

At Play in the Delta

Michael Luster

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In the Delta, folks find their pleasure where they can. They find it in country clubs and juke joints, in glitzy casinos and at kitchen tables, as well as at ball fields, in deer woods and fish camps. Much of that fun could be viewed as what Smithsonian historian Pete Daniel calls “domesticated violence,” and sometimes the domestication seems on the verge of reverting to the wild. Other times, the fun borders on a parody of gentility. But whether it be the debauched debutantes wading in the fountain at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis on New Year’s Eve, a deep blues juke joint rocking into the night just a stone’s throw from a civic festival, a supper-club “Tribute to the Blues” offered to the Symphony

League by a scatting jazzman, or an investment banker shopping at the mall’s Camouflage Shop for his next turkey shoot, there can be little doubt that the Delta offers a playing field rich in both irony and substance.

Perhaps most substantial is the Delta’s role as America’s musical Fertile Crescent, one of the places that gave the blues a reason to be and drove Blacks and Whites to rock. With equally good reason the blues might have spontaneously generated in Texas and the Carolina Piedmont in the years just before the last turn of the century, yet our first and best descriptions of it come from the Mississippi Delta. Blues historian Robert Palmer in his book *Deep Blues* tells how archaeologist Charles Peabody came to Coahoma County, Mississippi, in 1901 to study the great earthen mounds which the first Deltans built throughout the region as places of power, ritual, and refuge. Peabody hired local Black laborers to excavate the mounds and took note of the songs the men sang as they worked, and he wrote them up for the *Journal of American*

Folklore. That same year W. C. Handy, a brass band leader from Alabama, heard a young man playing his guitar and singing about going to where the “Southern cross the Dog”: Moorehead, Mississippi, where the two railroads cross at right angles. Handy said he thought it was “the weirdest music I ever heard.”

That weird music, blues, first reached the ears of most Americans beyond the Delta through the composed renditions of Handy and others, but it was with the advent of widespread recording in the 1920s that the original, real music began to be known. This largely rural blues was played on the house-party and juke-joint circuit by men like Son House, David “Honey Boy” Edwards, Robert Johnson, and some of them — like the young Muddy Waters — were also recorded, sometimes commercially, sometimes by song collectors like John and Alan Lomax. These rural blues performers both expressed and gave shape to a music which would prove resilient, influential, and infinitely adaptable. Most of these musicians were singing guitarists who were both heirs to the earlier string band tradition and precursors of things to come. Others were itinerant piano players like Roosevelt Sykes, Memphis Slim, Booker T. Laurey, and Mose Vinson, who worked in a variety of settings from lumber camps to bawdy houses, from night spots to an occasional worship service. Local sounds developed within the Delta often as the result of a single influential individual, and today many of these localized blues can still be heard in the work of Jack Owens of Benton, Mississippi, CeDell Davis of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Po’ Henry and Tookie of Rayville, Louisiana.

One of the most influential musicians from this region was Sonny Boy Williamson. Until his death in 1965, he played not only local dates but also on a radio program, “King Biscuit Time,” which still airs each day at noon on KFFA in Helena, Arkansas. Sonny Boy also made fine electrified blues recordings beginning in the late 1940s, first in Jackson, Mississippi, and then later in Chicago, where many of the Delta’s finest bluesmen would make their way. Most recorded for Chicago’s Chess Records, including Mississippians Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf, Arkansas’s Robert Nighthawk, and Louisiana’s Little Walter. Each produced records which not only had an impact in Chicago and down-home in the Delta, but which also made the upper reaches of the national rhythm and blues charts in the years between 1948 and 1959. Most influential of all was B. B. King of Indianola,



Henry Dorsey (right) and Wayne "Tookie" Collom of Rayville, Louisiana, have been performing acoustic Delta blues music together since 1986. Photo by Bob Kidd

Mississippi, who began recording for the RPM and Kent labels of Los Angeles in 1951 and was still charting blues records as late as 1992.

King had come to prominence working as a musician and disc jockey in Memphis, (excepting Chicago) the Delta's capital city. As most of the Delta blues guitarists of the 1950s saw their national record sales drop off at the decade's end, a new group of stand-up vocalists began to come to the fore, including most notably King's sometime collaborator Bobby "Blue" Bland. This new movement in the blues was termed soul and combined blues with the phrasing, drama, and message-orientation of the gospel world. Some of its biggest stars like Aretha Franklin and the Staple Singers would come directly from the church and gospel world; others like Arkansas's Al Green and

Louisiana's Joe Simon would return to the church after years of secular work.

Growing from the twin strains of the amplified Delta blues of the 1950s and the churchified soul of the 1960s are the two sides of contemporary blues in the Delta today. One side, a continued development of the amplified singing guitarist, is exemplified by performers such as Arkansas's Son Seals, who records for Chicago's Alligator Records, and a number of artists associated with the Clarksdale, Mississippi-based label Rooster Blues, including Lonnie Shields and the late Roosevelt "Booba" Barnes, as well as Big Jack Johnson and the Jelly Roll Kings. The other side of contemporary blues is known as soul blues and features such post-soul performers as William Bell of Memphis, Louisiana's Ernie Johnson,

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"Cotton Crop Blues"

Ain't gonna raise no more cotton;
I'll tell you the reason why I say so.

Ain't gonna raise no more cotton;
I'll tell you the reason why I say so.

Well, like raising a good cotton crop,
Just like a lucky man shooting dice.

Work all the summer to make your cotton,
When fall comes it still ain't no price.

(Oh now, Oh help me pick right here, boys,
Oh yeah, So dark and muddy on this farm.)

I have plowed so hard, baby,
Corns have hot all in my hands.

I want to tell you people,
It ain't nothing for a poor farming man.

—James Cotton

Mississippians Tyrone Davis and Willie Clayton, and Arkansas's Johnny Taylor. These soul blues artists, many of them associated with Jackson's Malaco label, have brought the blues once again not only to Delta night spots but to the national charts. For example, Johnny Taylor's hit "Good Love" made the national top ten at the close of 1996.

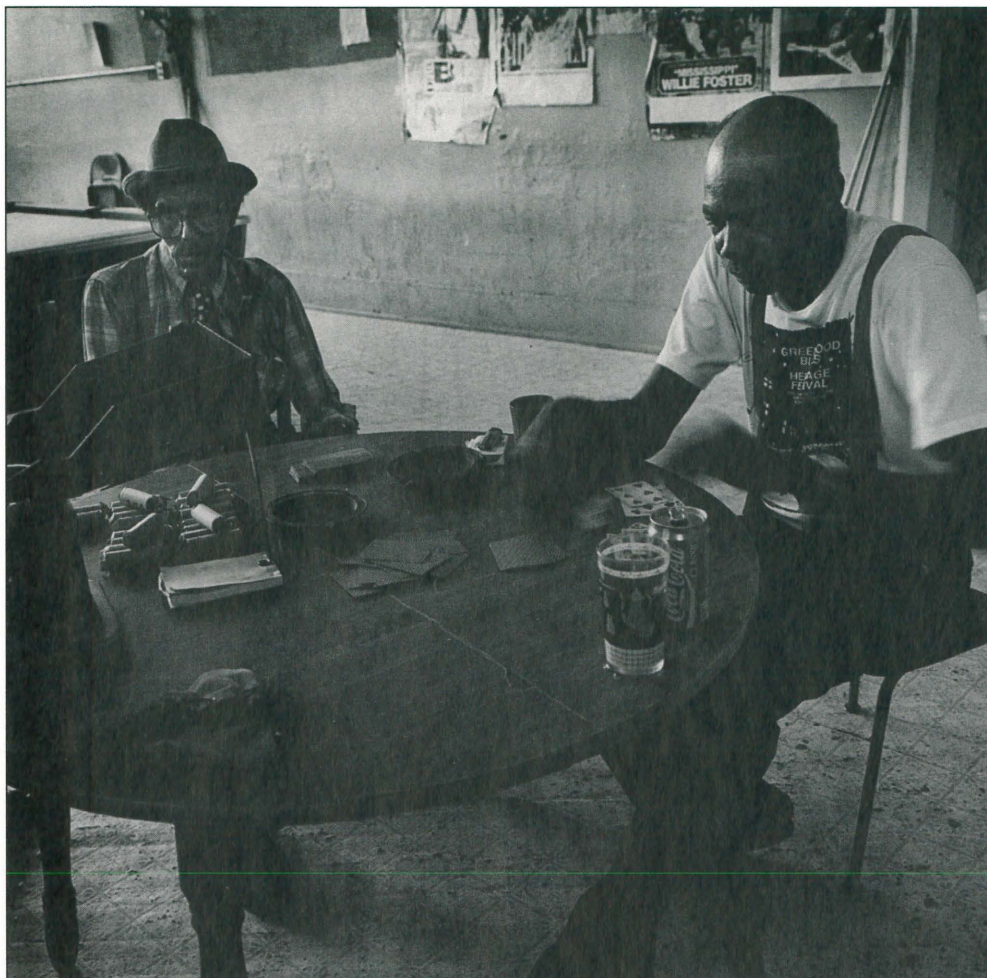
While the blues has become almost synonymous with the Delta, the region also has had other musical traditions, secular as well as sacred (see Joyce Jackson's article, "'Like a River Flowing with Living Water': Worshiping in the Delta," page 31, on the latter). Both Blacks and

Whites participated in a string band tradition which was manifested in the work of early Black groups like the Mississippi Sheiks and, by way of bluegrass, in such contemporary White groups as Don Wiley and Louisiana Grass. The Anglo-American equivalent of 1950s juke-joint blues is the classic honky tonk sound of Louisiana's Webb Pierce; honky tonk also merged with that juking blues to form rockabilly, a creolized form most often associated with Memphis's Sun Record label and its first star, Elvis Presley. But there were many, many young rockabillys who came out of the Delta, including Sonny Burgess and Sleepy LaBeef of Arkansas, Hayden Thompson and Warren Smith of Mississippi, and Louisiana's Dale Hawkins. Louisiana was also home to Jerry Lee Lewis. He personified a school of piano rockabilly which drew equally on the music of honky tonk pianists like Roy Hall, who worked with Webb Pierce, and the blues players who worked Haney's Big House in Lewis's hometown of Ferriday. Rockabilly served as the White road to rock and roll, a hybrid musical form which knew no color but was heavily influenced by Delta players including Black Mississippians Ike Turner and Bo

Diddley. Some of the White rockabillys, like Arkansas's Conway Twitty, Charlie Rich, and Johnny Cash, would return to the fold of country music in the 1960s, joining Black Mississippi country artist Charlie Pride. The Delta continues to produce country artists like Louisianans Tim McGraw, Deana Carter, and such unclassifiable roots performers as Tony Joe White, Kevin Gordon, and Kenny Bill Stinson. Other rockabillys and their followers, including a number of Memphians such as Mud Boy and the Neutrons, the Panther Burns, Alex Chilton, and Big Ass Truck, would push the envelope of rock and roll to produce new, region-based sounds.

The Delta region is also home to a variety of sacred traditions, which provide both uplift and entertainment. From the voice of a mighty church soloist to huge mass choirs to entire congregations, the Delta is still alive with gospel song and even older spiritual sounds. There are quartets with amplified instruments and some Pentecostal churches which rock as hard as any juke joint. It's no accident that many of the rockabillys came out of the Assembly of God, and it's sometimes argued that it's only lyrical content which separates, say, the piano rock of Jerry Lee Lewis from the piano gospel of his preacher cousins Jimmy Swaggart and Gerald Lewis.

One form of Delta recreation that has been both preached against and sung about is gambling. Since the first riverboats plied the Mississippi between New Orleans and Memphis early in the last century, Delta residents have wagered their money on the turn of a card or the roll of the dice. In the 1920s and 1930s small casinos like the Moon Lake Club in Lula, Mississippi, provided both entertainment and literary material to guests like Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. Most gaming, though, took place at a kitchen table, in the back room of a bar or store, or around a stump or any wall that would bounce a pair of dice or stop a penny. In a few locations, local variants of games evolved, such as the Jonesville poker that folklorist Don Hatley found in the back room of a Louisiana country store. (The store's owner had modified the basic poker deal to improve the odds for the "house.") Hatley also heard many tales of the "bean games," high-stakes poker games which emerged in the 1970s as the new riches of soybean farming increased Delta cash flow. While such games continue, since the early 1990s the emphasis has shifted to the "boats," riverboat replicas that remain mostly stationary adjacent to mammoth parking lots and brightly lit come-ons. These



casinos docked at Tunica, Lula, Vicksburg, and Natchez offer a round-the-clock array of slot machines, card games, roulette wheels, and dice accompanied by cheap food, plentiful beverages, and live music. Many of the casinos feature sound-alike “tributes” to musical stars, or sometimes the dimming stars of yore themselves. They also provide performance opportunities for Delta musicians, including young rockabillys and veteran bluesmen. And as they did for the writers of the 1930s, the casinos are providing material for the writers of contemporary blues songs, like Little Milton’s “Casino Blues,” that serve to both celebrate and warn of the pleasures and dangers of the game.

There has always been another form of game to be found in the Delta outdoors — deep in the swamps, on the levees, even on the ancient mounds. Although William Faulkner found occasional pleasure at the Moon Lake Club, it was in

Eddie Mae’s Cafe, above, in Helena, Arkansas, is a place for both blues and a friendly game.

Photo by Deborah Luster

A hunter’s garage, left, in Arkansas City, Arkansas, contains a deer decoy, sometimes used for target practice. Photo by Deborah Luster



Delta hunting that he discovered greater inspiration. Actually, in the world of the hunting and fishing camp one could find tales of bear, deer, and turkeys and also many an all-night card game. These camps are the private domain of hunting clubs, many of which feature excellent cooks, superb storytellers, and masters of a host of related craft skills including decoy carving, game call making, and the construction of the various traps, nets, and other equipment the sportsmen use instead of the gadgets advertised by the hook-and-bullet magazines. Many of these camps are extended family affairs, places where the

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rituals of the hunt are performed as rites of passage. A young hunter may be smeared with the blood of his first deer, or he may have his shirttail cut off and nailed to the camp wall to commemorate a missed shot. Regardless of the game bagged, the purpose of the hunt — for many — is ultimately to experience nature, to get in touch with a

Suggested Listening

Canton Spirituals. *Live in Memphis*. Blackberry Records BBC-1600.

Chilton, Alex. 1991. *19 Years: A Collection of Alex Chilton*. Rhino R2 70780.

Davis, CeDell. 1994. *The Best of CeDell*. Fat Possum/Capricorn 42083-2.

Davis, Tyrone. 1992. *Greatest Hits*. Rhino R4 70533.

Lewis, Jerry Lee. 1993. *The Jerry Lee Lewis Anthology: All Killer No Filler!* Rhino R271216.

Little Milton. 1994. *I'm a Gambler*. Malaco MCD7473.

Mississippi Sheiks. 1992. *Stop and Listen*. Yazoo 2006.

Pierce, Webb. 1994. *Webb Pierce: King of the Honky Tonk: From the Original Decca Masters, 1952-1959*. MCA/Country Music Foundation CMF-0019D/MSD-35500.

Shields, Lonnie. 1992. *Portrait*. Rooster Blues CD R72626.

White, Tony Joe. 1993. *The Very Best of Tony Joe White, Featuring Polk Salad Annie*. Warner Archives 9 45305-2.

Various artists. 1996. *Before the Blues* (three volumes). Yazoo 2015, 2016, 2017.

Various artists. 1993. *The Blues: A Smithsonian Collection of Classic Blues Singers*. Smithsonian RD 101.

Various artists. 1984. *The Blues Came Down from Memphis*. Charley 20033.

Various artists. *Blues Roots: Mississippi*. Folkways RBF 14.

Various artists. 1995. *It Came from Memphis*. Upstart 022.

Various artists. 1991. *The Complete Stax Volt Singles 1959-1968*. Atlantic 7-82218-2.

Various artists. 1996. *King Biscuit Blues: The Helena Blues Legacy*. Blue Sun Records BSCD 2000.

Various artists. 1992. *Memphis Rocks: Rockabilly in Memphis, 1954-1968*. Smithsonian RD 051.

Various artists. 1997. *Southern Journey, Vol. 3: Highway Mississippi — Delta Country Blues, Spirituals, Work Songs & Dance Music*. Rounder 1703.

part of the human heritage that's at least 20,000 years old, and to take some responsibility for the meat they eat. Is this sport? For some, but for others it can mean anything from a form of work to a mystical connection to their place in the world. Not all will agree with them, but then little of the culture of the Delta is calculated to garner favor with the outside observer. It exists to give pleasure and meaning to those who call the Delta home. To them, it's serious business.

Michael Luster earned a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. He is Director of the Louisiana Folklife Festival and host of "Creole Statement," a weekly Louisiana music radio program on KEDM Public Radio in Monroe, Louisiana.

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Morrison, Craig. 1996. *Go, Cat, Go! Rockabilly Music and Its Makers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Palmer, Robert. 1981. *Deep Blues*. New York: Viking Press.

Peterson, David, ed. 1996. *A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport*. New York: Henry Holt.