

MISSISSIPPI BLUES TRAIL PILGRIMAGE

By Jim O'Neal

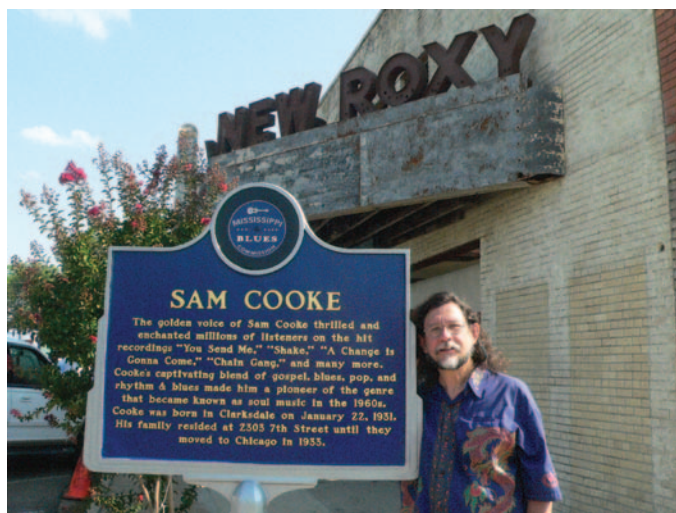
Mississippi is a prime destination for traveling blues aficionados eager to see the historic sites associated with Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, B.B. King, Muddy Waters and many others, as well as to witness the modern-day exponents of the blues still performing in juke joints, clubs and festivals. Tourists can find points on their paths with the convenient aid of internet sites, guidebooks, electronic apps and almost 200 Mississippi Blues Trail markers.

Not so long ago, a blues trip to Mississippi was much more of a hit-and-miss adventure. Travelers had to search on their own, or hope for tips or directions from locals, until Christiane Bird, a woman traversing the country on a motorcycle, published the first guide to Delta blues sites as a chapter of *The Jazz and Blues Lover's Guide to the U.S.* in 1991. I was co-owner of a record store in Clarksdale then, and after hoping inquisitive visitors could find their way from my directions, in 1991 I decided to do a *Delta Blues Map Kit*, printed on our Xerox machine and stapled together, with descriptions of sites, travel tips and maps of the area. Included in the *Kit* were sites where some of Mississippi's major blues artists reportedly lay buried with no headstones, until the Mount Zion Memorial Fund launched its ongoing mission to

correct such grave injustice by erecting a monument to Robert Johnson – also in 1991.

Mississippi blues has since been covered in many newspaper and magazine travel articles, and in books such as *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*. The Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, which has played a key role both in documenting and perpetuating the blues, saw its visitor count grow and grow. As the word spread, plenty of blues pilgrims overcame fears of Mississippi and found themselves welcomed in a state where enlightened citizens had been working hard to overcome dark episodes of the past. Mississippi was also taking note of the stream of out-of-state and foreign visitors stopping for photographs of Highway 61 signs and looking for juke joints and blues artists' gravesites. While the state had placed many historical markers, the sites were often connected to the Civil War, prominent residents, businesses and churches – but not to the blues. Only the "Father of the Blues," W.C. Handy, was honored with a state marker at his former home site in Clarksdale.

As the blues momentum grew, the state Senate finally established the Mississippi Blues Commission in 2004 "to develop a plan to promote authentic Mississippi 'blues' music and 'blues culture' for purposes of economic development" and "to purchase and erect 'Mississippi Blues Trail' historical markers with the assistance of the Mississippi Department of Transportation." On December 11, 2006, the first three Mississippi Blues Trail markers were dedicated at the cemetery in Holly Ridge where Charley Patton is buried, on Nelson Street – the historic blues hub of Greenville – and at the site of WGRM radio in Greenwood where B.B. King began performing with a gospel group. A committee of scholars and representatives of the state's heritage trails proposed a list of 100 more markers, although it's probably fair to say that no one really thought the project would last long enough to see nearly that many markers go up. But the markers proved so popular with both tourists and locals, more towns and counties sought markers of their own, and the state continued to approve funding. The state followed up with a Mississippi Freedom Trail dedicated to civil rights history and a Mississippi Country Music Trail to honor the state's country stars such as Charlie Pride, Conway Twitty and Tammy Wynette. The Blues Trail has expanded far beyond the state line



Jim O'Neal, cofounding editor of *Living Blues* magazine, research director with the Mississippi Blues Trail and this feature's author, with the Sam Cooke marker in Clarksdale, MS. Photo by Brenda Haskins



Texas Johnny Brown, a renowned guitarist born in Ackerman, MS, broke into tears when he saw photos of his father, blind guitarist Cranston "Clarence" Brown, on the marker in Ackerman named after Brown's song, "Two Steps from the Blues." Photo by Wanda Clark, courtesy of the Mississippi Blues Trail

to honor the connections and contributions of Mississippi blues with markers in Memphis, Chicago, Florida, Wisconsin, Maine, Norway, France and elsewhere, with more still to come.

The Blues Trail honors many legendary heroes of the blues with markers at their birthplaces or gravesites, especially in the Delta region, but it also celebrates hometown performers who kept the blues alive in places like McComb, Gulfport, Natchez, Pontotoc, Tupelo, Grenada and Meridian. The markers cover nightclubs, juke joints, record companies, hotels, radio stations and plantations, as well as topics including race, gambling, cotton and transportation.

The chronicles of local blues history in many towns and counties have never been published in any book. Scott Barretta and I research and write the marker texts, and we have used the opportunity to dig deeper into regional history and genealogy, rather than simply relying on previous biographies and accounts. With so much more data available now, even the basic details of many artists' lives, such as dates and places of birth, have been revised.

The most recent markers honor Prince McCoy (whose music was a major inspiration to W.C. Handy) in Greenville, MS,

hill-country patriarch Sid Hemphill in Senatobia, MS, Jackie Brenston's recording of "Rocket '88'" (placed in Lyon, MS, close to the cemetery where Brenston and fellow Ike Turner band member Raymond Hill are buried), Buddy Guy in Lettsworth, LA (saluted for his connections with Mississippi blues), and the blues communities of Ocean Springs, Meridian and Newton County, MS, and Pensacola, FL (a city with a surprisingly rich musical history).

The Mississippi Blues Trail website (www.msbluestrail.org) provides a wealth of information and can be downloaded as an app. The app includes a map of all markers with photos and texts from each marker; videos documenting Muddy Waters, Bobby Rush, Little Milton, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, Trumpet Records and more; a historical timeline; latitude and longitude of each marker for GPS navigation; and a make-your-own-itinerary function. The website includes additional features, including a calendar of blues events, a blues curriculum for teachers, a list of museums, a link to Mississippi Blues Trail merchandise and information on the Mississippi Blues Foundation and the Musicians' Aid Fund, established by the state "to provide assistance to any blues musician in need." A detailed guide to the Mississippi Blues Trail is also available in issue #233 of *Living Blues* magazine.

There is plenty to read, hear and watch even for those who can't make a pilgrimage to Mississippi. But nothing compares to being there. Pick an event from the Mississippi listings in the online calendar or here in the *Blues Festival Guide* and map out a blues trail itinerary. You may find yourself having the blues experience of a lifetime in Mississippi.



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Located in the Belmont-DeVilliers historic African American neighborhood, the Blues Trail marker in Pensacola, FL, was unveiled in January 2019. Photo by Brenda Haskins