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# Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals

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## **Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals**

Stephen A. King

If the blues is a religion, then Helena during the King Biscuit Blues Festival is Jerusalem. ("Few Understand" 10)

"It is my imagination / Looks like I'm still on the plantation" (Willie King and the Liberators, "Is It My Imagination," Living in a New World)

### **Introduction**

Although blues legend Robert Johnson died more than 60 years ago, his music remains captivating, mysterious and, by all accounts, commercially successful. Johnson's 1990 CD box set, *The Complete Recordings*, sold an estimated 350,000 copies during the first two years of its release (DeCurtis and Henke 376), eventually becoming the only "million-seller by an original country-blues artist" (Cheseborough 8). More significantly, this newfound appreciation of Johnson's work has sparked the latest in a series of blues revivals in North America and Europe. Since the early 1990s, a whole new generation of blues enthusiasts has flocked to blues festivals, blues museums, and blues bars, such as the House of Blues. The House of Blues is one the latest creations of entrepreneur and the club's founder Isaac Tigrett, who modeled the blues club after his hugely successful Hard Rock Café franchise. Despite Tigrett's supposed allegiance to this traditional African-American musical form, the House of Blues is a study in contrast and irony. The bar's flashing lights and mostly white clientele subvert the owner's attempt "to recreate the ambiance of a funky Southern juke joint. . ." (Lieberfeld 217).

Capitalizing on this latest blues revival, the state of Mississippi and neighboring city Memphis, Tennessee, recently expanded efforts to promote the blues as part of the region's tourism industry. In 1995, the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau formed a partnership with the Mississippi State Division of Tourism to promote "America's Blues Alley." Exploiting Northwest Airlines/KLM's nonstop routes from Europe to Memphis, America's Blues Alley has targeted European tourists desperate to visit the "motherland" of blues and rock and roll ("Tourism Boost" 4). Once in Memphis, tourists often visit Beale Street, touted as "the street where the blues was born" (Dawson 20).<sup>1</sup> While visiting Beale Street, many tourists eat at the Rum Boogie Café, the longest running and the most successful of the blues clubs on that famous street. Tourists interested in a more "authentic" blues experience will often enlist the services of the Blues & Blacktop program, an eight-hour driving tour of the Mississippi Delta. As part of the tour, tourists visit juke (sometimes spelled "jook") joints and barbecue shacks that dot the region (Jidoun 26).

Although the origins of the blues may never be known, the Mississippi Delta has been called the “home of the blues.” Located in northwest Mississippi, the Delta was birthplace and home to some of the greatest blues musicians who ever lived, including Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and B. B. King. Driving south from Memphis on U.S. Highway 61, many fans visit one of the landmarks of blues tourism, the Delta Blues Museum. The museum opened its doors in 1979 and has since sponsored a variety of programs, from musical performances to after-school programs designed to mentor young, inspiring blues musicians. In addition, according to Kappi Allen, Tourism Manager for the Coahoma County Tourism Commission, the city of Clarksdale hopes to increase blues tourism through a joint promotional agreement with Tunica County, one of the third largest gaming centers in the United States. At least one casino, the Horseshoe, already showcases the blues in the form of a museum (“Blues & Legends Hall of Fame”) and “Bluesville,” a “blues club” adorned with seemingly authentic artifacts from local juke joints and clubs. Leslie Doggett, former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Tourism Industries, suggested that the Delta has much to offer to potential blues tourists: “This region has such riches as far as its diversity of culture, history, and music—and we know the world’s travelers are looking for authentic experiences” (qtd. in Barton C1).

Yet, historically, the promotion of the blues in Mississippi has been marked by its decentralized nature. While there is a state-funded Division of Tourism Development, there was no effort to develop a state blues commission until spring 2004. In addition, some blues “promoters” are in direct competition with each other. For example, the movie *Last of the Mississippi Jukes* reveals how the proliferation of casinos in Tunica County has jeopardized the survival of some juke joints and small clubs in the Delta region. In a 2001 interview, Luther Brown, Director of Delta State University’s (DSU) Delta Center, summed up the decentralized nature of blues tourism in Mississippi:

Some of the people who are actively involved in promoting the blues either from a financial point of view or an academic perspective seem to not want to deal with other people who have similar interests. There seems to be a lot of territoriality and I think that fragments things. I’m not certain this is bad, except from the point of central organization.

In recent years, however, there have been efforts to coordinate and centralize blues tourism in the Delta. In 1999, the Clinton administration sponsored twelve millennium trails throughout the United States “as a means to preserve open spaces, interpret history and culture and enhance recreation and tourism” (Millennium, “Program”). The Mississippi Delta Blues Trail will encompass thirteen counties in western Mississippi. While making blues sites more accessible to tourists, the project will help the state develop a regional tourism plan (Millennium, “Mississippi Delta”). In addition, organizations such as the Mississippi Blues Highway Association and the Mississippi Delta Tourism Association are

attempting to achieve similar ends.

In all, these promotional activities reflect the insurgence of the “new blues tourism” (Titon 5). According to noted blues scholar Jeff Titon, the new blues tourism is “organized and mediated by historical markers, tour maps, chambers of commerce literature, and a growing group of presenters and musicians who interpret the music for outsiders” (5–6). This new blues tourism can be framed as an example of cultural tourism. According to tourism expert Valene L. Smith, cultural tourism includes the “vestige[s] of a vanishing life-style that lies within human memory with its ‘old style’ houses, homespun fabrics, horse or ox-drawn carts and plows, and hand rather than machine-made craft” (4–5). Cultural tourism lures visitors to “monuments, sites and ruins or to anything else that is marketable as a distinctive cultural attribute.” Cultural artifacts may also include stories, dance, music, performances, and religious expressions (Nettleford 8). For the blues tourist, cultural artifacts may include, according to the guidebook *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues* (Cheseborough), historical markers and signs, graves, plantations, hotels, cafes, recording studios, lounges, juke joints, blues clubs, and music festivals.

Without a doubt, music festivals are an important component of the “new blues tourism.” Although communication scholars have expressed some interest in the subject (Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth; Schowalter), few scholars have explored the functions of music festivals.<sup>2</sup> In one of the few studies of blues festivals, Rotenstein explored the impact of the King Biscuit Blues Festival on its local community: Helena, Arkansas. On one hand, the festival has helped celebrate an important African-American musical form as well as provide a boon to the economically depressed area. On the other hand, the festival has encouraged community leaders to “sanitize” and “repackage” the community in order to attract tourists to the area. As a result, the town “has allowed to disappear much of the ‘local color’ that made Helena a blues city” (Rotenstein 143).

Although Rotenstein’s work offers scholars a glimpse into the tensions associated with blues tourism, he does not illuminate the functions of blues festivals. Based on personal interviews, field notes derived from attending blues festivals over a seven-year period,<sup>3</sup> and an analysis of a number of primary documents including festival programs, I contend that blues festivals serve three functions: homecoming/honoring musicians, preservation of blues culture, and integration/racial harmony. First, since a vast majority of blues musicians were born in Mississippi, blues festivals offer these musicians the opportunity to return home to be recognized and honored for their contributions to the development of the blues. Second, blues festivals are part of a larger effort to preserve what some have called a vanishing blues culture in Mississippi. Third, some blues festivals use slogans such as “No Black, No White, Just the Blues” to promote themes of integration and racial harmony.

Ironically, however, while many festivals honor the contributions of Mississippi’s

blues musicians to the development of America's popular culture, many of these same musicians escaped plantation life and white rule, which characterized the South, and Mississippi in particular, during much of the twentieth century. Second, while many festivals seek to preserve the Delta blues, most feature a variety of musical styles, including rhythm and blues, soul, gospel, and rock and roll. At the same time, some performers are often typecast as "Delta Blues" musicians, despite the fact that these musicians have largely abandoned their earlier styles. Finally, while blues festivals offer blacks and whites one of the few spaces to share a common aesthetic bond, blues festivals offer participants, at best, a temporarily "integrated" community.

In the first section of this essay, I provide a brief but comprehensive examination of the history of the Mississippi Delta. Living under the tyranny of a small yet powerful white planter elite, blacks created the blues in a response to an environment ruled by abject poverty, political disenfranchisement, and legal segregation. In the second section, I explore the origins and development of music festivals from antiquity to the present. In the final section, I examine the functions of blues festivals and discuss some of the ironies involved in the promotion of the blues in the Mississippi Delta.

### **The Mississippi Delta: white planters and the black blues**

Over the years, the Mississippi Delta has been called the "heartland of Dixie," "the South's South," and the "Most Southern Place on Earth." According to historian James C. Cobb, author of the acclaimed book *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, the Delta achieved this distinction by exemplifying all the virtues and vices of the "Old South." On one hand, the Delta continues to exhibit the "courtesy, generosity, hospitality . . . identified as the primary virtues of an entire region" (325). On the other hand, the Delta is still very much an entrenched caste society whereby the black majority continues "to live in poverty . . . while a small, seemingly oblivious white minority enjoy[s] a pampered and gracious lifestyle. . ." (324).

The origins of this paradoxical mixture of human kindness and cruelty began with the expansion of white settlers into the area. Prior to white resettlement in the early 1800s, the Delta had been largely occupied by a number of Native American communities, including the Choctaw Indians. When Mississippi achieved statehood in 1817, "[w]hite migration to other areas of Mississippi soon generated pressure for Indian removal. . ." Between 1820 and 1832, the Choctaw tribe signed three treaties, thus allowing for white resettlement of the area (Cobb 7). Almost from the start, the white planter class—many of whom had relocated to Mississippi—viewed the Delta, with its rich fertile soil, as the "only hope of maintaining the accustomed standard of living" (Cobb 9). As the region's new landowners, white planters hoped to transform the Delta into one of the largest cotton-producing regions in the world.

For some planters, problems such as insect infestation (the dreaded boll weevil), frequent flooding, and erratic weather patterns quickly turned the dream of accumulating wealth into financial ruin. Of course, the dream of the improving one's social standing and achieving economic stability was out of reach for the thousands of slaves laboring under the watchful eye of the overseer on the plantation. The slaves were largely responsible for the planting and the picking of cotton, chopping firewood, clearing fields, and other forms of labor-intensive work, such as housekeeping and preparing meals. The Delta's plantation culture "secure[d] the firm establishment of modern capitalist slavery on the Old Southwest frontier" (Woods 48).

The events of the Civil War and the following Reconstruction period significantly improved the lives of some of the former slaves. For the first time, blacks enjoyed a five-day workweek as well as the opportunity to vote in political elections and hold political positions at local and state levels. And to the chagrin of many Delta planters, many blacks refused to return to the fields to work for their former masters, preferring employment with northern whites (Cobb 50). Not surprisingly, some whites resisted efforts to grant blacks their basic civil rights. From the end of the Civil War, through the Reconstruction period (1865–1877) and beyond, the white response to black emancipation (ironically called "redemption") involved legal attempts to "restore white control over black labor." Most southern states enacted "Black Codes," and in 1865 the Mississippi legislature created its own "Black Codes," which were "so restrictive of the rights of blacks that they came close to reviving the state's old slave code" (Cobb 51). According to W. E. B. Du Bois, these codes were "deliberately designed to take advantage of every misfortune of the Negro" by severely restricting blacks from carrying weapons, renting property within the city limits, consuming alcohol, or even preaching the gospel (409). Curfew laws restricted blacks from occupying city streets after sundown, and interracial marriages were illegal in most southern states. By the 1890s, with the implementation of new southern segregation laws (e.g., Jim Crow laws), many blacks found themselves "pilloried in a virtual bacchanalia of racism" (Berry and Blassingame 348).

Whites also used extralegal, and often brutal and sadistic, tactics to control and subjugate blacks. Mississippi became known as the "lynching capital of the U.S." Between 1882 and 1927, an estimated 517 reported lynchings occurred in Mississippi; 30 reported lynchings took place in the Delta between 1880 and 1901 (Woods 106–107). Woods claims, however, that these figures "represent a massive undercount of the deaths caused by shooting, beatings, and others forms of individual, planter, mob and official violence" (107). In his landmark study of violence and the blues, Adam Gussow reported that in the post-Reconstruction South some 3,220 lynchings occurred between 1880 and 1930 (45). These lynchings served to "terrorize black southerners, particularly men, into submitting to an emergent system of racial segregation and remaining a captive and exploited source of agricultural labor" (Gussow 3).

In response to this oppressive and increasingly violent environment, blacks created their own vehicle to express the hardships, frustrations, and alienation of second-class citizenship. Although the blues most likely developed after the Civil War (Ferris 31), most scholars generally agree that the blues was not classified as a musical genre until the end of the nineteenth century. Blues expert Paul Oliver argued that the blues was derived from “collective unaccompanied work-songs of the plantation culture” (3: 730). W. C. Handy, often acknowledged as the “Father of the Blues,” claimed to have heard the “blues” for the first time in 1903 at a railroad station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, and then two years later at a dance in Cleveland, Mississippi. Although Handy would pen his first blues song in 1909, other blues musicians, such as Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson, soon helped define the Delta Blues as a specific and distinctive musical genre. According to Robert Palmer, author of *Deep Blues*, Delta blues singers “sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues. Guitar and piano accompaniments were percussive and hypnotic. . . .” Blues guitarists would often slide a bottle or a knife on the strings to make “the instrument ‘talk’ in strikingly speechlike inflections” (44).

In the 1940s, technological advances such as the tractor and the mechanical cotton picker, along with the creation of powerful pesticides and herbicides, reduced the need for human labor in the Delta. Furthermore, many blacks believed that the “great promise of freedom” would be “indefinitely deferred” (Cobb 280). These events, along with other changes in the region, contributed to one of the largest human migrations in US history. In all, between 1910 and 1970, an estimated 6.5 million southern blacks migrated to the north, especially to the industrial-based cities of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit (Davis 48). Some of these migrants were blues musicians, such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf, who later transformed the largely acoustic Delta sound into the Chicago blues, a new, raw, and heavily amplified urban musical form.

Although many Delta whites believed that they could preserve indefinitely the inequities of the “Old South,” wide-sweeping cultural and social changes were inevitable. As a result of their experiences during World War II, some southern whites began to embrace the idea of racial tolerance, while many more wavered and then “quietly adjusted to the status quo.” More significantly, however, many blacks returning home “weighed their options, impatiently waited and covertly organized for an assault on the color line” (Daniel 21). By the mid-1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a growing number of black activists, along with the advent of rock and roll and an emerging youth culture, created the real possibility of radical social change in America.

By the early 1960s, the emergence of new, more aggressive civil rights groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped turn the south into a battleground between

integrationists who wanted to “dismantle the machinery of disfranchisement and segregation” (Cobb 208) and hardened segregationists who used every available method, from legal trickery to brutality and bloodshed, to avert social change.

Since the sixties, blacks in the Delta have achieved some political and social progress; however, economic power still rests in the hands of whites. Indeed, much of the Mississippi Delta is still segregated and many of its citizens, especially African-Americans, still live in abject poverty. For example, in 1999, nearly 75 percent of the black households in the small Delta town of Shelby did not possess a car (Middleton 48). According to 2000 census figures, Mississippi’s poverty rate of 17.6 percent was the third highest in the country (Hargrove A12). In addition, Mississippi’s Labor Market Information Department reported the Delta’s unemployment rate in December 2000, compared with the national average of 3.7 percent, was 10.2 percent (14).

Facing an uncertain future, many believe that blues tourism has the potential of reversing the gloomy economic forecast for the region. In the late 1990s, the state hired the Randall Travel Marketing Group to conduct a feasibility study in hopes of creating the “Millennium Blues Highway” a project that would, according to Cheryl Line, Tourism Manager for the Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce, make blues sites more accessible to the general public. In 2000, the Cleveland-Bolivar Chamber of Commerce received approximately 10,000 inquiries from blues fans. Most blues fans, according to Line, are not interested in the “glitz” of Beale Street, but a true “authentic” blues experience. Blues festivals, it would seem, offer blues fans an alternative musical venue.

### **Music festivals: from ancient Greece to Woodstock**

According to the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, the word “festival” comes from the Latin *festivitas* and is generally thought of as “a social gathering convened for the purpose of celebration or thanksgiving.” In antiquity, festivals were ritualistic in nature and were often associated with religious or mythical traditions (Young, Bowles, and Wilson 8: 733). For example, Greek festivals such as the Olympics were created, in part, to “stimulate the unseen forces considered to be the arbiters of human destiny to give good crops and protection against natural disaster” (Young, Bowles, and Wilson 8: 733). In fact, Greece sponsored approximately 60 festival days per year in which all business and government activities were temporarily suspended (Marshall, Wolman, and Hopkins 5). By the final years of the Roman Empire, festivals became so popular that “feast days” outnumbered days devoted to politics and trade (Marshall, Wolman, and Hopkins 6). By the fifth century AD, the proliferation of Christian and Jewish festivals underscored a tradition rooted in religious observance and invocation.

By the beginning of the Renaissance, however, the purpose of festivals shifted from religion to propaganda. Known as the “Court Festivals of State” era (1350–1800), festivals took the form of coronations and ceremonies of allegiances and



served primarily as “testaments to the power, wealth and prestige of the ruling houses of Europe” (Young, Bowles, and Wilson 8: 734). Since this time, several festival types have emerged, including commemorative festivals (1750–1900)—which celebrated the life of a noted musician or writer—and North American festivals (1850–1900), largely created by German immigrants in the United States and Canada who wanted to celebrate their ethnic heritage (Young, Bowles, and Wilson 8: 736–737).

By the twentieth century, many festival organizers began to create festivals to highlight a specific musical style. In 1924, the Old Time Fiddlers’ Convention in North Carolina became one of the first festivals to celebrate indigenous musical forms. One of the most important US folk festivals, the National Folk Festival, originated in St. Louis during the early 1930s and one of the first jazz festivals, was held in 1946 in Australia (Young, Bowles, and Wilson 8: 737). In the 1960s, rock and roll festivals, including the Monterey Pop Festival (1967) and Woodstock (1969) drew large numbers of fans for a weekend of music, drugs, and casual sex. Pop festivals reflected the “contemporary festival” which, according to one observer, was “a public rejoicing, a testing of sight and sound, and taste and smell and touch” (Marshall, Wolman, and Hopkins 5).

By the 1980s, music festivals began serving a variety of functions or purposes. Concert promoters and organizers create music festivals to celebrate alternative music/lifestyles (Lollapalooza, Monsters of Rock), present non-European music/dance to western audiences (the World of Music, Arts, and Dance festival [WOMAD]), and to provide humanitarian relief (Live Aid, Farm Aid) (Watts 83–84). As we will see, however, blues festivals serve three primary functions.

### **Blues festivals in the Mississippi Delta**

Although the date of the “first” blues festival is unknown, two blues musicians, Willie Dixon and Memphis Slim, established the first American Folk Blues Festival in Paris in 1961. At that time, the festival was created to expose European audiences to the largely unheard of musical style (Wilson 64). Living Blues writer, Nick Nicklawske, claimed that “until the mid-’70s few would have heard of such a thing as a blues festival” in the United States (7). The San Francisco Blues Festival, created in 1973, is recognized as the oldest ongoing blues festival in America (Nicklawske 7). In the Mississippi Delta, tourists and locals attend a number of these blues festivals, including the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival, the B. B. King Homecoming Festival, and the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival. The Mississippi Delta Blues Festival is recognized as the second-oldest blues festival in the United States.

However, as late as the 1980s, there was only a handful of community sponsored festivals. Most of these festivals were poorly attended and inadequately funded, and often drew the attention of law-enforcement officials. For example, the city of Clarksdale created its blues festival, the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel

Festival, in 1988. According to one spectator, E. H. Summer,

The 2nd fest was held in what is now called Martin Luther King Park. . . . That was a good time. People brought their own beer in and the police watched like prison sentrys [sic] from above. I've always thought the City was afraid it was going to turn into one of those Civil Rights marches from 20 years before. Maybe even a riot. (n.p.)

By the mid-1990s, many Mississippi Delta communities were developing blues festivals. The small Delta town of Shaw recently created its own blues festival. Eddie Sharkey, a member of the festival's cosponsoring group, the Shaw Men's and Women's Progressive Club, discussed the rationale behind the decision to create another blues festival: "I think it will be great for the city and great for the county. There's room for one more blues festival." Sharkey confessed, however, that "[w]e're having this because everybody else is doing a blues festival" (qtd. in Lush, "Shaw" 1). By 1996, there were more than 200 domestic blues festivals held annually (Garon, Blues x).

Most blues festivals are funded, in part, by corporate sponsors (e.g., Budweiser), local businesses, and individual contributors. In 2001, for example, Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE) once again was one of the primary sponsors of the 24th Annual Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival.<sup>4</sup> According to the festival program, additional sponsors included the Mississippi State Department of Tourism, the Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Lighthouse Point Casino, Seagram Americas, and Popeye's Chicken (24th Annual Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival n.p.). In general, however, corporate sponsors, including Philip Morris, the Miller Brewing Company, and Bryan Foods, typically underwrite at least 50 percent of the costs to fund and operate the Delta Blues and Heritage festival (Edmondson 49).

The proceeds from some blues festival are used to improve the local communities. The profits from the Shaw Blues festival, for example, were donated to various institutions which help the "needy and people who have been burned out of their homes" (qtd. In Lush, "Shaw" 1). The King Biscuit festival was originally created as a "way to lure business into downtown" Helena (Ellis E6). Jerry Wenzel, Media and Public Relations Director for KBBF radio in Helena, claimed that the festival was not "about making huge amounts of money" but "to help the businesses in the downtown area and promote and preserve the culture of the Delta Blues" (n.p.). Despite the obvious economic benefits to the local communities, blues festivals offer some blues musicians the opportunity to be honored for their achievements.

### *Homecoming/honoring musicians*

The great African-American exodus from the south during the first half of the twentieth century spawned a new form of urban electric-based blues. In 1943, when Muddy Waters first arrived in Chicago, he was, by all accounts, just another

“country boy” in the “big city.” Within a few years, however, Waters transformed his “country blues” into a new, wholly innovative, and dynamic musical style called the “Chicago blues.” Following in Waters’s footsteps, many blues performers, such as Elmore James and Howlin’ Wolf, left the cotton fields of Mississippi (often by way of Memphis and Helena, Arkansas) for new opportunities in the northern cities of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit. Some of these musicians toured Europe, Asia, and South America and ultimately relocated overseas. Festivals, thus, offer blues musicians the opportunity to return home to their birthplace and many are honored for their musical achievements.

Since 1968, B. B. King has made an annual pilgrimage in the late spring to the place of his youth—Indianola, Mississippi—to headline his own homecoming show (Cheseborough 145). Located at B. B. King Park (there is even a B. B. King Road in town), the festival features several warm-up acts before King’s tour bus finally appears on the festival grounds. Despite suffering health problems in recent years, King usually plays for an hour before adjourning to Club Ebony, a small black-owned and -operated “club,” for more late-night jamming in front of an enthusiastic, howling audience.

Many festival organizers and blues societies believe blues performers need to be recognized and honored for their musical achievements. The mission of the Leland Blues Project, according to the 2002 Highway 61 Blues Festival program, is to “honor the mid-Mississippi Delta Bluesmen and to educate the public on their contribution to music” (“Leland” n.p.). In the article “Few Understand,” the writer suggests that the original purpose of the King Biscuit Blues Festival was a “salute to the blues roots of Helena” and a celebration of Sonny Boy Williamson, “who made Helena his home” (10). The Crossroad Blues Society, a not-for-profit organization that helped sponsor the 2000 Crossroads Blues Festival in Rosedale, Mississippi, claimed that one of its purposes is to “honor blues musicians who had their roots in the Delta” (Lush, “Crossroads” 1).

Blues Festivals also honor musicians by providing financial assistance to elderly, often destitute blues musicians. For example, the King Biscuit Blues Festival, in concert with the Sonny Boy Blues Society, provides funding for Blues Aid, an organization designed to “bring worldwide attention and financial assistance to the plight of our aging blues musicians” (“Few Understand” 10). Many aging blues musicians, who often lack health insurance and other basic necessities, are trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty:

Jessie Mae Hemphill’s trailer is literally eroding into the pine country soil, open to snakes and vermin. Wesley Jefferson lost most of his equipment and his van in an accident on Highway Sixty-One. Delta musicians usually have no retirement set up nor a “nest egg” locked up in CDs or saving accounts. . . . The little that remains for many musicians is their few (if any) recordings, their stories, and us—their fans. The Sunflower River Blues Association adopted by resolution the formation of “The Sunflower Musician’s Relief

Fund” to help delta blues musicians in needy times . . . in times of survival, when there might not be anyone else to lend a helping hand. (Sunflower Musicians n.p.)

Referring to these musicians as “cultural resources,” Bubba Sullivan, one of the founders of the Sonny Boy Blues Society, lamented that “[o]ur living cultural history is dying” (qtd. in Richardson 18).

Blues festivals are often dedicated to the memory of blues performers who, unfortunately, have passed away often owing to old age or inadequate medical care. The 1979 Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage festival, for example, was dedicated to blues performer Joe Willie Wilkins (O’Neal 12). While remembering the 1993 Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival, an audience member, writing under the pseudonym “Fiat Lux,” framed the festival as a “wake” for legendary blues performer James “Son” Thomas, of Leland, Mississippi, who died shortly before the event (n.p.). The 2002 Highway 61 Blues Festival was dedicated to singer Mamie “Galore” Davis and legendary blues pianist “Boogaloo” Ames, both of whom “[had] been a part of the Highway 61 Blues Festival since its inception” (Ruth n.p.).

While many famous blues musicians, such as Little Milton, Koko Taylor, and Buddy Guy, have returned to Mississippi to headline blues festivals, many of these same musicians left the Mississippi Delta in the 1940s and 1950s to “escape” segregation and institutionalized racism. Forced to survive in a world of abject poverty and grueling labor-intensive employment, a number of blues musicians were subjected to police harassment (Little Walter), arrest and imprisonment (Son House, Leadbelly), physical beatings (Willie Dixon), and other forms of mistreatment. Castigating white southerners as the “most racist and dirtiest, cruelest people on this continent,” vocalist and pianist Eddie Boyd remembered the violence directed toward African-Americans in Mississippi:

They would have killed me, man, ’cause they were always beating some black man to death down there. I went through terrible experiences here in this country, man. Just because I didn’t buck dance and scratch behind my head when I’m looking at a white man. If a white man talked to me, he didn’t want you to look him in his eye. . . . But when I looked at him, that made him angry. . . . Many times he told me, “You better leave here, nigger, ’cause you’re a bad influence on the good niggers.” (O’Neal and van Singel 235, 279)

Most recently, at the 2002 Peavine Awards ceremony, an annual event held on the campus of Delta State University with the purpose of honoring the contributions of Mississippi’s blues musicians to the development of American popular music, Billy Branch and Ike Turner remarked on the irony of a blues awards ceremony in Mississippi. Branch announced to the largely white audience that “it’s nice to be in Mississippi in 2002. You wouldn’t want to be here before 1960. Mississippi was a dangerous place.” An hour later, Turner—who grew up in

Clarksdale, Mississippi—echoed Branch’s earlier remarks: “Glad to be back in Cleveland. The last time I was here somebody was trying to shoot at us.”

Although generally not regarded as a radical form of protest music, the blues, in the words of literary critic Stanley Crouch, “universalized black life.” From Charley Patton’s “High Sheriff Blues,” which chronicles the singer’s arrest in Belzoni, Mississippi, in 1934, to Willie King’s *Living in a New World* (2002), an album that perfectly enjoins themes of universal love with sociopolitical justice, blues musicians have commented on a wide range of issues, including dehumanization, enforced servitude, police brutality, lynching, and institutionalized racism. The blues serves as an important statement of “somebodiness” and “indelible individuality” in a world in which African-Americans were largely suppressed and despised, invisible and objectified (Gussow 5).

In sum, the return of some of Mississippi’s most famous citizens to the “hospitality” state must be viewed in context with the primary reason why many of these musicians participated in one of the greatest mass migrations in American history. As suggested by Paul Garon, a founding editor of *Living Blues* magazine, “only the complex web of racist oppression suffered by blacks at the hands of whites produced the blues” (“Speak” 53). Hounded by the authorities and persecuted under the tyranny of white rule, some blues musicians lamented their cruel fate, others celebrated their own survival, while many escaped to the “promised land” of the North. Perhaps, the homecoming/honoring function serves as a ritualized “apology,” a community’s attempt to heal old “racial wounds.” This function may also suggest that much has changed in Mississippi over the last half century. Certainly, however, the return of Mississippi’s most admired and recognized citizens serves a second function: preservation of blues culture.

#### *Cultural preservation of blues music*

Steve Cheseborough, noted author of *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of the Delta Blues*, warned would-be blues travelers that the blues culture in contemporary Mississippi is not the “same as it was in 1929—or 1969.” While physical evidence of the music’s golden era (e.g., juke joints, barbecue shacks) still exists, the blues currently heard in Mississippi is generally a heavily amplified music, forsaking the traditional acoustic Delta sound. Blues fans are even hard-pressed to find live blues music in the Delta. For example, at Poor Monkeys, a disc jockey plays R&B, soul, funk, and even a type of modern-day soul-blues—but rarely, if ever, the Delta blues. For all these reasons, blues fans should not expect to see or hear “a Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, or Memphis Minnie playing on a corner or in a jook joint in Mississippi” (Cheseborough 9).

Thus, as cultures develop and change, specific dances, folk art, songs, or history are sometimes “lost” to progress. Efforts to preserve cultural artifacts are often difficult, if not impossible. Information about blues singers’ lives is often unavailable or “lost” because many of the blues singers “were mostly rambling sorts who

didn't leave behind much in the way of estates, memoirs, letters, or other personal papers or belongings" (Cheseborough 9). Fortunately, "performances" are a means to preserve specific songs, dances, and history. Indeed, as sociologist Erik Cohen has argued, "the emergence of a tourist market frequently facilitates the preservation of a cultural tradition which would otherwise perish" (382). The performance of native dances in Hawaii, for example, allows that community to retain an important aesthetic component of its culture. In the same way, blues festivals "preserve" one of the Delta's best-known cultural artifacts.

Interviews with festival spectators (see Appendix) seem to support the theme of preservation. One respondent claimed that the main purpose of having a festival is to "keep it alive" because "we need to pass it on to other generations" (#9). Another respondent argued that it is important to keep "traditions alive" (#4), while another admitted that while some of the music was "fluff," some blues musicians try to "preserve the blues" (#14).

Even law-enforcement officials, many of whom were initially skeptical of this cultural event owing to potential violence, now believe blues festivals play an important role in showcasing the region's cultural heritage. In a letter to MACE on August 27, 2001, Victor G. Smith, Sheriff of Washington County, Mississippi, claimed the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival

allows us a chance to welcome visitors from all of the United States to our community, and gives us a chance to show off. I think that one of the best ways for Mississippi, and the Delta in particular, to overcome past negative stereotypes is to encourage visitors to come here and see what we are really like—a progressive community wise enough to hold on to the heritage and traditions that define us. (Victor Smith 10)

Festival promoters create themes or slogans to stress the importance of preserving one of America's oldest musical genres. For example, the theme for the 24th Annual Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival was "Taking It Back to Where We Started." The front cover of the festival program underscores this preservation theme, sporting a drawing of a transient 1920s "blues family" in motion. In the foreground, a family of three is pictured walking down a dirt road. On the left, the father is dressed in overalls with a guitar strapped to his back. On the right, the mother is carrying a basket, presumably filled with food and water. In the middle, a young boy is holding the hands of both parents. In the background, many of the images found in Delta blues songs are present: a large green field, a barn, and a fast-moving train. The festival theme is positioned underneath the drawing, thus accentuating the relationship between preservation and a Delta that no longer exists.

Advertisements printed in festival programs even highlight preservation themes. In the 1st Annual Highway 61 Festival program, fans are encouraged to purchase a 50-dollar engraved brick for the Highway 61 Blues Museum in Leland. According

to the program, fans who purchase a brick become “key figure[s] in preserving the Mississippi Delta’s rich heritage. . .” (“B. B. King” n.p.). The Sunflower River Blues Association in Clarksdale is dedicated, according to one ad, to “perpetuating, preserving, promoting and documenting the blues in its homeland” (n.p.). The Delta Blues Museum characterizes its mission as to keep “the Delta Blues tradition alive today” (n.p.). Ads even urge customers to apply for affinity credit cards, with the promise that “40% of the annual fee goes directly to the Sonny Boy Blues Society, which is committed to preserving the wonderful musical heritage of the Mississippi Delta area” (Helena National Bank 14).

At most festivals, street vendors and storeowners sell T-shirts featuring images of famous (and often deceased) blues musicians. At the 1999 King Biscuit Blues Festival, a T-shirt read “A Pact with the Devil Robert Johnson, 1911–1938.” Next to the inscription was a drawing of the famous blues crossroads (the intersection of U.S. Highways 61 and 49, which run through the Delta) where Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his musical genius. At the 2000 Crossroads Blues Festival, vendors sold T-shirts that featured the lyrics of one of Johnson’s most famous songs, “Traveling Roadside Blues.”

Although cultural tourism “preserves” traditional art forms, it also tends to “freeze” these traditions in time. As a consequence, blues musicians (especially musicians who have a strong historical link) are sometimes typecast as “authentic” Delta blues musicians. Rob Brown, a blues enthusiast and former Assistant Professor of Geography at Delta State University, recalled a disturbing incident at the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival in Greenville. On the Juke Stage (one of the three stages at the festival), a white musician (who was acting as the stage announcer) introduced Robert Lockwood Jr. to the audience. As Brown recalls:

Robert Lockwood Jr. . . . started out in the blues world, but you know expanded way beyond that. He became kind of like a jazz composer and arranger. So, here he [the white stage announcer] says, “Come on Robert, plays us that old, old deep down blues, you know, like you did in the old days.” Well, that is not what Robert Lockwood is all about . . . and it’s an insult to Robert Lockwood to be treated in that way. And here’s a case where whites have control over the presentation of his music and it’s coming out in a real derogatory way.

Ironically, while some blues musicians are frequently typecast as “authentic” Delta musicians, most performers do not play what is commonly referred to as the Delta blues.<sup>5</sup> “Few young musicians,” according to blues expert and University of Memphis music professor David Evans, “aspire to be solo self-accompanied blues singers playing a guitar or piano,” which is characteristic of the Delta style (12). Festival performers play a variety of different styles, including Chicago blues, blues/southern rock, soul-blues, R&B, rock and roll, and gospel music, an important and thriving genre in most black communities. At the 2003 Living Blues

symposium, gospel and blues singer Lea Gilmore argued that, while all forms of blues should be embraced, blues-rock should not be allowed to be redefined as authentic blues music. With similar insight, blues expert Peter Aschoff complained that many of the performers, such as Betty White and the Fabulous Thunderbirds, did not even play the blues at the 1988 Delta Blues and Heritage Festival: "I hope that the festival is not losing its original vision, and that it is not sacrificing 'real' blues in pursuit of a broader audience" (18).

In sum, preserving Mississippi's blues culture is an example of what is called cultural (or heritage) tourism. Indeed, preservation strategies encourage tourists and local community members to gain a new appreciation for the important role African-Americans played in the creation and development of the blues. At the same time, some critics have suggested that the desire to seek a larger audience has compromised the original vision of celebrating Mississippi's contribution to American music.

### *Integration/racial harmony*

As stated elsewhere, the history of Mississippi, and the Delta in particular, is one of enforced servitude, hysterical bigotry, political corruption, insatiable greed, and human suffering. The Delta still is a highly segregated "community"—a fractured community that highlights the dramatic differences between the powerful, white minority and the subjugated black majority.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, blues festivals are one of the few avenues in which blacks and whites (and other racial and ethnic groups) can develop an important human connection. But this connection, not surprisingly, is often ephemeral.

In general, blues festivals attract a very diverse, heterogeneous audience. Reflecting on an early Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, former festival producer Worth W. Long claimed that the festival's 7,000 fans were "young and old, men and women, black and white, families and singles, farmers and city slickers" (1). Writing in *American Demographics*, journalist Brad Edmondson described a typical blues audience: "The fans, black and white, arrive in BMWs and ancient pickup trucks. Some come in rented cars after flying in from other states or from Europe and Japan" (49). MACE observed that the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival is a "mass medium for racial harmony, as Blues fans of all races, ages, and backgrounds join together to celebrate the common heritage of Delta Blues music" ("MACE" 2).

Some blues fans suggest that music encourages members from different racial groups to "break" the unwritten code of self-segregation. For example, Luther Bibbs enjoyed "all the people; all races. It's fantastic" (qtd. in R. Smith A7). One respondent (#13) in an interview suggested that blues festivals bring "people together." Another audience member (#9) claimed that the festivals "bring whites and blacks together. Music is universal." Blues festivals, according to one respondent



(#10), “bring all the racial barriers down. In the ten to eleven years I’ve been coming to this festival, there has never been a disagreement between the races.” Another respondent (#11) summed up this theme by saying: “You can’t get any more racial harmonious than this blues festival [Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival].” Even the Chief of Police of Greenville, Lee Adams, observed that the festival “brings together people of all classes, color and creed” (9).

In a 2001 interview, bassist and multi-instrumentalist, Barry Bays, who has played with a roster of blues artists from Willie Foster to Dave Thompson, said most audience members are cognizant of the positive racial climate that permeates most blues festivals:

Most people that are going to the festivals already know that [the] atmosphere exists, you know, and that’s a cool thing about it. I remember the first time I went to the Delta Blues festival in Greenville. The very person that you would curse in line at the grocery store that broke in front of you at the blues festival. . . they might hand you a beer and come up and dance with you. . . . You’re not worried about: “Oh, man, there’s 40,000 blacks and 10,000 whites, what if a riot starts?” You know, that’s not going to happen. I mean, if a fight starts so many people will be breaking it up, not trying to egg it on.

Although the blues has its roots in the African-American community, blues lyrics—while sometimes containing “coded” or “hidden” meanings for some black audiences—have an appeal to a universal audience. According to speech communication scholar Ralph E. Knupp, protest songs are particularly effective if the songs contain a high degree of ambiguity and appeal to a listener’s experience and social setting (386). Blues songs comment on basic human experiences such as lust (“Wang Dang Doodle”), love and rejection (“My Baby Quit Me”), and loneliness (“Lonesome Dog Blues”). Not surprisingly, some blues fans believe that these universal themes have helped cultivate the music’s broad-based, international audience. Thomas B. Simpson of Milwaukee suggested that “[e]verybody has the blues” (qtd. in R. Smith A1). One respondent (#19) told me: “Well, I think everybody’s been through the blues one time or another . . . that’s why a lot of people relate to it, come out and relax and have a good time.”

Blues musicians are clearly aware of the power of music to “unite” traditionally segregated, and often antagonistic, groups. Blues legend Willie Foster, who passed away in 2001 at the age of 79, would often stop between songs to describe his birth on a cotton sack in a cotton field,<sup>7</sup> preach his faith in God, and reiterate his belief that the blues is about “love,” not “hate.” At the 2000 Highway 61 Leland Blues Festival, Foster urged the audience to follow the “golden rule” and “love one another.” The festival’s announcer, a white male, punctuated Foster’s remarks with a plea for racial tolerance and love: “God did not make a black world, a red world, or a white world, just one world.” In another example, during the 2000 B. B. King Homecoming Festival, King invited several children in the audience to join him on stage for a “dance contest.” After a series of run-off competitions, two

participants remained on the stage: an African-American boy and a Caucasian girl. Although the boy eventually “won” the contest, King’s “dance contest” included members who represented the racial diversity of the audience itself.

During a performance at the 2002 Highway 61 Blues Festival, Willie King’s song “America” expressed an urgent need to bridge the racial divide in America: “America, we’ve been separated too long/ We all need to come together/ . . . with love like that/ You know, we can’t go wrong.”

In his article “Aesthetics as a Bridge to Multicultural Understanding,” intercultural communication researcher James Steven Saucedo contends that the performance aspect of aesthetic communication allows individuals to “actively participate and share in another’s culture” (418). Rather than reading a poem or listening to music within the privacy of one’s bedroom, the performance of aesthetic communication is an essential component to the inculcation of “tolerance, empathy, and acceptance of culturally different groups” (420). Mae Smith, Interpretation Specialist at the Delta Blues Museum, believes that blues festivals can serve similar ends: “[D]ifferent groups of people can come together, you know, for a function and can exist and not tear each other apart and talk to each other and share ideas.”

At some festivals, including the King Biscuit Blues Festival, even the merchandise—from coffee mugs to hats to T-shirts—reflects themes of integration, tolerance, and love. The slogans “Make Blues Not War,” “Peace, Love, Blues,” “I’ve Got the Blues Brother,” and the ever-popular “No Black, No White, Just the Blues” urge spectators to transcend the prejudice and racism that still permeate the region.

However, in a 2001 interview, John Ruskey, the former curator of the Delta Blues Museum, said these types of promotional materials represent, at best, a superficial understanding of the blues. According to Ruskey, themes of “racial harmony” obfuscate the protest function of blues music:

I think a person who says something like that looks at the blues as pure entertainment, and nothing else, and doesn’t understand where it comes from, and doesn’t really understand what it’s talking about ’cause if you really have the blues, then you’re not lying about what you’re seeing, you’re not glossing it over and saying that it’s all harmony. Blues is about accepting reality. I’d say it’s just a suburban mentality about looking at the blues just as entertainment, pure entertainment.

Moreover, in a 2002 interview, musician Bobby Rush was critical of some promoters who negotiated contracts with musicians based on a race-based, inequitable pay system. While there “is no color barrier in the music,” promoters “make a separation between the color barrier in entertainers and musicians because they fluctuate in the pay scale. Because the blues white guy can make much more money than the blues black guy which he already got his lesson from him. The real

deal gets less money than the copy.”<sup>8</sup> Another blues musician, Barbara “Pope” Looney, confirms Rush’s observation, but suggests that black musicians are partly responsible for the inequitable pay rate because “they sold themselves so cheap when they first started I guess they didn’t know that their talent ran more than when they started out.” Perhaps, because of this trend, Looney prophesized that by 2006 “white [musicians] will be taking over full control of” the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival.

Furthermore, while blues festivals promote themes of integration and racial harmony, actual interaction patterns often prove to be very different. Most audience members still arrive as a member of their respective racially segregated group. While whites and blacks may spark up conversations or even dance together, audience members are still closely connected to their primary group. Even street vendors are sometimes segregated by race. At the 2000 Crossroads Blues Festival, white and black vendors occupied different sections of a downtown street. In many ways, racial integration at blues festivals is limited to spectators simply occupying the same physical space. Luther Brown, Director of Delta State University’s Delta Center, experienced a similar phenomenon at a local juke joint, Poor Monkeys: “It’s integrated only in the sense of sharing the same physical space at the same time. I don’t feel it is integrated in the sense of blacks and whites sitting at the same table buying each other drinks.” Thus, while blues festivals may provide blacks and whites the opportunity to violate unwritten norms of interaction, the day after the festival, life is the same: segregation prevails. Thus, blacks and whites are members of a temporarily “integrated” community.

## **Conclusion**

While there is scant research on the functions of music festivals, this essay contends that blues festivals in Mississippi serve three primary ends: homecoming/honoring musicians, preservation of blues culture, and integration/racial harmony. Preservation strategies encourage tourists and local community members to gain a new appreciation for the role African-Americans played in the creation and development of the blues. At the same time, however, some performers are often typecast as “Delta” blues musicians and most festivals feature nonblues performers. In addition, while blues festivals may provide blacks and whites the opportunity to violate unwritten norms of interaction and share a common interest in the blues, festivals provide a short-lived “integrated” community.

Although some blues festivals employ the integration/racial harmony strategy, a recent attempt to cancel the King Biscuit Blues Festival suggests there are factions competing to control the economic “purse strings” of the festival. In 1999, Jimmie Wilson, a lawyer, filed suit on behalf of the minority-owned businesses in Helena and the local NAACP to block the festival because, according to Wilson, white people have maintained “exclusive control over a festival honoring music of black field hands” (Duffy A12). Wilson argued that city ordinances give festival organization

authority to an organization called Main Street Helena. In effect, according to Wilson, city ordinances have created an exclusive franchise, a violation of Arkansas's constitution. The lawsuit was later ousted as the judge refused to grant Wilson an injunction to block the festival.

Blues festivals serve as one means to promote the blues as part of Mississippi's cultural heritage. The number of blues festivals held in Mississippi has certainly increased in the last decade. However, this study indicates that blues festivals are not without their ironic consequences.

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### **Notes**

1. In 1909, W. C. Handy, often called the "Father of the Blues," penned his first published blues song, "Mr. Crump," while on Beale Street in Memphis (Dawson). Mr. Crump was a white mayor in Memphis who was often referred to as "Boss Crump."

2. In their study of the function of community building within social movements, Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth argue that the National Women's Music Festival (NWMF) provides the opportunity for feminists to "create an alternative community that attracts a diverse constituency in addition to promoting a positive lesbian identity" (486). Specifically, the authors examine the tension between the affirmation of a prolesbian identity and a movement that stresses diversity as one of its underlying ideals. However, the authors conceptualize the NWMF as simply another venue for community building, while failing to appreciate the NWMF as a unique and dynamic rhetorical phenomenon. In his critical analysis of three rock documentaries (Monterey Pop, Woodstock, and Gimme Shelter), Schowalter argues that contemporary narratives concerning the "dangerous" effects of rock and roll can be traced back, in part, to Woodstock and Gimme Shelter. Both documentaries highlight the supposed "destructive" and "harmful" effects of rock music on audience members, while ironically subverting the importance of the music performances. By contrast, Monterey Pop "subverts the assumptions of this narrative, making its music highly visible while not exploiting representations of the audience" (86). While Schowalter's essay is an insightful examination of film documentaries and historical narratives, the study examines media representations of rock festivals, not the functions of music festivals.

3. From 1996 to 2003, the author attended a number of blues festivals in Mississippi, including the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival (Greenville); the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival (Clarksdale); the Drew Blues Festival (Drew); the Lambert Homecoming Festival (Lambert); the Highway 61 Blues

Festival (Leland); the B. B. King Homecoming Festival (Indianola); the Crossroads Blues Festival (Rosedale); the Shaw Blues Festival (Shaw); the Willie Clayton Homecoming Festival (Stephenville); and the King Biscuit Blues Festival (Helena, Arkansas). I have included the King Biscuit festival because of Helena's close proximity to Mississippi (less than ten miles) as well as Helena's contributions to the development and preservation of the Delta Blues. As suggested elsewhere, while many blues festivals draw a diverse, heterogeneous audience, some smaller festivals, including the Shaw Blues Festival, attract a mostly African-American audience and feature soul-blues musicians (e.g., Mississippi Nuo Nuo). Soul blues is a popular blues-based genre in many African-American communities.

4. Since 1977, MACE has sponsored the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, which "according to its sponsors . . . is the only major blues festival produced by an African-American non-profit community group in the United States" (Kinnon 88).

5. Most festivals feature a small, intimate stage set-up, often called a Juke or acoustic stage, where musicians such as long-time Delta blues performer Eddie Cusic play acoustic-based, Delta blues.

6. Although signs saying "for whites only" have long been absent from restaurant windows and bathroom doors, the Delta is still a segregated "community." The following are just a few examples of the racial tension that still exists in the area. (1) In many Delta towns, a railroad track serves as an obvious physical symbol of racial demarcation. (2) In Cleveland, "College Street" cuts through the white section of town. When the street intersects the railroad tracks and enters the black community, the street's name is changed to "Lee Street." (3) In response to the school desegregation order of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, a number of all-white, private academies formed. The student bodies of the public schools in the Delta are predominantly black.

7. According to Foster, his mother worked as a sharecropper on a farm in northwest Mississippi. Despite her pregnancy, she was still forced to work long hours in the cotton fields. As a result, she gave birth to her son on a cotton sack in an open field. Reflecting on that experience, Foster once announced to an audience: "I was born in the blues, I've lived the blues, and I'm still livin' the blues."

8. Bill Gresham, Chairperson of the Delta Blues Museum's Board of Trustees, has also served as a Chairperson for the Sunflower River Blues & Gospel Festival. In a 2003 interview, Gresham suggested that "headliner" acts at the Clarksdale festival (e.g., Koko Taylor, John Lee Hooker) typically receive between \$3,000–8,000 for the event, while most "local" acts (e.g., Wesley Jefferson) receive considerably less money (\$250–500) for playing at the same festival. According to Gresham, promoters "try to be fair [to the musicians], but we're on a very tight budget." Gresham was not asked about an alleged discriminatory pay scale.

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## **Discography**

King, Willie and the Liberators. *Living in a New World*. Rooster Blues ROB-CD-2647, 2002.

## Appendix: Respondents

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|                |        |       |
|----------------|--------|-------|
| Respondent #1  | Female | White |
| Respondent #2  | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #3  | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #4  | Male   | White |
| Respondent #5  | Female | White |
| Respondent #6  | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #7  | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #8  | Female | Black |
| Respondent #9  | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #10 | Male   | White |
| Respondent #11 | Male   | White |
| Respondent #12 | Female | White |
| Respondent #13 | Female | Black |
| Respondent #14 | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #15 | Female | White |
| Respondent #16 | Male   | White |
| Respondent #17 | Male   | Black |
| Respondent #18 | Female | White |
| Respondent #19 | Male   | White |
| Respondent #20 | Female | Black |

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Respondents #1–15 were interviewed at the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, Greenville, Mississippi (September 15, 2001). Respondents #16–20 were interviewed at the King Biscuit Blues Festival, Helena, Arkansas (October 5, 2001).