



# Road Tripping the **BLUES** Across **Mississippi**

By Josephine Matyas

There's a reason the U.S. National Park Service called Mississippi "the cradle of American culture." The oft-overlooked state is a fascinating mix of history, music and literature, especially in the cotton-growing Delta region – the part of the state hemmed in by the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers.

We've travelled back and forth across Mississippi, researching our upcoming travel book on the blues, a form of roots music that was born and grew in American soil. Since the 1960s, the blues has enjoyed a growing following, making Mississippi the perfect place for a music-themed road trip. The blues has been Mississippi's gift to the world; music that became the bedrock for rock and roll, soul, Motown, R&B and much of 20th-century popular music across the planet.



As legendary Chicago bluesman Willie Dixon famously observed, “Blues is the roots, the rest is the fruits.”

Whether you are a blues aficionado or just want to experience some soul-stirring sounds, Mississippi is filled with musical stops. Seek out Mississippi Blues Trail markers that tell the story of bluesmen and women like B.B. King, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf, powerhouse talents who define the blues. ([www.MSBluesTrail.org](http://www.MSBluesTrail.org))

## **GATEWAY TO THE BLUES MUSEUM TUNICA**

**[www.tunicatravel.com](http://www.tunicatravel.com)**

The outstanding Gateway to the Blues Museum is housed in an old wooden train station, relocated from a nearby rail crossing. The displays are enriched with a 100-year loan of priceless memorabilia from a local casino, creating multimedia and information-packed galleries on the Mississippi music experience.

Dozens of instruments – some signed by famous blues artists like Eric Clapton – W.C. Handy’s cornet, and even the copy of the death certificate for Robert Johnson are tastes of the massive collection.

**Refuel:** Just a few miles south – off Old Highway 61 – is The Hollywood Café (“home of the fried dill pickle”), the atmospheric diner made famous in Marc Cohn’s iconic song, Walking In Memphis.



## **DELTA BLUES MUSEUM CLARKSDALE**

**[www.deltabluesmuseum.org](http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org)**

Like many great art forms, the blues is shrouded in myth and lore, especially the story of Robert Johnson’s pact with the devil, where he allegedly sold his soul for mastery of the guitar. The towering Crossroads sign created of guitar shapes marks the intersection of Highways 61 and 49.

The downtown Delta Blues Museum has photos, instruments, stage wear, sheet music and recordings from seminal blues artists like Charley Patton, Big Jack Johnson and Pinetop Perkins. A highlight is the reconstruction of the original one-room sharecropper’s shack where young McKinley Morganfield – aka Muddy Waters – lived on nearby Stovall Plantation.

There are many places to hear live music in Clarksdale. Red’s Lounge is one of the last authentic “juke joints” with live blues, but don’t expect fancy. Red’s is about blues music, not the decor. Ground Zero Blues Club is known for live music as well as for its co-owner, actor and Delta resident Morgan Freeman.

For books, music and blues memorabilia, stop in at Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art and chat with owner Roger Stolle, a northerner who moved to Clarksdale on a mission to preserve the Delta blues traditions.

**Refuel:** Yazoo Pass is one of the town’s more hip downtown bistros. Right at The Crossroads, Abe’s Bar-B-Q advertises “swine dining” and authentic barbecue.

## GRAMMY MUSEUM MISSISSIPPI CLEVELAND

[www.grammymuseumms.org](http://www.grammymuseumms.org)

With the recognition of Mississippi as the birthplace of American music, it made sense for GRAMMY to open its second location in the state. The museum's Mississippi Gallery uses multimedia technology to trace the connections between generations of musicians and song forms. There are hundreds of original artifacts like Willie Dixon's passport, Sonny Boy Williamson II's harmonica and "Pop" Staples' Fender Jazzmaster guitar.

When the late blues guitarist B.B. King talked about Dockery Farms, just a few miles outside Cleveland, he suggested, "You might say it all started right here." At the height of the cotton era, Dockery was a massive plantation and home to blues giants like Charley Patton, Son House and Howlin' Wolf. Plantation workers taught each other their music at Dockery, creating new sounds and styles.

**Refuel:** The Senator's Place for authentic Southern



soul food like "meat and three."

**Stay overnight:** Leroy Percy State Park is the state's oldest park. Its 16 sites all have water, sewer and electrical hook-ups, although the rural location is out of cell phone range.

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**1927 FLOOD MUSEUM  
GREENVILLE**  
[www.visitgreenville.org](http://www.visitgreenville.org)

To really understand the history and geography of the Delta – and how it contributed to the blues – learn about how the devastating Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 impacted the economy, landscape and the lives of Mississippians.

There is a saying: “The people of the Delta fear God and the Mississippi.” The small 1927 Flood Museum shows how the disaster transformed the life and circumstances of that land and the people who farmed it. Facing insurmountable losses, many sharecroppers and field workers – some also part-time musicians – abandoned the Delta, moving north to larger cities, taking the music of the blues with them and spreading it across the country.

**Stay overnight:** Warfield Point Park is a short drive from town, with quiet, developed sites right on the shores of the Mississippi River.

**B.B. KING MUSEUM AND DELTA  
INTERPRETIVE CENTER  
INDIANOLA**  
[www.bbkingmuseum.org](http://www.bbkingmuseum.org)

The B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is one of the best multimedia music museums you will ever find. Impressively stocked with Riley B. King’s personal reflections and archival material, the museum is built onto an old cotton gin where King worked



driving tractors before becoming one of the world’s most beloved blues masters. This is a text- and artifact-heavy museum, including B.B.’s personal papers, video clips, his trademark 1960 Gibson 355 (“Lucille”) and a recreation of his home studio and office.

**Refuel:** Across the street from the museum, The Blue Biscuit hosts live blues and features local cuisine, including delicious pulled pork.

**DELTA BLUES LEGEND TOURS  
GREENWOOD**  
[www.deltablueslegendtours.com](http://www.deltablueslegendtours.com)

It would be hard to find a more authentic or personable tour guide than Sylvester Hoover of Baptist Town, the oldest African-American community in Greenwood and “a melting pot of the Delta.”

At one time, Greenwood was known as the “Cotton Capital of the World” drawing travelling blues musicians who made a living busking on street corners for tips and in the juke joints and house parties where plantation workers let off steam on a Saturday night. Hoover’s story-rich driving tour takes visitors to all three supposed gravesites of Robert Johnson, the site at Three Forks where he was poisoned and through the historic Baptist Town neighbourhood.

**Stay overnight:** Although not a campground, the renovated sharecroppers’ shacks at Tallahatchie Flats make unique stays in the Delta countryside. Little Zion M.B. Church – thought to be the actual burial site of Robert Johnson – is just down the road.

## ELVIS PRESLEY BIRTHPLACE TUPELO [www.elvispresleybirthplace.com](http://www.elvispresleybirthplace.com)

The unpretentious Elvis Presley Birthplace museum gives Graceland a run for its money.

Tour the actual two-room, shotgun-style house where Elvis was born during the Great Depression and sit in the wooden pews of the Pentecostal church where the family worshipped. This is where Elvis learned to sing, play guitar and stoke his passion for gospel music, although he was influenced by and embraced the blues, spawning rock and roll. A state-of-the-art museum showcases memorabilia and audio-visual clips from boyhood friends and Tupelo residents.

Downtown, the historic Tupelo Hardware is where Gladys Presley and her young son came to buy a birthday present. Elvis wanted a bicycle but settled for his first guitar, making history.

Tupelo has a self-guided driving tour of the local spots that played a role in Elvis' formative years. Markers give information on the significance of statues, schools, church, stores and a swimming hole.

**Refuel:** Elvis' regular booth inside Johnnie's Drive-In has not changed in decades. This is where the young



teen went after school to order his regular cheeseburger with RC Cola and talk comics and music with friends. **RV**

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travelled across the U.S. southern states in a quest to explore the roots of American music. Their book – *A Travel Guide to the Blues* – will be published by Quarry Press in early 2018. They wander with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210. Learn more at [www.travelswithrigby.com](http://www.travelswithrigby.com).

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