

# In Search of the Mississippi Blues Trail

by Mike Livermore

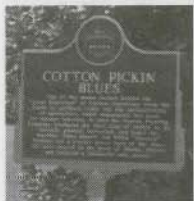
After reading a story in the *Big City Rhythm & Blues* June/July issue, I was intrigued with the Blues Trail Markers that were described in the article. So with a week of vacation in early August, my wife Nanci and I went south to check it out and visit with the folks in the Delta. We have been to Mississippi in the past, but mostly just passing through or stopping for the night while going to the King Biscuit Festival or going for a drive from Memphis while attending the IBC. The people we have encountered in the South have always been pleasant and genuine. It doesn't need to be said but I will say it anyway. It doesn't matter whether you are white or black. They are quite a bit relaxed compared to people up north, in my opinion. After a while visiting there I must admit that maybe they are on to something. This, as you will read, was a history lesson. This was a small history lesson in the blues and the people who lived and encouraged this artform.



We arrived at Clarksdale Mississippi without any trouble. We stayed a few nights at the Shack Up Inn on Highway 49/61 in an old sharecropper's shack on Hopson's Plantation.

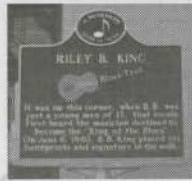
One room with a bed and a very small bathroom. No TV or phone, wood floors with gaps in them, tin roof, a shower with vice grip knobs, and a small fridge with no room for anything to put in the freezer due to its being frosted over.

But this is where the journey of the blues markers begins. The first marker that we



encountered was titled Cotton Pickin' Blues. May 9, 2008 Pinetop Perkins was on hand at Hopson for the dedication of the marker "Cotton Pickin' Blues," which acknowledges the role of cotton production in the blues. Hopson was the first place where a crop of cotton was planted and harvested using only mechanized implements, and one of the tractor drivers during this time was none other than Pinetop Perkins.

We then drove over to Indianola to go see the B.B. King Museum that has



been open for less than a year. For a fee of ten dollars we spent three hours there and could have spent at least another hour or so but we had other places to get to. What a cool Museum they built. Lots of B.B. King's artifacts and videos of his life. This is a must see if you get to Mississippi to feel and see the blues.

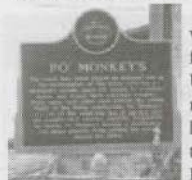
Then off to Boyle. The marker commemorates the original lyrics of famed blues artist Charley Patton's "Peavine Blues" which describes the railway branch of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad which ran south from Dockery Plantation to Boyle. A common theme of blues songs was riding on the railroad, which was a metaphor for travel and escape.

On down the road we go to Shaw Mississippi to find the marker of the great blues singer and player David "Honeyboy" Edwards. Honeyboy has played at our Blues Festival four times beginning in 1988. He is said to be one of the last links to Robert Johnson. He has a career playing blues that goes back seventy years. And he still is entertaining us with his guitar, and singing the music we enjoy listening to. With his music, it seems that I can feel where the music came from, and I know it will keep going.

We wanted more information so we went to the Cleveland Tourism Council in Cleveland Mississippi. We met a wonderful woman there who told us we needed to go over to the Delta State University and talk to the folks over there. As it turned out, they were recently donated the collection of blues masks from Sharon McConnell. Sharon is an artist who is blind and sculpts masks of living blues artists. The



collection includes masks of Honeyboy Edwards, Hubert Sumlin, Pinetop Perkins, Robert Lockwood, R.L. Burnside, Bo Diddley and Jessie Mae Hemphill (who was featured on the 2009 t-shirt for this year's fest). There are currently 60 masks on the wall.



When we were talking to the folks at the University, the mask that she was holding up was of the proprietor of Po Monkeys himself. We were told that if we wanted to go to a true Juke Joint in the Delta we needed to go to Po Monkeys. So with verbal

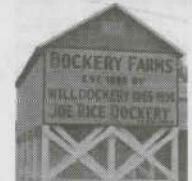


instructions we decided to go to the joint on Thursday, which was the only time it was open currently. We had a good time visiting with the local folks, and Po Monkey himself was very nice. It did take us a couple of tries to find the place, but you can find it with some practice on back roads!

Then it was off to Rosedale to find the marker associated with Robert Johnson. The marker reads:

"Rosedale was immortalized in Robert Johnson's 1937 recording 'Traveling Riverside Blues.' In 1968 Eric Clapton's group Cream incorporated the verse 'goin' down to Rosedale' into their version of Johnson's 'Cross Road Blues.' Although Johnson's original 1936 version of this song did not mention Rosedale, the town has since become associated with the legend of a bluesman selling his soul to the devil at the crossroads."

Now, I must tell you my favorite and most special place that we found was Dockery Farms in Cleveland, Mississippi. It is said by many a person including the great B.B. King that if there was a place to say that the blues was started somewhere, it is here. I walked around the grounds, read the literature



beforehand and it felt like something was, and still is, in the air. Maybe there is still a spirit here, a mystique. Charley Patton called it home, Howlin' Wolf was here as was Willie Brown, Tommy Johnson, Eddie "Son" House, David "Honeyboy" Edwards, and Robert Johnson himself. It was really something to think of all the great blues players that were here at one time.

We returned to Clarksdale again and we were pleasantly surprised to be there for the dedication ceremony honoring the newest blues marker for Sam Cooke, who was born in Clarksdale. Get the connection here. The Delta, man, that's where much of it started, and it is still going strong to this day.

And if this wasn't enough for two blues lovers, there was the 22nd annual Sunflower River Blues & Gospel Festival going on right in Clarksdale where we were staying.

Now there are plenty more of the Blues trail markers to see and discover but we wanted to share a few with people who might be interested in some of the history of the Blues.

As we traveled Mississippi to see these, I stood at the markers and looked around at how I got there. I must say that in most of these places there wasn't much there. I saw lots of cotton fields and very small houses with old gravel roads. I thought of how someone like Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf and many of the others that came from around here could go to a place like Chicago and share their music. Wow, we are fortunate that somehow they made that journey and shared their music with the world.

Thank you, *Big City Rhythm & Blues Magazine* for turning us on to the Mississippi Blues Trail Markers. They gave us education, enjoyment and a great time. I would recommend this adventure to anyone. If you happen to be going down to the IBC in Memphis this January, take a short drive to Mississippi and check out the markers. To get more information on the Mississippi Blues Trail go to [www.msbluestrail.org](http://www.msbluestrail.org).

