

Road Trip Report: Part Two

By Keith Murphy

Doug and I shoved off from Tuscaloosa around 8:30 Wednesday morning headed for Mississippi delta country. Our first detour off of highway 82 west was to swing thru Starkville MS, the home of Mississippi State University, but honestly we never saw any evidence of a University in Starkville. Doug and I decided it must be some scam to rip off fed funds. I did eat Duck Butter at a downtown café, but did not buy any to bring home (Yuck). Downtown we saw more lawyer offices per capita than any other place I have ever been to. We decided never to stop in Starkville again.

We made tracks pretty good on Hwy 82 until we hit Indianola, MS, the home of B B King. We toured the BB King museum which not only tells all about BB, but it also depicts a lot about the culture of that area for much of the 20th century. It is a great museum, and you'll need around 2 hours to take it all in.

www.bbkingmuseum.org

BB's real name was Riley King, but after he went to Memphis, he was known as little blues boy, then blues boy, then bb. He initially played both gospel and blues music. But when he played gospel, the crowd would just holler "amen" and "hallelujah", but when he played the blues, they would give him money. That explains why he never made it big in the gospel music business.

What prompted him to run off to Memphis was when he wrecked his employer's tractor. He skipped town, and went to Memphis in order to avoid the farmer's wrath. The rest is history.

Once a year BB still returns to Club Ebony near the museum as part of the BB King Homecoming Festival sponsored by the Indianola chamber of commerce.

If you ever wish to tour the delta blues area, I would recommend getting a copy of the official map of the Mississippi blues trail. It tells you about important people and places connected to blues music, and gives you a map and directions to where markers are located that gives more specific information about what or who is associated with that particular place.

We are now on a part of the blues trail, and stop next in Dunleith MS, the home of one of my favorite bluesmen, Jimmy Reed who is famous for "Big Boss Man (can't you hear me when I call)", "Bright Lights, Big City", "Baby, you don't have to go" and many more.

Just down the road we toured the Highway 61 Blues museum in Leland MS which probably has as much blues history associated with this little town as any other place its size in the delta.

www.highway61blues.com/highway_61_blues_museum.htm

In 1908 Leland was called the “Hellhole of the Delta” because of so much gambling, saloons, and wild revelry. It is also the home of Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, and hence, the birthplace of Kermit the frog. It is the home of a Congressional Medal of Honor winner (Korean war). Also, a part of the movie “Brother, O where art thou?” starring George Clooney was filmed there a few years ago, and its history goes on, and on and on. Wonderful murals are all over many of the exterior walls of the historic buildings downtown. This is the place I want to go back to, first chance.

Doug and I have learned that the most interesting places to visit are those you stumble upon, not the museums or other places listed in the tourist brochures. This happened to us in the little town of Rosedale, very close to the Mississippi River. As we headed thru the town on highway 1 north, I spotted a very small, very old, shack sitting on the side of the road. It had a painted white front, and a sign that....of all things....said ‘White front Café’ and a sign for tamales. I passed it by at first, but when I asked Doug, “Exactly, what is a tamale?” he indicated he didn’t really know either. So we turned around and returned to the White Front café.

Parked outside was an old bicycle that looked as though it had collided with a garbage truck; it was decorated with all things shiny. We spooked....no pun intended...the three black ladies working inside when they saw Doug and I walk thru the door. Soon, we were chomping down on great tamales (about 50cents each) and enjoying delightful conversation with these ladies (who were processing hundreds of tamales). I asked one of the ladies, “I thought tamales was a Mexican food” She replied, “Yes, it may have come out of Mexico way back but,as you can see.....we are not Mexicans”and we all laughed. If you want to see photos of this place, I just now happened to find a internet page talking about the Whitefront Café

www.roadfood.com/Restaurant/Reviews/1371white-front-caf

Another interesting thing I learned from my sometimes friend, Mose Cotton about tamales and the delta. In 1928 Robert Johnson, one of the most famous bluesmen of all time, wrote a blues delta song entitled “Hot Tamales” about “a gal, she’s long and tall, sleeps in the kitchen with her feets in the hall.... got tamales for sale, red hot, two for a nickel, and four for a dime...

Tamales have been a part of the delta for a long time.

Rosedale was also mentioned in a version of another Robert Johnson classic, “Crossroads” by the hit

group Cream....."Going down to Rosedale...." Lots of British bands were inspired and based their career on old blues songs.

Somewhere between Greenville MS and Helena Ark we saw signs for casinos, and followed those signs to their logical conclusion.....two riverboats anchored side by side and folks giving their money away. These were not the fancy casinos at Tunica, and not the Isle of Capri near Helena. These casinos were for the desperate. The parking lots...perhaps 100 cars in each lot....were full of old, worn cars and trucks. No sport cars, or Mercedes or BMWs here. Inside Doug and I found the place to be choking with cigarette smoke, and the racial composition was about 90 percent black and a few whites. There was a look of despair, sadness on EVERY face I saw inside these two places.

I did sit down at a blackjack table with a live dealer...I was the only player, and won about \$50 in ten minutes, so I quit, and went to the cashier cage to redeem my chips. I stood in line 20 minutes behind others trying to arrange credit with the casino. I was the only person I saw cashing in chips. Doug and I left, feeling sorry for these people.

For the first time, we crossed the Mississippi River. It was around dusk, but we were bound and determined to at least ride thru historic Helena Arkansas before we backtracked to Clarksdale for the nite. There were magnificent buildings lining both sides of historic downtown....but the vast majority of these were empty. You could not help but ask, "Where are all of the people?" and the simple truth is that most are long-dead, and many of the rest moved away decades ago.

I would love to have one of these old, classic, colorful buildings to develop into a bar, a restaurant, a club, and a few have been restored and are being used. But, it is painfully obvious that without people, these buildings represent little more than what one writer called "pleasing decay". I guess like looking at the beautiful face of a ninety year old man or woman who have lived a full, long and happy life.

Helena is associated with King Biscuit radio, and once a year has a King Biscuit festival. I understand in the early days, King Biscuit radio was as important to the blues as Grand Ole Opry was to country music. For some reason, within the last few years, the festival was forced to change its name to the Arkansas Arts and Blues festival.

Enough for now. I'll have to wait until later to tell you about Red's Blues club, and The Ground Zero club in Clarksdale, all of which took up the rest of our Wednesday adventures.

Keith

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