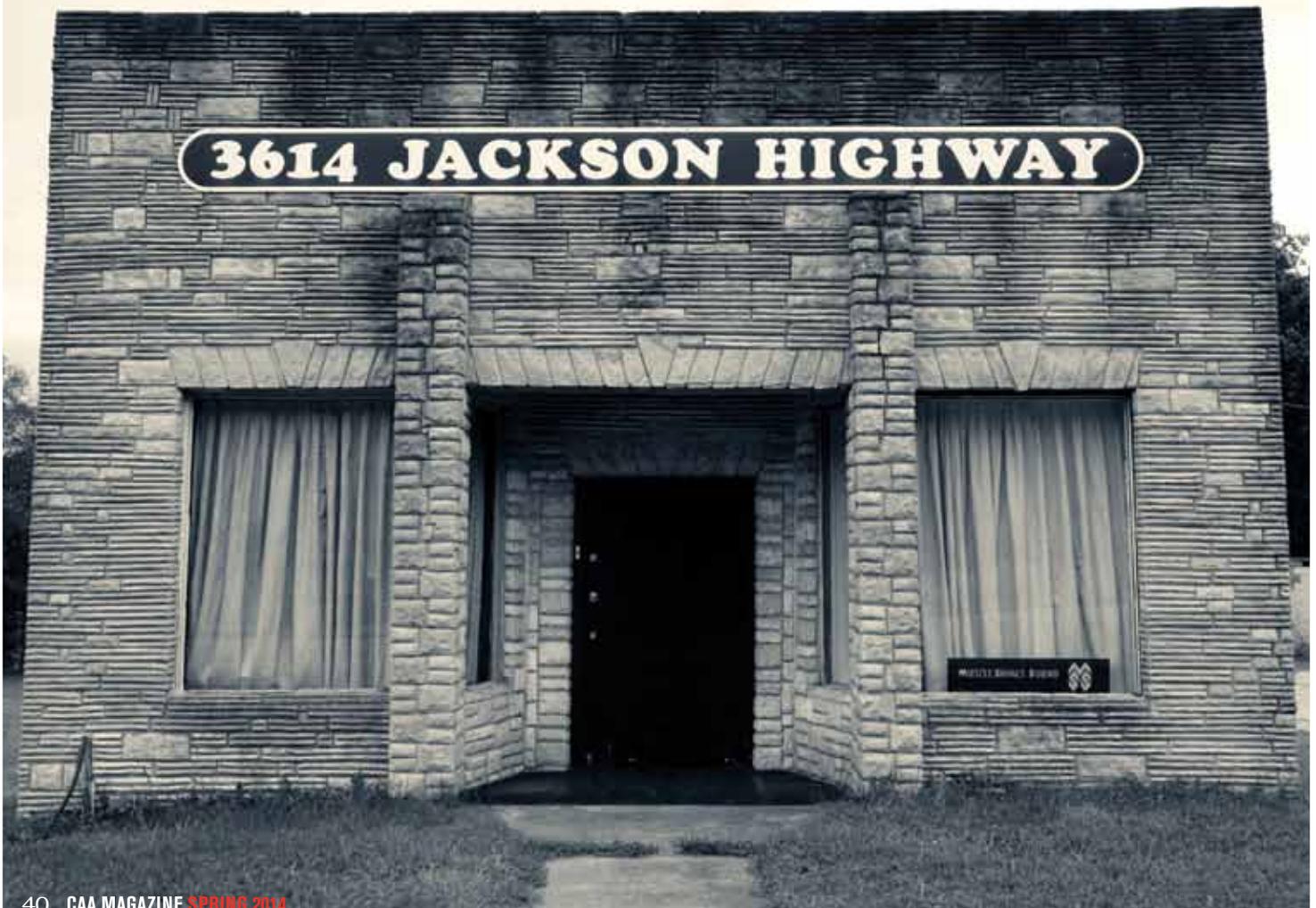


# ROAD TUNES

A SIX-WEEK ODYSSEY FOLLOWING THE SCENIC  
MUSIC TRAILS OF THE SOUTHEAST U.S.

WRITTEN BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS & CRAIG JONES





PHOTOGRAPHY: (MUSCLE SHOALS SOUND STUDIO) © WALTER BILKOWSKI/STOCK PHOTO; BRIDGE © THE PROTECTED ART ARCHIVE/ALAMY

**RURAL ROUTES**

Crossing the Tennessee River in Muscle Shoals, Ala. (this page); Muscle Shoals Sound Studio drew huge talent in its heyday (opposite page)



**OWN A DIRT ROAD**, past rolling hills blanketed with crops of Christmas trees to a driveway jammed with pickups, a doorway opens into a crowded workshop. Every conceivable surface is covered with guitar parts and fretted instruments in various states of construction, stacked, hanging, pegged and clamped. The air is sweet with the smell of fresh-cut wood. In the corner sits the man bestowed with a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship, Wayne Henderson. He is softly dabbing the finish onto a mandolin.

Many people make the trip to Rugby (population: 7) in southwest Virginia because Wayne is among the country's best luthiers—makers of stringed instruments—and because he was the man who made Eric Clapton wait a decade for one of his handmade creations. Wayne gets a lot of requests for his instruments, and money doesn't vault you to the front of the line.

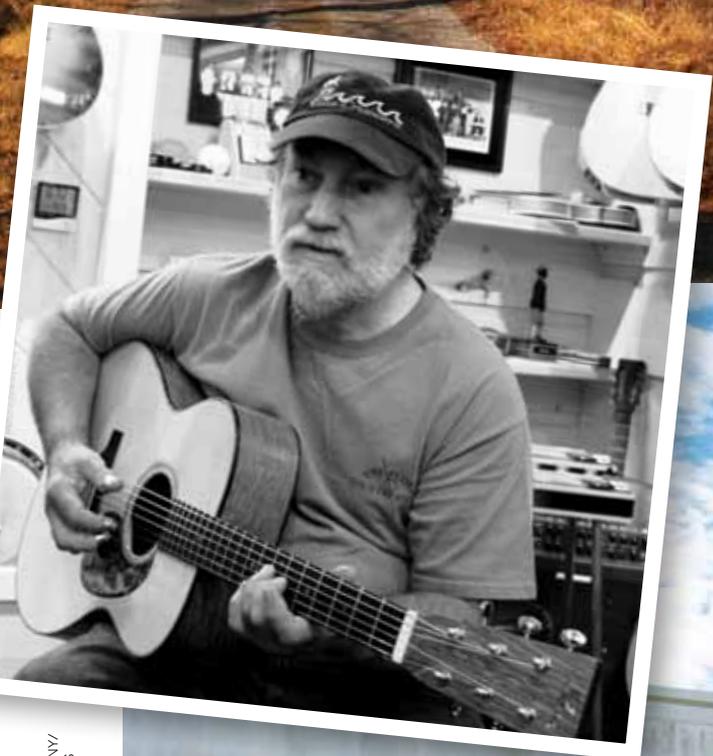
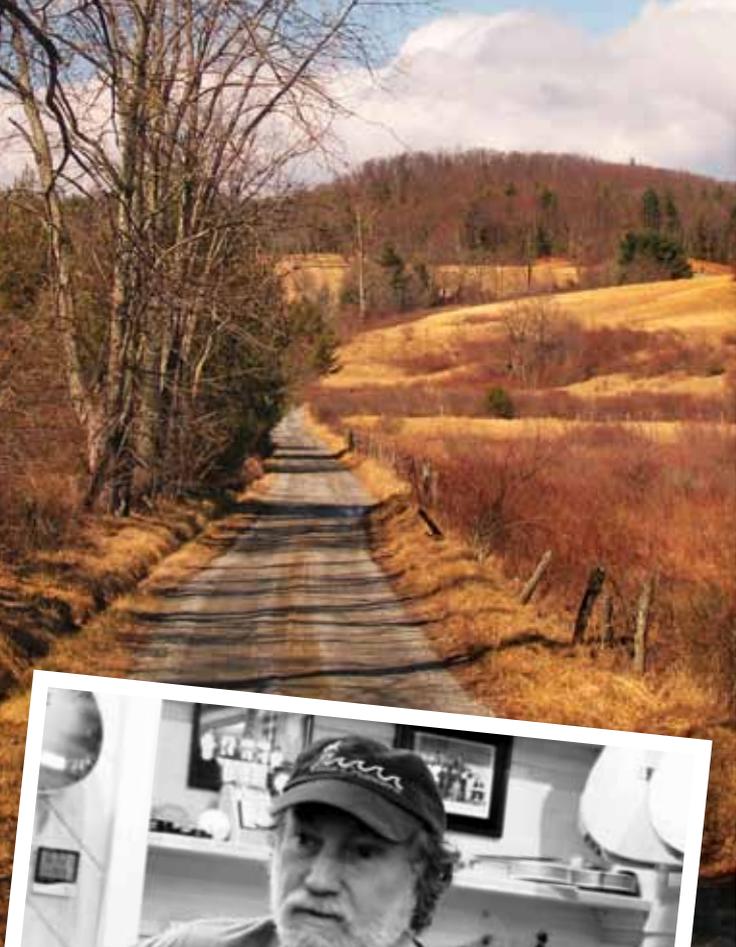
Rugby was at the beginning of our six-week road trip to explore the roots of American music in the southeast. We marked a route on our map: through Virginia, to Alabama, then Louisiana and back north through Mississippi. Our RV camper van was outfitted with everything we thought we'd need: maps, guitars, CDs, guidebooks, a compact kitchenette stocked with supplies and a comfortable bed. Our border collie, Eleanor Rigby, was along for the ride.

Leaving the cooler fall temperatures behind, we joined our first music trail in southwest Virginia—Appalachia—on The Crooked Road, a twisty ribbon connecting the dots at the roots of American old-time and bluegrass. In Appalachia, the narrow rural roads through the forested Blue Ridge region link small communities flush with history and talent. Campsites scattered throughout the hillsides are easy to find, and our camper van is just small enough that we're able to navigate tighter routes and fit into regular parking and camping spots.

In every small town, local musicians always have time to talk. "People used to sit around the old wood stove and play," explains Woody Crenshaw, the owner of the Floyd Country Store, a gathering place known for its grassroots always-packed Friday-night jamboree. "Visitors come to Floyd with their instrument cases. It's an audio education." >

**SCENES FROM THE ROAD**  
**[clockwise from top left]: the writers' camper van on the Gulf Islands National Seashore, Miss.; Floyd Country Store in Floyd, Va.; along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Galax, Va.; a fiddle player in Lafayette, La.; Fred's Lounge in Mamou, La.; Blackbird Bakery in Bristol, Va.; Billie Holiday mural in Jackson, Miss.; Wayne Henderson in Rugby, Va.**





PHOTOGRAPHY: IMURAJI © PHILIP SCALIA/ALAMY; IRADJ © ANDRE JENNY/ALAMY; FIDDLER © JOHN ZADA/ALAMY; (ALL OTHERS) JOSEPHINE MATYAS



**CHANGING LANES**  
(from left): the intersection of Highways 49 and 61 are a Delta-blues hotspot in Clarksdale, Miss.; looking out at Cajun Country, La.; walking the state line that cuts through Bristol



Music shops are guaranteed spots to connect with local players. In Galax, Virginia—home to the annual Old Fiddlers’ Convention—local musicians gather at Barr’s Fiddle Shop to talk about yesterday’s jam or tomorrow night’s gig. Mitchell Music in Floyd and Capo’s Music Store in Abingdon are filled with a buffet of instruments to strum, pick, pluck and bow.

In Bristol, a town straddling the Virginia-Tennessee state line, the Birthplace of Country Music Museum (scheduled to open in August 2014) will tell the story of how the Victor Talking Machine Co. set up a portable recording studio to capture performances of traditional Appalachian music. Every September, more than 50,000 music lovers descend on Bristol to enjoy the annual Rhythm & Roots Reunion country-music festival.

Starting the day with homemade doughnuts, brownies and fist-size cinnamon buns is a local tradition at Bristol’s Blackbird Bakery. Served with a mug of micro-roasted coffee, it’s a calorie-laden way to begin the day. Another local favourite is lunch at Burger Bar, the spot where some believe country-music legend Hank Williams was last seen alive when he got out of his car to stretch his legs on New Year’s Eve in 1952. All of the restaurant’s burger platters are named after his songs.

After a week in Virginia, we left the hills behind, heading further south toward the wide-open landscape of the northwest corner of Alabama. During the 1960s and ’70s, a sound like no other was being steeped in and around the city of Muscle Shoals.

The Shoals is known for a rhythm section nicknamed The Swampers who produced a funky sound, providing an irresistible groove to back up a who’s-who of A-list talent, from Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett to Etta James and Bob Seger.

Small independent recording studios sprung up; most prominent were FAME Recording Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound. For a few golden years, the Shoals was *the* place to record.

Musicians like The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and dozens of others flocked to the area, a story told at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame and on tours at FAME, still a working studio.

It’s a long day’s drive from the Shoals south to Louisiana’s Gulf Coast; at the halfway point on our route we had been on the go for three weeks, following the sunshine and warm temperatures. The freedom of travelling by RV means we can break up the drive with a short nap to recharge, make lunch with shrimp fresh from the docks or take spontaneous detours. Most nights we’ve been staying at campgrounds—preferring state parks that have an emphasis on the natural surroundings with hiking trails, interpretive centres and ranger-led programs. When we need to be close to town, the occasional Walmart parking lot is a handy option and popular with other RV travellers; the retail giant welcomes RVs to stay for free at most of its well-lit and security-patrolled locations, which can be found online. Campgrounds can be like an open-air living room—and they’re a great way to meet travellers from around the nation and the world.

**A** **NOTHER STYLE OF AMERICAN MUSIC** we sought out was born in the prairie and bayou of Louisiana’s Cajun country, a region known as Acadiana. Music was central to the Cajun’s self-understanding; put an accordion, fiddle, bass and drums in the same room and the combination bursts into song, inciting hours of two-stepping and waltzing.

We find this in every small Louisiana town and at every local dance hall. In music-rich Lafayette, at the “living history” ▷

**AD**

**AD**



Don't forget to pack a little peace of mind. CAA offers RV membership coverage with the same great benefits you've come to rely on. If you get a flat tire, need a battery boost or even run out of gas, CAA can get you back on the road in no time. For details, call 1-877-854-5222 or go to [caasco.com/rv](http://caasco.com/rv).

museum of Vermilionville, local powerhouse bands like Goldman Thibodeaux and the Lawtell Playboys blow through a Sunday afternoon of Creole, Cajun and Zydeco music to the delight of listeners and dancers.

This musical bond is on display at the rustic Fred's Lounge in Mamou, where drinks start flowing and feet start moving at 9 a.m. on Saturday mornings. It happens every night at Prejean's

## BY LATE NOVEMBER, WE'VE TRAVELLED 9,000 KILOMETRES, BEGINNING WITH OLD-TIME AND BLUEGRASS, DABBLING IN SOUL, CROSSING INTO CAJUN AND ZYDECO AND FINISHING WITH THE BLUES.

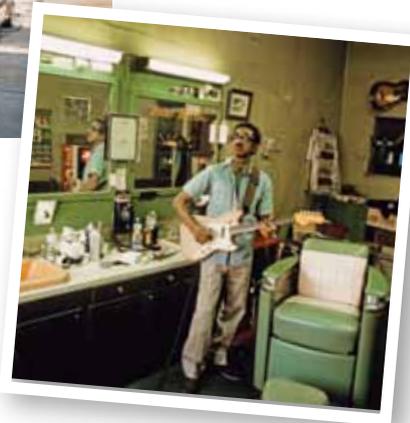
and at Randol's in Lafayette as the wooden dance floor fills to capacity with two-stepping couples of all ages (some have been coming twice weekly for decades). And it's on display every Saturday night at Eunice's restored Liberty Center for the Performing Arts when they switch on the microphones for the weekly *Rendez-vous des Cajuns* live radio broadcast and dance.

After a week exploring Acadiana, the lure of the blues-rich Mississippi Delta pulls us northward. Driving a larger vehicle can be tiring, especially in windy conditions and on the interstates

where there is more transport traffic. To make things easier, we divide the trip into smaller chunks of time and distance, take regular breaks and choose alternate routes along smaller highways whenever we can.



**SOUNDS OF THE SOUTH** Ground Zero Blues Club; blues musician Wade Walton was known for playing in his barbershop



**IN THE DELTA**, the fertile alluvial plain hemmed in by the Mississippi and the Yazoo rivers, the story of the blues is told a thousand different ways. And what a dramatic introduction—crossing the bridge north of Yazoo City and seeing the wide Delta farmland spread out before us, as Paul Simon sang “shining like a National guitar.”

We happily bask for hours at the B.B. King Museum in his hometown of Indianola, where the multimedia displays tell the story of cotton plantations, the blues and subsistence living.

Mississippi's Delta also tempts with its famous barbecue. At Ubon's at the edge of Yazoo City, fall-off-the-bone ribs are just one item on an indulgent menu. An hour north, at Indianola (across the street from the B.B. King Museum), The Blue Biscuit serves an incredible slow-roasted pulled-pork sandwich, alongside an order of live blues.

The highways and towns of the Delta are filled with homespun ways of keeping the blues tradition alive, like the Highway 61 Blues Museum in Leland, Po' Monkey's cotton-field juke joint near Cleveland and the rustic Blue Front Café juke joint in Bentonia. These and almost 200 other spots of blues significance are scattered across the state as part of the official Mississippi Blues Trail. Interpretive markers pinpoint the spots where a new kind of music radiated out from the South, creating the foundation for rhythm and blues, soul, rock 'n' roll and jazz.

In Clarksdale, a mecca for blues enthusiasts at the intersection of Highways 49 and 61, the Delta Blues Museum shows how the “down South blues” were born from an isolated geographical setting at just the right moment in time, producing a unique style of blues deeply rooted in the early African-American experience of hard work and hard living.

The Delta blues are found at Clarksdale's many music venues, including the roomy Ground Zero, co-owned by Morgan Freeman, and Red's, the real-deal juke joint just around the corner.

By late November, we've travelled 9,000 kilometres, beginning with old-time and bluegrass, dabbling in soul, crossing into Cajun and Zydeco and finishing with the blues. Heading back home we're invigorated, educated and desiring more. Luckily, all it takes is popping a CD into the stereo and we're transported back to the roots of American music. **CAA**

**AD**

**AD**