jazzy type blues. "The night papa Brown was making his rounds, ain't nobody here but us, and nobody"... But anyway, I can't think of his name, but he did a jazzy blues. And then I'm kind of thinking, later years, I believe I remember hearing Muddy Waters. It was always blues. Always blues. And still, I don't think that has any (unclear)... I think deep down inside its because...(unclear) as far as me playing the blues. Because, along with Jack Owens playing the Bentonia-style blues. There was another guy that I was associating with played guitar, Tommy West...he played the Muddy Waters style. Tommy Lee West. I could have easily picked up his style, which was more or less Muddy Waters. Or I could have played Bentonia-style blues, which I ended up doing the most.

Dempsey: Why do you...can you describe how the Bentonia style is different from, say, someone like Muddy Waters or, the delta blues, somebody like Charley Patton?

Holmes: The Bentonia-style blues, when you play it to the best of your perfection...real lonesome, real haunting, real scary sounding, when you do it like it's supposed to be done. Now, even though I play in the Bentonia style tuning, like Skip, Jack...I can't rearrange it. If you rearrange it, it's not (unclear). But I kind of (unclear) on certain songs. If you're familiar with the Bentonia style of blues, you can tell that it's in there.

Dempsey: So, when you tune, is it open E tuning?

Holmes: Well I learned in later years that that's the music term for it. Jack (Owens) always called it Cross Note (tuning).

Dempsey: That's how Skip James and Jack Owens, that's how they talked about it.

Holmes: They wouldn't have known nothing about open E or D minor or E minor...All they know is...tune it in cross note.

Dempsey: Why did they call it cross note?

Holmes: I don't have the slightest idea. I wouldn't even speculate. If Jack was sitting here now, and you say "Jack, tune it in open E or D minor, he wouldn't know what you're talking about. But if you told him to tune it in cross note, he'd jump right to it.

Dempsey: When you talk about Jack Owens, he came after Skip James, right? Did he learn from Skip James?

Holmes: Well now, to listen to both of them play (unclear)...you just have to listen. One taught the other...they came along at the same period of time under Henry Stuckey. (unclear). They both have the high-pitch voice. Skip had a real good (or real) tenor but it wasn't high pitch like Jack. It was a (unclear). Now, Henry's voice was higher than that.

Dempsey: You say, you would listen to your mom and they would moan often, spirituals and such. Henry Stuckey, Skip James, and what you do...would you describe as kind of a moaning, that's part of the Bentonia sound?

Holmes: It's, ... the moaning, the high pitch, is associated with the Bentonia style playing. To play it with the guitar is one thing. You have to sing with that loud loud pitch, is another thing. Because when you have the combination of both then you've got the Bentonia blues. Alto, bass, and tenor. I think, they say Jack...this is what the (blues?)

people say, now: Jack had an alto voice. Skip and Henry had a tenor voice. Both were the Bentonia style blues.

Dempsey: Did you know Skip James?

Holmes: No, but I (knew) Henry Stuckey personally. I think, when I got acquainted with Henry Stuckey, Skip had already moved away. Like I said, Skip...

Dempsey: Skip went to Philadelphia didn't he?

Holmes: Philadelphia, yeah. Henry Stuckey farmed with my daddy a couple years. That's how I got acquainted with him. Like I say, I could sit on my back porch and talk to his kids...we were neighbors...did that from I think 1956 up through 1959.

Dempsey: Now, in that time when you were a kid and you were talking to Henry Stuckey...do you remember how often he would play? Would he play at the juke? Would he play for parties?

Holmes: Well the times I saw him play would be at his house, on his front porch, or at my house on Saturday nights.

Dempsey: So ya'll would just be hanging out and he'd be playing on his front porch?

Holmes: With, like, little kids running around...his kids. Me and my siblings would be playing on Saturday evenings...sun's just going down. Saturday night. (unclear) would be cooking popcorn, making little snacks for the kids. My momma would be down here (Blue Front) and Henry and his wife would be sorta like baby sitting, looking out for us because my mom and dad were down there running the Blue Front and we lived about two miles out. And by him (Henry Stuckey) being our neighbor, he would entertain us because my mom and dad normally wouldn't get home until about 10 or 10:30 on Saturday night...(unclear).

Dempsey: And then Jack Owens...you knew him basically all your life?

Holmes: Oh yeah. But I didn't get acquainted with him guitar-wise or music-wise until sometime in the late sixties or early seventies.

Dempsey: Did they (Jack Owens/Henry Stuckey) play in here (Blue Front)?

Holmes: Oh man, ten or fifteen years before Jack died, passed, I would say he would play in here four or five times a week. Not to entertain (unclear)

Dempsey: He would just come in and start playing?

Holmes: Come in and start playing.

Dempsey: When Jack would play, how would the crowd respond?

Holmes: Oh, they loved it.

Dempsey: Would they dance?

Holmes: yeah, they loved it. Not so much to be entertained by him...they admired what he could do. Because Jack, when he played, he didn't play to entertain. He did because he could do it.

Dempsey: He knew how good he was.

Holmes: Yeah.

Dempsey: He was trying to be as good as he was.

Holmes: I don't think he was aware of that. And I don't think he really saw the crowd or audience. Cause he would play just as hard for one or two as he would for 15 or 20. So he really wasn't trying to entertain. He was more or less trying to get the point across that 'I can play that guitar.' There's a difference.

Dempsey: Some say that about Skip James, that a lot of the blues...the early blues players, they were entertainers, as you know. And the idea was to entertain. When you read about someone like Skip James, often people say, I don't know if its true or not, he wanted to be the best that he could. He knew he wanted to improve on the guitar and it was a real personal thing for him.

Holmes: At that point, (unclear: he had worn off on Jack.) And it wasn't their goal to be entertainers. It was their goal to be good.

Dempsey: To be good, right. But at a certain point, Skip found out that he could make money (playing blues). Do you think that affects someone like Skip, or yourself? The idea that you can make money doing this. How does that affect you?

Holmes: It has no impact on me, none whatsoever. (unclear: Trust me) Now, I appreciate the fact that I can do it. And I appreciate the fact that somebody wants me to continue doing it. And I appreciate the fact that it means a lot to certain people. (unclear),

ambition. Don't get me wrong everybody wants to make money. It was not my intention when I started, to make money. And I don't go out seeking out fame and fortune. Like I said, I appreciate people coming around saying, 'do you know you can do this'. (unclear) Now, what I've been told in the last five or six months that what I do is almost a necessity for the blues community...so that it won't die. Seriously, it's a lot of blues tapes and blues CD's, but somebody who's actually doing it...it's almost non-existent. (talking about) The Bentonia style now, the hard-core country blues. See that type blues I play...(unclear). Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, BB, Albert. They say that the type I play, the type I do, is almost at the beginning of it.

Dempsey: So you feel like...Some might say that, you hear about the Bentonia style and that is different from Delta blues players. You're saying that this sound kind of started with Henry Stuckey, came up through Skip James...

Holmes: All the researchers say that as far they can go back, they could only come up with Henry Stuckey. The Bentonia style blues. They only come up with Henry Stuckey.

Dempsey: So how does that make you feel that someone like Henry Stuckey, that you knew as a kid...full circle, now back to you. How does that make you feel, that you're considered the last one doing it?

Holmes: Well, I'm a very Christian person. I credit it all to God. It's something I had to do. The reason I say that...I could have easily taken on the style of music that Tommy West played, which is the Muddy Waters style. Course, I can do that. Now, I would sit down and play the Muddy Waters style or the Delta blues style, but somewhere before I got through playing, it's gonna revert back to the Bentonia style. And the Bentonia style is the most complicated style to play. But I always catch myself... (unclear) playing the Bentonia style. So my thing is...it's meant to be that I play the Bentonia style of blues. Now, I think deep in my heart... that Jack (Owens) wanted me to learn that particular style of music. And I remember him saying (or telling me) just one time... just once, of all our contact... 'I want you to learn this'. Said it one time. Said, 'boy, I want you to learn this.' I never believed he would call it teaching me, but he wanted me to watch him and learn because...He only said that one time out of all the other times he would come out here. He would never have said, 'boy can you play it', or 'boy I want you to do this'. He never took my hand and said 'do it like this.' (unclear)...he never did. He told me one time, 'I want you to learn this.' But that had no leaning on me at that particular time. Just towards his (unclear) later life when Ithis urge hit me: 'You gotta learn that.'

Dempsey: You say this urge hit you?

Holmes: To learn that. Because really, it was a challenge. Trust me. Just, you sitting and watching him (Jack Owens) play...you can't get it. You got to put your eyes directly on his fingers. You've got to watch every move cause (unclear). You got to watch it.

Dempsey: So, when you started learning...how did you start learning these songs?

Holmes. Watched his fingers.

Dempsey: So he didn't sit down with you and say, 'Look here, here's how you play this.'

Holmes: No. No. He didn't know how to teach.

Dempsey: He just did it.

Holmes: He just did it. And I think deep down inside he felt like if you watch him and listened to him, you could do it. (unclear) Like I said, even though...he wanted me to learn but he didn't know how to teach it to me.

Dempsey: He wanted you to learn...Is that because he felt like it was going to die out?

Holmes: I believe deep down inside he had an instinct that he wasn't aware of. Because he would play certain songs and he would tell me, 'boy you can go all over the world and you can't find nobody that can do that.' And I don't believe he was aware of what he was saying. It was true. He'd play that song and he'd look at me and laugh, 'ha, ha, ha,' laughed. (unclear) 'Boy you can go all over the world and you can't find nobody else (who can) run that note.'

Dempsey: So when he was playing, there was really no one else in town playing that kind of music?

Holmes: One guy that come kind of close and that was Jacob Stuckey.

Dempsey: Jacob Stuckey. (Was that) Henry Stuckey's son?

Holmes: Henry Stuckey's cousin. He could run a few chords in that same particular tuning. But he was no comparison to Jack.

Dempsey: So to this day, as you're playing, is there anybody else playing this style around town?

Holmes: No. Now there is a young white guy who can run some of the Skip (James) chords, could run some of the Jack Owens chords, from a *musical* standpoint. If you follow...its different. From a professional, *music* standpoint. As far as being able to play it from a Jack and Skip standpoint, no. Because it's done with a feeling. You've got to know where you're coming from.

Dempsey: So you're saying that to play it right, you've got to...

Holmes: If I say a hard time, you've got to know what a hard time is. Now to get up there and play it cause I heard it ...(unclear) They were talking about, you got to be done lived it.

Dempsey: Now, here's a question then. Do you have to be from Bentonia to play this music?

Holmes: Bentonia style music?

Dempsey: Yes sir.

Holmes: Oh, most definitely. You have to have experienced something those guys experienced. (somewhat unclear)

Break in interview:

Holmes: ...example. There's no way you could do the Gettysburg Address or the Washington Speech that Dr. King did. You could recite the words but not with the same force that they did because, he was there. Gettysburg Address...Lincoln new what was going on from his heart. Now, I recited it when I was going to school. You've got kids now that do the Martin...what's the name of that speech?

Dempsey: 'I Have a Dream' Speech.

Holmes: I Have a Dream Speech. You can recite the words but not with the same force they he did because he had experienced it.

Dempsey: He lived it.

Holmes: He lived it. Now, you might could sit up there and play some Skip notes and some Jack notes...but when it comes to transmitting what actually happened through them things on the guitar...there's no way...you have to have lived it.

Dempsey: You know, I find that too. That, in my own songwriting, it has to come from inside.

Holmes: Inside.

Dempsey: You can learn things from a particular style of player.

Holmes: Right.

Dempsey: I can learn things from you, for example. But what I want to try to do is learn from that and write from my perspective.

Holmes: (agreeing) From your perspective.

Dempsey: And when you write, till this day, is that how you see it?

Holmes: Yeah. See, I've got several songs that I create...I ain't gonna say write cause I'm not a songwriter. I got several songs...

Dempsey: Now, you say you're not a songwriter?

Holmes: I mean...no, not a songwriter in this sense of (unclear) Malico or Motown considers a songwriter.

Dempsey: Ok. So what is your type of songwriter?

Holmes: Life experience with a feeling. See I don't write something based on what I think you want to hear. If you're in the entertainment business, that's what you have to do. What the public wants. You follow me?

Dempsey: I do.

Holmes: My songwriting is geared to what I've experienced, or what I want to write about.

Dempsey: Then you're a songwriter. I would consider that a songwriter.

Holmes: Most of the stuff I write and play is 90% life experience.

Dempsey: Personal. So the Bentonia Blues is a very personal style.

Holmes: Personal thing. I had one guy asked me, 'do you write your lyrics on a sheet?' If you lived it you ain't got to write it cause you know what you lived.

Dempsey: So when you sit down...you don't necessarily sit down and say, 'I'm gonna write a song today.'? You just start playing?

Holmes: (agreeing) Start playing.

Dempsey: You just start playing?

Holmes: yeah. Think about something that happened to me years ago or yesterday or the day before. Now, the only way I'll write one...if I'm gonna play tomorrow. I might jot out... I'm gonna play this, because these are ones that fit the occasion. Not for the sake of memorizing the words. I'll do the title and that I don't forget which ones I want to do. See, when I play the old country blues it depends on who I'm gonna play for that determines what songs I'm gonna play.

Dempsey: Ok, so the audience kind of determines what you're playing.

Holmes: Yes. If I'm gonna play a club setting, you don't want to play Cherry Ball or Hard Times'...unless you get a request for it. Now that type of music is more for

educational purposes. You've got a professional who's really interested in (the song) 'Hard Times'... But if you're playing for a crowd that wants to kick it a little bit, the songs I'm gonna play are light (?)(unclear), but it's gonna be at a different tempo.

Dempsey: So when you play a show and let's say...I'm sure you play in here (Blue Front Café). What kind of songs would you play in here (Blue Front)?

Holmes: Now, (unclear) everybody that comes to hear me play, they wanna hear some Skip or Jack, and I'll do that request. But after that I'm gonna figure my crowd out... do they want to rock or do they want to be laid back. But every song (unclear) tells a story. The songs will be determined...do they want to rock awhile or do they want to lay back and listen to some old, old country blues ...(unclear)

Dempsey: Now what type audience comes to hear that old country blues?

Holmes: People that are truly interested in where it came from and how it got started.
(unclear)...whites.

Dempsey: Just a white audience?

Holmes: Not just a white audience. They are the ones who are more or less interested in the old old country blues. Now the young audience wants the up-beat stuff. Blacks want the BB King, Albert King, (unclear) Nothing wrong with that, but those artists entertain. And I never considered myself an entertainer. Don't want to be an entertainer. My music is ...and I'm not boasting, now...

Dempsey: I understand.

Holmes: My music is so unique. I've been invited to play in a church.

Dempsey: Really, in a church?

Holmes: Yeah. The lady that called me, and I was telling her that I play blues. And she said, 'well the blues you play can go both ways.' You do a storytelling blues, you'd be considered gospel ...(unclear)

Dempsey: Now that brings up a pretty interesting point. You read about how, often times in the church, blues is considered the devil's music. How do you pick through that and how...It sounds like this woman was picking through it. She was making a distinction.

Holmes: It's real simple. Now that's a myth about blues...now I can't say all blues, I know some blues singers (unclear). But the type of blues I play, from my standpoint, it's not considered the devil's music. Let me tell you the reason why. This is my theory. If I went out last night, got drunk, what seems to be an act of the devil, I got drunk. Now, and ask God to forgive me...so forth and so forth. Go to church tomorrow, tell my pastor or my fellow church members that I got drunk Saturday night... 'will ya'll forgive me?' (unclear) ...start praying for me. You search the world over and you let me know that this is Jimmy Duck's home (unclear) But, if I give that same testimony and play the guitar while I'm saying it...it's the devils music.

Dempsey: It's the devil's music for that?

Holmes: Because of the guitar. Why?

Dempsey: Yes.

Holmes: That's my question. I can tell that same testimony with a piano because the piano is considered a church instrument. This is something society did. Not everybody. But if I want to do that testimony with a guitar...

Dempsey: It's the devil's music?

Holmes: It's the devil's music. (they would say)

Dempsey: And you (think) that, to this day, that's how...

Holmes: That's what's wrong with it.

Dempsey: Now this woman, though, that was asking you to come play in her church...why would that be ok, for you to come in and play guitar.

Holmes: Because I told her...(unclear) (she said) 'you don't play the same type of blues...But we heard you because we heard your CD and you play educational and storytelling blues.'

Dempsey: So therefore that makes it ok to play in the church?

Holmes: Yeah. The type of music like that. I don't entertain. I don't get up and wiggle. I don't get up and dance and don't fall on my knees. I sit there and tell a story with music.

Dempsey: So now, when people say, you know, that's the devil's music...why would they think that?

Holmes: They don't even know. If you ask them why you call that devil's music, they couldn't tell you themselves. My feeling is because you've got a guitar. People testify everyday and every night in church. Testify about, 'my wife left me, will you pray for me?' Or, 'I had a hard time...(unclear). But now, when you bring that guitar in the picture...say, 'I want to tell ya'll a story and I'm gonna play my guitar', they frown on that.

Dempsey: Still?

Holmes: Yeah! Still do it.

Dempsey: But yet, they might be in here (Blue Front) on a Friday night.

Holmes: Exactly. You can tell every kind of story you wanted in the church. I can't say for the whites, but for the blacks, you can tell any type of story you want to tell... in church... so long as you don't have that guitar.

Dempsey: So in your church there's probably a piano...

Holmes: Piano and organ.

Dempsey: There's no guitar up there?

Holmes: No. (unclear)...Because they've been stereotyping that the guitar...you know, anything can be used for the work of the devil. And (unclear) can be used for the work of God. I don't know why they label a guitar along with testifying is the work of the devil. You've got a professional preacher that will (unclear...tell you the same thing?) That all the blues does is tell a living story. If I can go into my pastor's chamber and say (hypothetically) 'I killed a man'. (Pastor says) 'brother Holmes, we're going to pray for you.' If I stand before the congregation and say, (hypothetically) 'I killed a man, will ya'll forgive me?' Or, 'I'm a drug addict, will ya'll forgive me?' (Congregation says) 'we sure will, everybody will forgive you.' Now, if I want to tell that same testimony with a guitar, they frown on it.

Dempsey: That's interesting.

Holmes: That is my personal experience.

Dempsey: That's your experience.

Holmes: Uh huh. (agreeing)

Dempsey: So, you mentioned BB King...the entertainers playing the blues. Even when Elvis Presley came out, you know, he was playing a blues style...

Holmes: Right.

Dempsey: There were a lot of people that said he was playing the devil's music. You look at the way he danced.

Holmes: That's what I'm saying. And I know some gospel groups that play now, play nothing but blues chords. But it's on a spiritual label.

Dempsey: So that makes it ok?

Holmes: I'm asking you? Same chords, blues chords. But it's done in a spiritual, gospel way.

Dempsey: You know, I read a lot about the older blues players, and read about someone like Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, or Son Thomas. Did you know Son Thomas?

Holmes: Oh yeah. I got a picture of him somewhere (Points to the wall in the Blue Front with Son Thomas photo). Yeah, there he is sitting right there. (on the wall)

Dempsey: Yeah, there he is. My dad interviewed him back in the '80s. But, I was reading about Son Thomas and he would talk about, you know, 'at a certain point I will put down the guitar and I'm going to get religion.' He almost felt like, it seems, and you can tell me if this is right or not...that he was living the blues life, and therefore he couldn't fully be within the church.

Holmes: See a lot of people...I ain't no perfect man or close to being perfect. Nobody walking on this earth is perfect (unclear). Now, if me playing the guitar is going to consider me being doomed, then somebody has missed the point. David, in the Bible, (unclear) went out on a walk and he celebrated. God told him, 'Go celebrate'. He danced and danced and God told him to go celebrate. All God told him, 'now stop and go home' (unclear) God told him, 'go celebrate, dance...' (he) danced out of his clothes. His wife got (unclear)... (he) had a good time. Did he sin? No. His wife told him he should be ashamed of himself, done pulled his clothes off.

Dempsey: But you're thinking what Son Thomas was picking up on was kind of how society views...

Holmes: Yeah. He wanted to adhere to what society had to say. 'You playing that guitar, you're going to hell.' The song that Skip played, 'Devil Got My Woman' or 'Devil Blues'. And right now we say things like, 'the devil must have made you do it.' (unclear) Or, aw, that's the devil in you. I mean, but if you say I'm going to write a few lines, 'the devil made me do it' (unclear), blah, blah, blah, and you do it from a gospel standpoint, oh you're well accepted. But do it from a *blues* standpoint...

Dempsey: That kind of gets into this idea, you know how this myth surrounds Robert Johnson and that he sold his soul to the devil at the Crossroads. You know that story?

Holmes: Nothing but a myth.

Dempsey: Where do you think...is it coming from what you're saying, this social idea in the church saying, you know, the devil...

Holmes: I would have no idea how that got started. I don't think anybody else can prove that. That's what people are saying...it's real popular.

Dempsey: It's real popular. Has it always been popular?

Holmes: Long as I can remember. Crossroads, Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil. And during that particular time, you would have to be an outlaw (unclear)...for you to make that kind of statement. Cause black folks in that particular time were very, very religious. You would have been kicked completely out of the community.

Dempsey: Now, what do you mean, outlaw? That Robert Johnson was an outlaw?

Holmes: You would have to have been, to make a statement like that. I mean, he would have been ostracized by the entire community...saying 'I sold my soul to the devil.' You couldn't even live in Mississippi anymore...not in the black community. (unclear) During that particular time, some of the most religious (unclear) ...you know that.

Dempsey: Yes.

Holmes: There's no way he could have openly said 'I'm gonna sell my soul to the devil to play this guitar.'

Dempsey: You know, I can't find anything where Robert Johnson actually said that.

Holmes: I think more or less that was just a statement. He was telling somebody ... (unclear) play that guitar. It was an old myth because my momma used to tell me, 'Boy they say if you want to learn how to play the guitar, go to the graveyard at midnight.'

Dempsey: Your mom would tell you that story?

Holmes: Yeah!

Dempsey: What would she say?

Holmes: 'If you want to learn how to play that guitar, go to the graveyard at midnight.'

Dempsey: And someone would come up?

Holmes: No. The ability to play would automatically shower down on you. Nothing but a myth.

Interview Break.

Interview Over.

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Evaluation Questionnaire

MDAH / Historic Preservation

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Historic Preservation Division

PO Box 571

Jackson, MS 39205

1. Name of Property: Blue Front Cafe
Street & Number: 108 East Railroad Ave.
City & Zip: Bentonia, Mississippi 39040
County: Yazoo

2. Original Use:
Juke Joint/Music performance space/grocery store
Present Use:
Juke Joint/Music Performance space

3. Date(s) of Construction & of any major changes:

Originally constructed in 1948. Addition of an indoor toilet/bathroom in mid-1960s. Site originally included an outhouse from ca. 1948 to ca. 1965.

4. Name & Address of Owner:

Jimmy "Duck" Holmes

Blue Front Café

108 E. Railroad Ave.

Bentonia, Mississippi 39040.

5. Original or other historically notable owner or occupant:

Original owners: Mary and Carey Holmes, tenure 1948-1970.

Current Owner: Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, tenure 1970-present.

6. Architect or builder (if known):

unknown.

7. Why is the property historically or architecturally important?

The Blue Front Café is historically important for its association with the development of African-American blues music and culture in Mississippi. For close to sixty years, this property has served as the nucleus of the African American community in Bentonia; providing a space for social and musical interaction. It is intimately linked to a blues narrative that encompasses numerous artists as well as their highly influential musical progeny. Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, current owner of the Blue Front, argues that it continues to serve as the pulse of the African-American community. Given these general circumstances, the Blue Front Café appears to be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A.

The Blue Front Café began its tenure as a blues juke joint in 1948. The property has been in the Holmes family since its inception and is now owned and operated by Jimmy “Duck” Holmes. Juke joints are historically associated with African-American social

interaction and cultural expression. In various locales throughout Mississippi and the South, juke joints continue to serve vital social and cultural roles, often helping to maintain local identities. Historically, people frequently created juke joints within their own homes, converting their living room into a music/dance space, and serving food and alcohol through a makeshift window into the kitchen. As a commercial structure, the Blue Front also includes these differentiated areas, with the central barroom serving as the 'living room' for the community. This property has served the community of Bentonia for nearly sixty years. It sits firmly within a dynamic storyline, one that is continuing to generate national and international press. Specifically, the Blue Front Café is a familiar gathering place for the African-American community in Bentonia and has historically served as a social and cultural center. It is also a music venue, offering a performance outlet for blues musicians connected to what many believe to be a distinct strain of Mississippi blues.

While blues scholars debate the merits of referring to Bentonia's blues community as unique or authentic, this general blues narrative likely began after the First World War with Bentonia native, Henry Stuckey (1897-1966). His version of an open-tuned, minor-keyed blues continued within the style of Skip James (1902-1969)¹, one of the most influential Mississippi Blues artists of the twentieth century. While serving in World War I, Henry Stuckey possibly learned open-tuning techniques from wounded French soldiers.

¹ An extended discussion of Skip James and his wide appeal appears below.

He brought this tuning back to Bentonia, eventually influencing James, Jack Owens, Jimmy “Duck” Holmes and others. Stuckey and James performed together in and around Bentonia in the early twentieth century. Though other blues players experimented and performed with various tunings, Skip James developed a particularly haunting sound using an open D or E-minor tuning. Many, including Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, refer to this style of playing as the ‘Bentonia Sound.’ Jack Owens (1904-1997), a contemporary of James, also used open tunings, producing a similar, yet distinctive sound. Owens ran a juke joint outside Bentonia and played at the Blue Front Café frequently. Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, the current owner of the Blue Front, remembers Jack Owens playing blues in the Blue Front four or five times a week before Owens died in 1997. Owens released his only full-length album in 1971 on the Testament Label. This album was reissued in 1995. Both Skip James and Jack Owens utilized open tunings and variations on standard tuning. This style also influenced early-twentieth century Delta musicians such as Robert Johnson. Currently, Blue Front owner/musician Jimmy “Duck” Holmes continues the James/Owens open-tuned tradition. By playing this style of blues at the Blue Front, Holmes is actively preserving what he refers to as the Bentonia Sound. Broke & Hungry Records released two critically-acclaimed Holmes CDs in 2006 and 2007.

The Blue Front Café is situated alongside a cotton gin structure to the south, and is adjacent to a Canadian National-Illinois Central railroad right of way, bordering to the east. As a dynamic interpretive site, the Blue Front story includes primary aspects of

blues history and culture. As discussed below, Skip James achieved international notoriety within the 1960s folk-blues revival. This revival reignited interest in blues and African-American rural culture; these reverberations are increasingly felt today in music and historical scholarship. The Blue Front Café may be viewed as a central site that interprets the legacies of Henry Stuckey, Skip James, Jack Owens, Bud Spires, and Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, their contributions to African-American culture in Bentonia and in Mississippi, as well as the influence of such cultural strains on the rest of the country. The enduring presence and operation of the Blue Front Café speaks to the vitality of the blues idiom in Mississippi. This site offers an important interpretive opportunity, one that involves a particular form of Mississippi blues, as well as an operating venue that routinely receives fans and enthusiasts from around the world.

Skip James

Nehemiah Curtis “Skip” James, one of the most talented and enigmatic blues artists of the twentieth century, was born on June 21, 1902 in Yazoo City, Mississippi. He spent his early years in and around Bentonia, Mississippi at Woodbine Plantation. With musical tools gained from his association with local blues player, Henry Stuckey, James left Bentonia in 1919 to work in various levee, lumber, and construction camps around the Delta. In these often brutal working environments, James developed the hardened outlook and musical chops necessary to survive as an itinerant musician.

In the early 1920s, Skip James returned to Bentonia, working as a sharecropper and bootlegger, which granted him a degree of protection from his white landlords. He also practiced guitar and performed with Henry Stuckey in various Mississippi towns. Conscious of a need to sound unique, James experimented with different guitar tunings, generating a lonesome and haunting sound in the process. His 'cross-note tuning', usually taking the form of open E-minor, as well as his high falsetto voice, produced the drone later writers associated with a distinctive Bentonia style of blues.

HC Speir, a highly influential Jackson blues talent scout, persuaded Paramount Records to consider recording Skip James. As a result James traveled to Grafton, Wisconsin in 1931 to record eighteen sides, including several songs now firmly established within the blues canon: "I'm So Glad," "Devil Got My Woman," "Special Rider Blues," "20-20 Blues." Although James exhibited a conscious artistry when developing his musical aesthetic, he also believed that playing blues music meant the opposite of living a morally correct life, dictated by the church. This tension represented a central conflict throughout James' life. Shortly after making his recording debut, James reunited with his father, who was a Baptist preacher, and moved to Texas. After spending a brief time in seminary, James later moved back to Bentonia in the 1950s after the death of his mother. Although Skip James played in an extremely personal, at times seemingly tortured style, he could distance himself from what many considered the doomed fate of a sinful bluesman by later claiming his heart was not dominated by it.

James' 1930s recordings are undeniably impressive, personal, haunting, and what many claim to be truly 'authentic'. James was careful to play well in these early sessions. He conveyed a sense of artistic integrity, was aware of his own style, and he recognized a need to develop that style for professional reasons.

After lying musically dormant through the 1940s and 50s, James entered a new phase of his professional career within the folk-blues revival of the 1960s. This revival assisted in the process of reintroducing many aging blues musicians to the American public. As artists like Skip James, Son House, Muddy Waters and Jack Owens achieved public acclaim and new audiences, they also attracted the attention of blues scholars. These living blues musicians played coffeehouses and folk festivals around the world, while white audiences connected them to the often romantic, poetic portrayals they read about in magazines and record sleeves. The legend of Robert Johnson, for example, was elevated through the lofty and dark liner notes accompanying his 1961 reissue. Though the country blues form had lost much of its popular attraction within the southern black community after World War II, enthusiastic jazz critics wrote emphatically about what they considered to be the primitive and authentic nature of blues music and its purveyors, including Skip James.

James, far from the folk primitive of lore, created highly sophisticated and emotional music and left an indelible mark on the American musical landscape. After solidifying his name within the pantheon of American artists, Skip James died on October 3, 1969 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He rests in Mercon Cemetery, Bala-Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

Sources:

Stephen Calt. *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994.

From NPS website: Trail of the Hellhound:

http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/people/skip_james.htm

Jack Owens commemorative website:

http://www.hutten.org/rob/writing/remembering_jack.html

Interview with Jimmy "Duck" Holmes

August 26, 2006

Location: Blue Front Café

Bentonia, Mississippi

Interviewer: Brian Dempsey

8. Briefly describe the property. (Describe the original form and any major changes, inside and out, that may have occurred. Be sure to point out any notable features. If the property includes outbuildings or notable landscape features, mention them also. Enclose photographs showing any notable exterior, interior, and landscape features.)

The Blue Front Café is a gable-front concrete block vernacular building. An indoor toilet/bathroom was added in the mid-1960s. The property included an outhouse before indoor toilet installation. The property is adjacent to a cotton gin structure to the south (this structure was likely built in the 1950s and ceased its ginning functions in the early

1980s), as well as a building that served the community as a grocery store in 1948, to the north. The Blue Front sits directly across from an operating rail line and right of way (Canadian National-Illinois Central), and, according to owner Jimmy Holmes, its property line extends to the edge of this railway. Holmes also confirms that the landscape surrounding the Blue Front maintains its integrity, relative to the period 1948 (original construction) to the present.

Blue Front Café

Exterior (original, 1948)

- Board – and – batten gable front
- Rectangular wood vent in gable field
- 3-bay building
- Central door flanked by two windows (Advertising signs above both windows)
- Exposed rafter tails on sides
- 4-post porch, including metal overhang
- Blue and gray paint scheme with Coca Cola “Blue Front Café” signs.
- Raised seam metal roof.
- Iron protective bar covering on windows, doors.

Interior (original, 1948)

- Divided three room structure. From front to back in linear fashion: main barroom/music/dance performance space; second room is kitchen area; third room is barber shop space.
- Beaded-board wall covering
- Concrete floors
- Window opening and door separate/access main room from kitchen.
- Blue color motif in main room, with numerous photographs, musical instruments on walls.
- Tables and booths in main room, with juke box, coolers, bar-structure and cash register.
- Kitchen includes stove, refrigerator, sink, storage spaces. Walls are bare.
- Barber shop includes central barbers chair in middle of room. Numerous photographs, mirror on walls. Sink, cabinets, radio, fan, heater.
- Bar frame/structure is original
- Lighting structures/wiring, etc. are original

9. Are there plans for the rehabilitation or renovation of the property in the near future? If so, please describe them.

Jimmy Holmes has no plans to alter or renovate the property.

10. Is the property endangered? If so, explain.

No.

11. Is Register listing being sought for grant eligibility or tax benefits? If so, explain.

No.

12. Name, address, and telephone number of person submitting this questionnaire:

Brian Dempsey

Ph.D Research Assistant

Center for Historic Preservation

Middle Tennessee State University

Box 80

Murfreesboro, TN 37132

615-494-7888

(cell: 615-785-2261)

13. If the person submitting this form is not the property owner, has the owner been contacted and does the owner consent to the consideration of this property for nomination to the National Register? Contacted: Yes: No: Consents: Yes:

No: (Owner, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, has been informed about this evaluation and is fully supportive of Register Nomination efforts.)

Submitter's interest in the property (e.g. owner, renter, relative of owner, local historian, etc.): PhD student currently working with the Mississippi Blues Commission.

Date questionnaire submitted: 01/24/07

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS

February 6, 2009

Brian Dempsey & Dr. Van West
Center for Historic Preservation
bdd2m@mtsu.edu, cwest@mtsu.edu

Subject: "Mississippi Blues Heritage Tourism"
IRB # 08-164, **Expedited Research**

Dear Investigator(s):

I have reviewed your research proposal identified above and your request for continued review. Approval for continuation is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918. Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

You will need to submit an end-of-project report to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research. Complete research means that you have finished collecting data and you are ready to submit your thesis and/or publish your findings. Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date. Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Your study expires **February 6, 2010**.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to provide a certificate of training to the Office of Compliance. If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers and their certificates of training to the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

Please note, **all research materials must be retained** by the PI or **faculty advisor (if the PI is a student)** for at least **three (3) years after study completion**. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Tara M. Prairie
Compliance Officer
Middle Tennessee State University