

Road Trip Report: Part 4

By Keith Murphy

We arrived on Beale Street Memphis Tn around 6:30 on Thursday nite. It is bitterly cold and the crowd is about half what it was last year.....weather conditions in Chicago and the Northeast, as well as in Dallas and other places, prohibit air travel and deny many blues people the opportunity to be in Memphis on this nite. This is the first nite of judged performances; the quarterfinals and the music had already started flowing around 4:30. Yet, later, we learn that there are performers and bands here from 40 states and 14 foreign countries.

We buy our \$10 bracelet which will get us into 18 different venues on Beale Street where the blues are being performed. Every group is allowed 25 minutes to perform, with 10 minutes for the next group to set up. We are a little surprised when we step inside the first couple of clubs, which were packed. Everyone was inside, leaving the cold streets a little sparse, whereas, last year, when the weather was great, the street and sidewalks were rather crowded. We quickly find our way down to the New Daisey Theater and settle back with cold beers to enjoy great music. We saw groups from New Orleans, Gainesville Fl, Wichita Ks, a group from Canada, and other places (I forget). After a couple of hours we strolled up and down Beale dropping in and out of a number of clubs. I paid tribute briefly to Peoples Pool Hall, the place full of century old Brunswick tables that I told you about in last year's road trip report. I am glad to say it is still open, although few people were shooting pool.

Eventually we drop into the old Daisey Theater for about an hour. By now, the competition is over for the evening, and the music in all the venues is simply performers jamming. We did not care for one group in the old Daisey, so we went back across the street to the new Daisey.... and it was Here that they had it going on. We watched literally a river of unrehearsed, impromptu performers who could not have put on a better blues show if they had been performing for national television.

Finally, around 2 in the morning, Doug and I feel that it was time to depart the party. Last year we had stayed up until almost 4... hmmm.

We depart Memphis on Friday morning, headed for home. We think our adventure is about over, just a long drive ahead. We do manage to spot Abe's Diner which we discovered last year, in Corinth Ms, and we stop for coffee and a snack. Abe, his wife and son were there, in one of the most unique diners I have ever seen. There was a special calendar on the wall, and the date March 11, 2024 was circled in red. Of

course, I had to ask Abe the significance of that date. He told me, that's the date he and his wife will retire, after 50 years owning and operating the diner.

Doug and I wished them well, and congratulated them on 37 years they had already put in. What we did not know, was that there was another huge surprise for us, waiting just down the road, in Cherokee Al, just across the Mississippi line.

Doug and I are cruising along the highway, talking about everyone we know, psychics, religion, and anything else that comes to mind, and my attention is snared by a government-looking sign posted on the shoulder of the highway, declaring, "Coon Dog Cemetery, Freedom Hills wildlife management area". I go about a mile before I pull over and tell Doug what I had seen. After a split second of consideration, we turned around and started following signs to the Coon Dog Cemetery. Never mind that we are 8 hours away from home.

We drove forever and ever until we were way up in the north Alabama hills, and just about to turn around when we saw a road, and a sign, saying "Coon Dog Cemetery road". Down this road a couple of miles, we arrived at our destination.

Now the first impulse was to laugh, and to think how silly this is, a cemetery for coondogs. Before our solitary tour was over, we both had lumps in our throat, and were deeply touched by what we had seen and read.

Key Underwood started this cemetery in 1937, burying a champion coon dog, named Troop. Troop was followed over the last 75 years or so by over 180 dogs, coming from all over the United States, many champions, all loved. The most recent dog was buried only a couple of weeks ago, the red clay still fresh. There was a brick on top of the clay, wrapped in paper and we were able to read part of the writing on the paper. It read, in part, "we love you and we will miss you. I promise to return soon with your headstone".

Many of the gravesites had either a slab, a headstone, or both, and many had been hand-crafted out of wood, stone or metal. Most gave the name of the dog, many gave their birth year and year of death, and some contained a list of championships the dog had won. Some had epitaphs, all had plastic flowers adorning the gravesite.

There were black and tans, redbones and walkers, some had lived a long life (I think one lived to be 18). One had been struck by a car as it chased a coon across a highway. Another had single-handedly treed over 200 coons in 6 short years. There was a black and tan pair, one named Nig and the other Nancy. There was a Rebel, a Cracker Jack, a Squealer, a red gal, a little gal, a Hank, one name Tree, Beau, Cindi, Gypsey, Preacher, Ranger and on and on.

One epitaph read, "As good as the Best, better than the rest". Another read, Not the best Coondog, but the best I ever had". Another epitaph simply said, "My best friend". And another, "Always faithful."

This was a graveyard full of love, respect, loyalty, faithfulness, strong bonds between men and their dogs. It was not silly or juvenile. It was sacred ground. Doug and I are both animal lovers, and in fact my dog Merle is mostly redbone hound rescued from a shelter. I don't know if there is a coondog heaven or not, but I felt privileged to walk among the fine coonhounds that were buried in this place.

www.coondogcemetery.com

On the way out we met Johnny Durham, 85 years young, who knew Key Underwood. A long time ago, Johnny sold possum skins to Key for 25 cents per. Among other things, he told us about his great grandfather's return from the Civil War, and the practical joke he played on his family about buried gold. With a twinkle in his eye and the friendliest smile I ever saw, he thanked us for stopping and talking to him. Believe me, the pleasure was all ours. I told him we would see him again.....and I hope we do.

One last thing worthy of mention is the M and M Soul Food restaurant in Courtland Al. The best soul food I have ever eaten. As we travel, we occasionally detour thru an old town, downtown sections, to see what we can see, especially around mealtime... which for us... is anytime. This we did Friday around noon, and while the town's cotton history was very interesting, the food at the M and M overwhelmed the history lesson. I had ribs, collard greens, black eyed peas and sweet potato pie with pecans, fried corn bread and a slice of strawberry cake... all homemade. I told the waitress when I was thru eating, that she had exactly 1 minute to release my Mama who apparently was being held in the back as a kitchen slave.

(They had a homemade WHITE sauce for the ribs.....not flour-based like our white gravy.....and I got the recipe, very good).

And so ends another fine road trip with my buddy Doug - memories to last a lifetime. Thanks to all of you readers for your kind comments, and for letting me share these experiences with you.

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On a personal note: I finally heard from Marimar Friday nite and we agreed to hold peace talks on

Saturday. She finally conceded that there was nothing wrong with the trip; her problem was that I had lied about going on the trip. I conceded that a delay in telling the truth can sometimes come close to being a lie. We both apologized to each other, ate a T-bone steak and the cold war was over. She even said she might go with me on my next road trip. (Yeah.....Right...like I'm gonna let that happen!)

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