

Road trip report - Part One
From Keith M. at Cooter Brown Emporium
February 5, 2011

Well, the big day (Tuesday, Feb. 1) finally arrived, and Doug B. and I headed out on our 2nd annual roadtrip to the Mississippi delta. Ultimate destination was to be Memphis and the International Blues Challenge which was to start on Thursday. The IBC is an annual competition and is the largest gathering of blues performers in the world.

We had invited a number of people to join us for this adventure, but all of them had really good excuses for declining our invitation. Jailhouse Bobby, for example, told us that he was just too upset about the political upheaval in Egypt to leave home at this time. Jimmy C. told me he would love to go, but he was afraid my van would not hold up for this long trip. Raymond, another longtime and dear friend, told me he lost my telephone number and was unable to get back with me in time. So....undeterred.... Doug and I headed off into the unknown like teenagers on their first beach trip to Panama City. Oh yeah, we almost picked up a hitchhiker in Mississippi, but she also declined our offer.

We had decided that we would spend Tuesday nite in Tuscaloosa Al, but instead of taking Mapquest's suggested route along the interstates, we elected to take the backroads from Blairsville thru Cartersville, Cedartown, Anniston and many small towns off the major thoroughfares.

As you ramble along you see lots of things of interest, but I decided that I would not bore you with little details unless either sex or violence was involved. I felt that I should concentrate only on those things that had made a big impression upon us.

Near Cartersville we came upon a number of homemade signs advertising "old car tour" and what appeared to be a junkyard of antique cars visible from the highway. Naturally, we did not hesitate to pull off and investigate.

There we found Dean Lewis the owner and 'curator' of this antique car junkyard. He explained that this was a guided tour, \$20 per person per hour. Unfortunately, Doug did not understand and he got really excited until he realized, that Dean meant that we had to pay to take the tour, instead of us getting paid.

Dean told us that he had 34 acres and over 4000 old cars in various stages of deterioration, all for sale, and that we could even pack a lunch and do a self-guided tour if we preferred. Doug and I decided to pass, but we did manage a free 15 minute walk thru of a small portion of the junkyard, and saw lots of old cars. We knew some of these cars were really old, because the trees growing thru the broken windshields had to be at least 30 years old.

Inside one building Dean pointed out a beautiful Lincoln sedan, and told us that this beauty was Elvis Presley's last car, and it was the prize of his collection....yet he would consider selling it for the right price. Doug was a little suspicious, because Elvis died before this car was made.....but, anyway, I already have two old Lincolns so, again, we passed.

Dean was a very friendly fellow, and took an immediate liking to Doug and I. He told us, if we had time, he would show us something like we had never seen before. Of course we quickly accepted his offer, and spent the next hour touring Dean's private estate a few miles away.

There Dean gave us a free tour of a number of buildings and structures, which he had designed and then built by hand. Most of these objects and places were covered with stained concrete, most with free flowing, with abstract lines. Many of these structures contained what he called "subliminal" images of animals, designs and even one of Jesus. He would ask us if we could see the images, but he stopped doing that after I mistakenly guessed that the Jesus image was the late Janis Joplin.

There were concrete tunnels, caves, a concrete ark, a 30 foot waterfall with secret sleeping quarters near the waterfall pool, and numerous other creations. We were looking at years of hard work, the products of a creative...perhaps a little twisted... mind, and many thousands of dollars invested.

Due to the time we had spent with Dean, we opted to postpone our trip to the cowboy museum in Cartersville (which I understand rivals any cowboy museum in Texas), and bypass the science museum also in Cartersville, and finally to skip the Silver Comet Trail museum in nearby Cedartown. We planned to return perhaps on a day-trip to tour these places.

Doug and I ate lunch at Knights in Cartersville - www.knights1889.com a really beautiful building downtown that started out in 1889 as a hardware store. We mused as to whether the original owners of the hardware business would really approve of their fantastic building emerging 125 years later as a bar with free-flowing alcohol, and late nite loud music and dancing. The old photos of the stern-looking original owners suggested that they might have some issues with suchprogress.

In the afternoon, we made our way thru rain and wind to Tuscaloosa, the home of the University of Alabama, and where the late Coach Bear Bryant is still revered. There are buildings, a street, and many things named after him throughout the city, including a bar simply known as Houndstooth, which is an obvious reference to the houndstooth hat the Coach always wore during football games. The magnificent frat houses, the President's Mansion and other University structures were pretty impressive.

The nitelife was really subdued on this Tuesday nite, perhaps because it was Tuesday, cold and raining, but we also were told that nitelife was down overall because so many college students chose to socialize via the internet, facebook, twitter, etc from their dorm rooms instead of frequenting the bars downtown. I didn't know what to think about that. Still don't.

But one place was packed, and that was the original site where Dreamland BBQ started in 1958 by Big Daddy Bishop www.dreamlandbbq.com. Big Daddy and his wife Miss Lilly are both gone now, but their story ... and their bbq...is really impressive. Legend holds that Big Daddy-- who was a brick mason- prayed to God to give him direction as to quitting his masonry business, and either opening a BBQ restaurant or a mortuary. One nite soon thereafter, he had a dream, and he dreamed that he owned a highly successful BBQ business. He followed that dream, quit his masonry job, and opened Dreamland BBQ. Now there are multiple locations in the Tuscaloosa, Mobile, Birmingham, Huntsville and Atlanta areas and the business is being franchised throughout the Southeast.

Doug and I enjoyed great ribs that nite in the place where it all started, and agreed with the business's slogan, "Ain't nothing like it, nowhere".

In the next report, I'll tell you what happened on the second day of our journey, including the visit to Indianola, Ms (home of BB King), the birthplace of Kermit the Frog, hot tamales at the Whitefront café, gambling on the Mississippi, our scary visit to Reds Blues club and the wonderful music on Wednesday nite at the Ground Zero Blues club in Clarksdale.

ON A PERSONAL NOTE: Before retiring for a good nite's sleep, I decided to call Marimar, my wife, and tell her where I was and what I was doing. I had postponed telling her about this trip until I was safely in another state. She advised against any future contact of any kind and hung up.

Stay tuned.

Keith

Road trip - Part Two

Doug and I shoved off from Tuscaloosa around 8:30 Wednesday morning headed for Mississippi delta country. Our first detour off of highway 82 west was to swing thru Starksville Ms, the home of Mississippi State University, but honestly we never saw any evidence of a University in Starksville. Doug and I decided it must be some scam to rip off fed funds. I did eat Duck Butter at a downtown café, but did not buy any to bring home (Yuck). Downtown we saw more lawyer offices per capita than any other place I have ever been to. We decided never to stop in Starkville again.

We made tracks pretty good on Hwy 82 until we hit Indianola, Ms, the home of B B King. We toured the BB King museum which not only tells all about BB, but it also depicts a lot about the culture of that area for much of the 20th century. It is a great museum, and you'll need around 2 hours to take it all in. www.bbkingmuseum.org

BB's real name was Riley King, but after he went to Memphis, he was known as little blues boy, then blues boy, then bb. He initially played both gospel and blues music. But when he played gospel, the crowd would just holler "amen" and "hallelujah", but when he played the blues, they would give him money. That explains why he never made it big in the gospel music business.

What prompted him to run off to Memphis was when he wrecked his employer's tractor. He skipped town, and went to Memphis in order to avoid the farmer's wrath. The rest is history. Once a year BB still returns to Club Ebony near the museum as part of the BB King Homecoming Festival sponsored by the Indianola chamber of commerce.

If you ever wish to tour the delta blues area, I would recommend getting a copy of the official map of the Mississippi blues trail. It tells you about important people and places connected to blues music, and gives you a map and directions to where markers are located that gives more specific information about what or who is associated with that particular place.

We are now on a part of the blues trail, and stop next in Dunleith Ms, the home of one of my favorite bluesmen, Jimmy Reed who is famous for "Big Boss Man (can't you hear me when I call)", "Bright Lights, Big City", "Baby, you don't have to go" and many more.

Just down the road we toured the Highway 61 Blues museum in Leland Ms which probably has as much blues history associated with this little town as any other place its size in the delta. www.highway61blues.com/highway_61_blues_museum.htm In 1908 Leland was called the "Hellhole of the Delta" because of so much gambling, saloons, and wild revelry. It is also the home of Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, and hence, the birthplace of Kermit the frog. It is the home of a Congressional Medal of Honor winner (Korean war). Also, a part of the movie "Brother, O where art thou?" starring George Clooney was filmed there a few years ago, and its history goes on, and on and on. Wonderful murals are all over many of the exterior walls of the historic buildings downtown. This is the place I want to go back to, first chance.

Doug and I have learned that the most interesting places to visit are those you stumble upon, not the museums or other places listed in the tourist brochures. This happened to us in the little town of Rosedale, very close to the Mississippi River. As we headed thru the town on highway 1 north, I spotted a very small, very old, shack sitting on the side of the road. It had a painted white front, and a sign that...of all things....said "White front Café" and a sign for tamales. I

passed it by at first, but when I asked Doug, “Exactly, what is a tamale?” he indicated he didn’t really know either. So we turned around and returned to the White Front café.

Parked outside was an old bicycle that looked as though it had collided with a garbage truck; it was decorated with all things shiny. We spooked....no pun intended...the three black ladies working inside when they saw Doug and I walk thru the door. Soon, we were chomping down on great tamales (about 50cents each) and enjoying delightful conversation with these ladies (who were processing hundreds of tamales). I asked one of the ladies, “I thought tamales was a Mexican food” She replied, “Yes, it may have come out of Mexico way back but,as you can see.....we are not Mexicans”.....and we all laughed. If you want to see photos of this place, I just now happened to find a internet page talking about the Whitefront Café
www.roadfood.com/Restaurant/Reviews/1371white-front-caf

Another interesting thing I learned from my sometimes friend, Mose Cotton about tamales and the delta. In 1928 Robert Johnson, one of the most famous bluesmen of all time, wrote a blues delta song entitled “Hot Tamales” about “a gal, she’s long and tall, sleeps in the kitchen with her feet in the hall..... got tamales for sale, red hot, two for a nickel, and four for a dime..... Tamales have been a part of the delta for a long time.

Rosedale was also mentioned in a version of another Robert Johnson classic, “Crossroads” by the hit group Cream.....”Going down to Rosedale....” Lots of British bands were inspired and based their career on old blues songs.

Somewhere between Greenville Ms and Helena Ark we saw signs for casinos, and followed those signs to their logical conclusion.....two riverboats anchored side by side and folks giving their money away. These were not the fancy casinos at Tunica, and not the Isle of Capri near Helena. These casinos were for the desperate. The parking lots...perhaps 100 cars in each lot...were full of old, worn cars and trucks. No sport cars, or Mercedes or BMWs here. Inside Doug and I found the place to be choking with cigarette smoke, and the racial composition was about 90 percent black and a few whites. There was a look of despair, sadness on EVERY face I saw inside these two places.

I did sit down at a blackjack table with a live dealer...I was the only player, and won about \$50 in ten minutes, so I quit, and went to the cashier cage to redeem my chips. I stood in line 20 minutes behind others trying to arrange credit with the casino. I was the only person I saw cashing in chips. Doug and I left, feeling sorry for these people.

For the first time, we crossed the Mississippi River. It was around dusk, but we were bound and determined to at least ride thru historic Helena Arkansas before we backtracked to Clarksdale for the nite. There were magnificent buildings lining both sides of historic downtown...but the

vast majority of these were empty. You could not help but ask, “Where are all of the people?” and the simple truth is that most are long-dead, and many of the rest moved away decades ago.

I would love to have one of these old, classic, colorful buildings to develop into a bar, a restaurant, a club, and a few have been restored and are being used. But, it is painfully obvious that without people, these buildings represent little more than what one writer called “pleasing decay”. I guess like looking at the beautiful face of a ninety year old man or woman who have lived a full, long and happy life.

Helena is associated with King Biscuit radio, and once a year has a King Biscuit festival. I understand in the early days, King Biscuit radio was as important to the blues as Grand Ole Opry was to country music. For some reason, within the last few years, the festival was forced to change its name to the Arkansas Arts and Blues festival.

Enough for now. I’ll have to wait until later to tell you about Red’s Blues club, and The Ground Zero club in Clarksdale, all of which took up the rest of our Wednesday adventures.

Keith

Road trip - Part Three

After leaving Helena, we scoot back to Clarksdale to enjoy a nite of great blues music at the Ground Zero Blues club. We first check in at our El Patel Motel, and then head on over. We arrive at 7 pm, but learn that the music doesn’t start until 8 pm. I tell Doug, that there is a historic blues club, called Reds, nearby, and maybe we can catch a beer there and then return in time for the music at the Ground Zero. Doug, who is the most agreeable traveling companion I have ever had, simply replied, “Cool, man!”

We find the club, but it looks like it has been condemned and is falling in. Yet, there are a couple of cars parked out front, so Doug and I carefully made our way to what appeared to be an entrance door. I pushed on the door which was unlocked, and suddenly came face to face with four grown....I said.....grown... black men. They were sitting in the middle of the room around a table decorated with a half-full fifth of Evans Williams. I managed to say a rather weak, “How Ya’ll”.

Next thing I know we are sitting with these guys, one of whom is Red, and listening to and telling more BS than you will ever hear at a VFW. Technically the club was closed this particular night, and it was just Red and three of his friends...relaxing...and a more hospitable group I have never encountered. We laughed, talked, and drank for about an hour in this real

live juke joint, with these black men of the delta. I remember four things in particular that were said by Red or his friends:

1. "Don't worry, I run this place, and nothing is gonna happen to ya while I'm around". (?? That was real reassuring!)
2. Ya'll brought some of that good ole Georgia shine wif ya, didn't ya?"
3. "I once had Pinetop Perkins play the piano against Jerry Lee Lewis, and Pinetop smoked ole Jerry Lee. I had four cameras filming, and none of them could keep up with Pinetop's fingers as he hit up on that ole piano".
4. Red said that business was a little slow, but that he had the river to his back (sunflower river) and the graveyard to his front (large cemetery in front of Red's), and that he had no choice but to make it.

We finally get out of Red's after promising him faithfully that we would be back on Friday nite to hear T-Model Ford, a legendary bluesman, now in his 90's, who will be performing in this old juke joint. If you are internet savvy, you can find lots of info on T-model Ford, the bluesman, and also there are videos of blues being performed at Red's, just look up Red's blues club Clarksdale to pull up a number of internet and youtube entries.

We got back to Ground Zero about the time the band started. www.groundzerobluesclub.com The band was Sean Apple and the All Night Long Blues Band (you can find them on the internet). This band was great, especially the big harmonica player who couldn't stop dancing. They also brought up a lot of other guest performers, including Josh Razorblade Stewart, and a lady singer, queen of something, and a lot of other people, including three sisters, age 8, 11 and 13 who sang and played instruments and brought the house down.

We saw the co-owner of the Ground Zero, a man called Luckett who co-owns the club with black actor Morgan Freeman. We left around 1 a.m. and retired for the nite.

Thursday morning, we are up bright and early and take off for Little Rock, Arkansas. I had purchased a 4ft by 8ft Pabst sign on ebay, and needed to pick it up in Alexander, a little place outside Little Rock. We started out cross-country with the intention of picking up interstate 40 near Brinkley, Arkansas.

Between Helena and Brinkley, we encountered duck and goose hunting country. Lots of flat grain fields, flooded fields and flooded woodlands, and thousands of what I think were Canadian geese flying around and sitting on the ground. We didn't see any hunters, and we learn later that the hunting season had just ended the last of January.

We stop in to drink coffee (it is a cold and dreary day) in Brinkley at Gene's BBQ and Family restaurant. There we discover two things: First, the ivory-billed Woodpecker and Second, the nice waitress from Romania.

It appears that there was a magnificent bird that inhabited the big woods of Arkansas for ions of years, until the bird became extinct as a result of logging operations, sometime during the first part of the 20th century. Then, in 2004, after 60 years, someone saw the ivory-billed woodpecker near a section of virgin woods outside of Brinkley. The search was on by naturalists from around the world.

A bird once thought extinct, actually lives! This restaurant, was the meeting place for a lot of these scientists, and Gene has decorated its walls with artist's drawings of this splendid bird. (You can also order an "ivory-billed cheeseburger...it's on the menu). There have been a number of videos and photos taken, but yet no absolute proof that the bird still lives. Recently, someone offered \$50,000 to anyone who could actually prove that the bird lives on.

www.ibwo.org

Later, Doug told me that he thought he saw one of these birds smushed into the grill of a freightliner we met on the highway, but I think he was kidding.

Our waitress was a lovely young lady with a strange accent. We inquired, and it turns out she is from Romania, and was working on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean when she met a handsome young man from Brinkley. You know the rest of the story.

We boogie on to Little Rock, retrieve this wonderful sign that will be displayed over my juke joint at Cooters, and we head back east on I-40 to Memphis. The IBC is in full swing, and we plan to be on Beal St this night.

To be continued.

Keith

Road trip - Part Four (Last one)

We arrived on Beale Street Memphis Tn around 6:30 on Thursday nite. It is bitterly cold and the crowd is about half what it was last year.....weather conditions in Chicago and the Northeast, as well as in Dallas and other places, prohibit air travel and deny many blues people the opportunity to be in Memphis on this nite. This is the first nite of judged performances; the quarterfinals, and the music had already started flowing around 4:30. Yet, later, we learn that there are performers and bands here from 40 states and 14 foreign countries.

We buy our \$10 bracelet which will get us into 18 different venues on Beale street where the blues are being performed. Every group is allowed 25 minutes to perform, with 10 minutes for

the next group to set up. We are a little surprised when we step inside the first couple of clubs, which were packed. Everyone was inside, leaving the cold streets a little sparse, whereas, last year, when the weather was great, the street and sidewalks were rather crowded.

We quickly find our way down to the New Daisey theater and settle back with cold beers to enjoy great music. We saw groups from New Orleans, Gainesville Fl, Wichita Ks, a group from Canada, and other places (I forget). After a couple of hours we strolled up and down Beale dropping in and out of a number of clubs. I paid tribute briefly to Peoples Pool Hall, the place full of century old Brunswick tables that I told you about in last year's roadtrip report. I am glad to say it is still open, although few people were shooting pool.

Eventually we drop into the old Daisey theater for about an hour. By now, the competition is over for the evening, and the music in all the venues is simply performers jamming. We did not care for one group in the old Daisey, so we went back across the street to the new Daisey....and it was Here that they had it going on. We watched literally a river of unrehearsed, impromptu performers who could not have put on a better blues show if they had been performing for national television.

Finally, around 2 in the morning, Doug and I feel that it was time to depart the party. Last year we had stayed up until almost 4.....hmmmmmm.

We depart Memphis on Friday morning, headed for home. We think our adventure is about over, just a long drive ahead. We do manage to spot Abe's Diner which we discovered last year, in Corinth Ms, and we stop for coffee and a snack. Abe, his wife and son were there, in one of the most unique diners I have ever seen. There was a special calendar on the wall, and the date March 11, 2024 was circled in red. Of course, I had to ask Abe the significance of that date. He told me, that's the date he and his wife will retire, after 50 years owning and operating the diner. Doug and I wished them well, and congratulated them on 37 years they had already put in.

What we did not know, was that there was another huge surprise for us, waiting just down the road, in Cherokee Al, just across the Mississippi line.

Doug and I are cruising along the highway, talking about everyone we know, psychics, religion, and anything else that comes to mind, and my attention is snared by a government-looking sign posted on the shoulder of the highway, declaring, "Coon Dog Cemetery, Freedom Hills wildlife management area". I go about a mile before I pull over and tell Doug what I had seen. After a split second of consideration, we turned around and started following signs to the Coon Dog Cemetery. Never mind that we are 8 hours away from home.

We drove forever and ever until we were way up in the north Alabama hills, and just about to turn around when we saw a road, and a sign, saying “Coon Dog Cemetery road”. Down this road a couple of miles, we arrived at our destination.

Now the first impulse was to laugh, and to think how silly this is, a cemetery for coondogs. Before our solitary tour was over, we both had lumps in our throat, and were deeply touched by what we had seen and read.

Key Underwood started this cemetery in 1937, burying a champion coon dog, named Troop. Troop was followed over the last 75 years or so by over 180 dogs, coming from all over the United States, many champions, all loved. The most recent dog was buried only a couple of weeks ago, the red clay still fresh. There was a brick on top of the clay, wrapped in paper and we were able to read part of the writing on the paper. It read, in part, “we love you and we will miss you. I promise to return soon with your headstone”.

Many of the gravesites had either a slab, a headstone, or both, and many had been hand-crafted out of wood, stone or metal. Most gave the name of the dog, many gave their birthyear and year of death, and some contained a list of championships the dog had won. Some had epitaphs, all had plastic flowers adorning the gravesite.

There were black and tans, redbones and walkers, some had lived a long life (I think one lived to be 18) . One had been struck by a car as it chased a coon across a highway. Another had single-handedly treed over 200 coons in 6 short years. There was a black and tan pair, one named Nig and the other Nancy. There was a Rebel, a Cracker Jack, a Squealer, a red gal, a little gal, a Hank, one name Tree, Beau, Cindi, Gypsy, Preacher, Ranger and on and on.

One epitaph read, “As good as the Best, better than the rest”. Another read, Not the best Coondog, but the best I ever had”. Another epitaph simply said, “My best friend”. And another, “Always faithful”.

This was a graveyard full of love, respect, loyalty, faithfulness, strong bonds between men and their dogs. It was not silly or juvenile. It was sacred ground. Doug and I are both animal lovers, and in fact my dog Merle is mostly redbone hound rescued from a shelter. I don't know if there is a coondog heaven or not, but I felt privileged to walk among the fine coonhounds that were buried in this place. www.coondogcemetery.com

On the way out we met Johnny Durham, 85 years young, who knew Key Underwood. A long time ago, Johnny sold possum skins to Key for 25 cents per. Among other things, he told us about his great grandfather's return from the Civil War, and the practical joke he played on his family about buried gold. With a twinkle in his eye and the friendliest smile I ever saw, he

thanked us for stopping and talking to him. Believe me, the pleasure was all ours. I told him we would see him again.....and I hope we do.

One last thing worthy of mention is the M and M Soul Food restaurant in Courtland Al. The best soul food I have ever eaten. As we travel, we occasionally detour thru an old town, downtown sections, to see what we can see, especially around mealtime.....which for us...is anytime. This we did Friday around noon, and while the town's cotton history was very interesting, the food at the M and M overwhelmed the history lesson. I had ribs, collard greens, black eyed peas and sweet potato pie with pecans, fried corn bread and a slice of strawberry cake.....all homemade. I told the waitress when I was thru eating, that she had exactly 1 minute to release my Mama who apparently was being held in the back as a kitchen slave.

(They had a homemade WHITE sauce for the ribs.....not flour-based like our white gravy.....and I got the recipe, very good).

And so ends another fine road trip with my buddy Doug - memories to last a lifetime. Thanks to all of you readers for your kind comments, and for letting me share these experiences with you.

Keith Murphy
Cooter Brown Emporium, Blairsville, Ga.

On a personal note: I finally heard from Marimar Friday nite and we agreed to hold peace talks on Saturday. She finally conceded that there was nothing wrong with the trip; her problem was that I had lied about going on the trip. I conceded that a delay in telling the truth can sometimes come close to being a lie. We both apologized to each other, ate a T-bone steak and the cold war was over. She even said she might go with me on my next road trip. (Yeah.....Right...like I'm gonna let that happen!)
