

The Mississippi Blues Trail - Gulf Coast

The Mississippi Blues Trail is dedicated to preserving the state's musical heritage. Formed in 2003 by the Mississippi Blues Commission, the trail features historical markers and interpretive sites throughout Mississippi. Here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast there are several historical markers:

<u>Biloxi Blues</u> – Corner Main & Murray Street, Biloxi

The Mississippi Coast, long a destination for pleasure seekers, tourists, and gamblers, as well as maritime workers and armed services personnel, developed a flourishing nightlife during the segregation era. While most venues were reserved for whites, this stretch of Main Street catered to the African American trade, and especially during the boom years during and after World War II, dozens of clubs and cafes here rocked to the sounds of blues, jazz, and rhythm & blues. Biloxi was strutting to the rhythms of cakewalk dances, vaudeville and minstrel show music, dance orchestras, and ragtime pianists by the late 1800s, before blues and jazz had fully emerged. Biloxi's musical culture was particularly influenced by and intertwined with that of New Orleans, and Crescent City jazz pioneers Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941) and Bill Johnson (c. 1874-1972) lived in Biloxi in the early 1900s before moving on to California, Chicago, and other distant locales. Morton's godmother, reputed to be a voodoo practitioner in New Orleans, had a home in Biloxi. In 1907-08, Morton frequented a Reynoir Street gambling den called the Flat Top, where he used his skills as a pianist, pool player, and card shark to hustle customers, particularly workers who flocked to town from nearby turpentine camps to engage in a game called "Georgia skin." At the Flat Top, Morton recalled, "... Nothin' but the blues were played ... the real lowdown blues, honky tonk blues."

Morton courted a Biloxi woman, Bessie Johnson, whose brothers Bill, Robert, and Ollie ("Dink") were musicians. The Johnsons lived on Delauney Street and later on Croesus Street, just a few blocks west of this site. Bill Johnson's touring unit, the Creole Band, introduced New Orleans ragtime, jazz, and blues to audiences across the country. Bessie later adopted the show business moniker of Anita Gonzales. Other early Biloxi musicians included minstrel show performers Romie and Lamar "Buck" Nelson; drummer Jimmy Bertrand, who recorded with many blues and jazz artists in Chicago; and William Tuncel's Big Four String Band.

In the 1940s, as business on Main Street prospered, clubs featured both traveling acts and local bands, as well as jukeboxes and slot machines. Airmen from Keesler Field participated both as audience members and musicians; Paul Gayten, a noted blues and R&B recording artist, directed the black USO band during World War II, and Billy "The Kid" Emerson, who recorded for the legendary Sun label, served at Keesler in the 1950s. Both Gayten and Emerson got married in Biloxi. Blues/R&B producer-songwriter Sax Kari once operated a record store on the street, and rock 'n' roll star Bo Diddley's brother, Rev. Kenneth Haynes, came to Biloxi to pastor at the Main Street Baptist Church. Local musicians active in later years included Charles Fairley, Cozy Corley, Skin Williams, and bands such as the Kings of Soul, Sounds of Soul, and Carl Gates and the Decks. After a period of decline, local entertainment perked up again in the 1990s as casinos and the Gulf Coast Blues and Heritage Festival brought a new wave of blues and southern soul stars to Biloxi.

• Broadcasting the Blues - 10211 Southpark Drive, Gulfport

Blues radio took off in the post-World War II era with the arrival of rhythm & blues programming. A new era for blues radio began in 2000 when Rip Daniels, a Gulfport native, launched the American Blues Network (ABN) at this site. Using satellite and Internet technology, ABN provided a mix of modern and vintage blues to listeners around the world. Radio emerged as the primary medium for the dissemination of music, advertisements, and news to the African American community during the 1940s and '50s. In Mississippi, the earliest radio stations to broadcast black music, usually in the form of local groups singing gospel or traditional harmonies live in the studios, included WQBC in Vicksburg, WGRM in Greenwood, and WJPC in Greenville. In the 1940s, Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2 (Rice Miller) brought the blues to audiences throughout the Delta via his live broadcasts from KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, and later from WROX in Clarksdale, WAZF in Yazoo City, and other stations. Among the first African American radio announcers in Mississippi were Early Wright, Jerome Stampley, Bruce Payne, William Harvey, and Charles Evers.

In 1949 WDIA in Memphis became the first station in the country to go to an all-black format. By the early '50s a number of Mississippi radio stations were broadcasting the blues as a component of their wide-ranging program schedules, which were designed to reach entire local communities rather than specializing in certain genres or formats. The buying power of Mississippi's large African American population spurred more blues and rhythm & blues air time, which was often sponsored by local businesses advertising groceries, furniture, or medicinal tonics. On September 17, 1954, WOKJ in Jackson became the first Mississippi station to institute full-time black-oriented programming.

Not until WORV went on the air in Hattiesburg on June 7, 1969, however, did Mississippi have an African American-owned station. When radio veteran and blues promoter Stan "Rip" Daniels launched WJZD radio in Gulfport on March 20, 1994, it became the first African American-owned FM station on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. According to the 2007 *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook*, Mississippi had more stations (thirteen) regularly broadcasting under a blues format than any other state. In addition, specialized blues programs have been aired on various college, public, rock, oldies, and urban contemporary stations.

Daniels took the blues concept a step further on October 1, 2000, when the American Blues Network transmitted its first satellite signals from the WJZD studios. Adopting a primary format of "party blues and oldies," the ABN secured affiliations with dozens of stations across the country and put its programs on the internet as well. Daniels's concert promotions also ensured support of the blues and southern soul performers on the Gulf Coast "chitlin' circuit."

<u>Blues & Jazz in the Pass</u> - Corner of Scenic Drive & Davis Avenue, Pass Christian

The histories of blues and jazz are often traced along separate pathways, but, especially on the Gulf Coast, the two genres were intertwined from the earliest days. Blues was a key element in the music of Pass Christian's illustrious native son Captain John Handy (1900-1971) and other locals who played traditional jazz or rhythm & blues. Pass Christian has celebrated its rich African American musical heritage with various festivals, including "Jazz in the Pass," first held here in 1999.

Captain John Handy is celebrated as a exemplary performer of traditional New Orleans jazz, but his innovative and forceful work on the alto saxophone also inspired rhythm and blues pioneers Louis Jordan and Earl Bostic. Handy began playing drums around age twelve in a band with his father, violinist John Handy, and his younger brothers Sylvester and Julius. In Pass Christian, where bands often entertained at beachfront resort hotels, the brothers worked as a trio, with John on mandolin, performing for dinner patrons at the Miramar Hotel, among others, and serenading locals at their homes. Handy later began playing clarinet and moved to New Orleans after World War I with local trumpeter and bandleader Tom Albert. In 1928 he took up alto saxophone and later he and his brother Sylvester formed the Louisiana Shakers and toured throughout the region. In New Orleans Handy collaborated with the Young Tuxedo Jazz Band, Kid Clayton, Lee Collins, Kid Sheik Cola, and others. Handy reputedly earned his nickname "Captain" from his authoritative style of bandleading and directing rehearsals. Widespread fame came late in life to Handy, who did not record until 1960, but during his last decade he recorded several albums and played often at Preservation Hall, in addition to touring the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. Music was a family affair among other local musicians as well. The Watson Brothers-Harry, Eddie, Henry ("Gator"), and Charlie-had what was known in its early years as a "spasm band," featuring homemade instruments and gadgets. Eddie Watson later worked with Handy's Louisiana Shakers. At times the Watsons' group included pianists Anita Jackson and her brother, Joseph "Joe B." Jackson, Jr., who also led his own group, "Jobie Jackson's Band," which featured John Handy on alto. The Jacksons' father, Joe, Sr., played with local bands including that of August Saucier.

Pianist Jeannette Salvant Kimball also played with the Watsons before joining Papa Celestin's band in New Orleans. She later performed at the Dew Drop Inn and Preservation Hall. A popular local blues, R&B, and rock 'n' roll band of the 1950s called the Claudetts included, at various times, brothers Lawrence ("Sonny") and Earl Wimberley (whose father, Johnny Wimberley, played in New Orleans' Olympia Brass Band), Arthur Arnold, John Farris III, Joe Welch, Jackie Avery (later a prolific R&B songwriter), Roland Bowser, Nolan Harris, and Irven and James Baker. Sonny Wimberley, a singer and bassist, moved to Chicago, where he played in Muddy Waters' blues band and led his own group, the Sunglows. Saxophonist Donald "Cadillac" Henry also played with the Claudets and later worked in promotion and management with Z. Z. Hill, Otis Redding, and other artists. Among the local clubs that featured blues, jazz, and R&B were the Dixie, the Savoy, and the P. C. Club, where John Handy gave his final rousing performance at a jam session.

• Blues Hall, 100 Men Hall- 303 Union Street, Bay St. Louis

The 100 Men D.B.A. Hall, a longtime center of African American social life and entertainment, was built in 1922 by the One Hundred Members' Debating Benevolent Association. Over the years the association sponsored many events and also rented the hall to promoters who brought in blues, rhythm & blues, and jazz acts. Local residents have recalled performances by Etta James, Big Joe Turner, Guitar Slim, Irma Thomas, Professor Longhair, Ernie K-Doe, Deacon John, Earl King, and numerous others here.

In the decades following the Civil War, African Americans throughout the South formed many fraternal and benevolent organizations in order to collectively increase their social, economic, and political power. The One Hundred Members' Debating Benevolent Association was incorporated in Bay St. Louis in 1894. According to its charter, "the purpose of this Association is to assist its members when sick and bury its dead in a respectable manner and to knit friendship." The charter stipulated that "the Association may from time to time give entertainments for the purpose of replenishing the treasury." Despite its name, the association was founded by twelve men, and the nature of its "debates" appears to be lost to time. (In other organizations, the initials D.B.A. often stood for Death and Burial Association.) By the 1950s the functions of many benevolent organizations were supplanted by insurance companies, although in New Orleans they have survived as social aid and pleasure clubs that organize annual parades. The Disabled American Veterans acquired the 100 Men D.B.A Hall in the mid-1970s. After Hurricane Katrina the hall was slated to be razed until Jesse and Kerrie Loya stepped in to purchase it in 2006. The Loyas restored it with the intent of creating a nonprofit community center and venue. As a resort community in the early decades of the twentieth century, Bay St. Louis was the site of performances by New Orleans jazz and dance bands, as well as local groups, including the Supreme Band and bands led by Paul Maurice, August Saucier, and Harry Fairconnetue (who played regularly at the Promo Benevolent Association Hall). Bay St. Louis natives Fairconnetue and Warren Bennett also worked in Clarence Desdunes' Joyland Revelers. Other local performers of the era included the Alexis family (Peter, Ricard, and Joseph), Edgar Benoit, Sumner Labat, Edward Palloade, Edgar Saucier, Oscar Collins, Eddie Thomas, Anderson Edwards, and Johnny Toncred. Famed New Orleans musicians Lorenzo Tio, Sr. and Jr. and Johnny and Warren "Baby" Dodds also lived in this area in the early 1900s. After World War II the 100 Men D.B.A. Hall became a stop on the "chitlin circuit," a network of African American clubs, with many of the acts booked out of New Orleans. Mississippi coast bands, including M. C. Spencer & the Blue Flames, the Sounds of Soul, Carl Gates & the Decks, and the Claudetts, also played here. Another area venue in the early '50s was the Cotton Club on Highway 90, operated by guitarist Jimmy Liggins, who relocated here briefly from Los Angeles. Onetime area residents who later achieved musical fame included the Bihari family, whose sons formed one of the most important independent record companies, Modern Records, in Los Angeles, and singer-guitarist Ted Hawkins, who was born in Lakeshore.

<u>*Gulfport Boogie – Gulfport*</u> Corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd & Arkansas Ave., Gulfport

Gulfport was once home to an active blues and rhythm & blues scene, particularly here in the North Gulfport area. Jaimoe, famed drummer with the Allman Brothers Band, was raised in Gulfport, a's was the band's onetime bassist Lamar Williams, and both performed in many clubs along the coast during their early years. Blues Hall of Fame pianist Roosevelt Sykes once lived here, and other Gulfport residents have included pianist Cozy Corley, singer Albennie Jones, and guitarist Blind Roosevelt Graves. Gulfport has been fertile territory for musicians who not only turned this area into a hotbed of blues and R&B but also impacted popular music on an international scale. Drummer Johnnie Lee Johnson, better known as Jaimoe, grew up in Mississippi City and bassist Lamar Williams was raised in Handsboro (before both towns were annexed by Gulfport). Prior to joining the Allman Brothers Band they played locally with George Woods and the Sounds of Soul and others. They also teamed in other bands, including Sea Level, and Jaimoe later founded Jaimoe's Jasssz Band. Like many other top musicians on the coast, including Theodore "Skin" Williams, Carl Gates, and Willie Willis, they learned music at 33rd Avenue High School. Gates, a bandleader and school band director, also booked many leading blues and soul acts who regularly plied the coast's chittlin circuit, including Little Milton, O.V. Wright, Tyrone Davis, Z.Z. Hill and Johnnie Taylor. Roosevelt Sykes, composer of "Night Time is the Right Time," "Driving Wheel," and other blues classics, lived here in the 1950s and early '60s and recorded "Gulfport Boogie" in tribute to "Little Conway's" (the Beverly Lounge) near this site. Sykes was sometimes joined by guitarist Henry Townsend. The "Four Corners" intersection here was the site of the Hi-Hat Club. A party atmos- phere pervaded these and many other nightspots that flourished in North Gulfport, Handsboro and Turkey Creek, including the Owl Club, Elks Club, Ebony, Night Owl and the Throne, all then outside Gulfport police jurisdiction. The roster of local blues, jazz and soul performers has included brothers Cleve and Clezell Booth, Sugar Billy, Yvonne Tims (who had the Blues Evolution band with her brother Johnny Jefferson), Buster Teague, Charles and Ruby Wheeler, Jabo Walker, Billy Gray, and more recently acts such as Dr. G.L. John. Cozy Corley, who relocated to Gulfport from Hattlesburg, was the first artist to have a record released on the Malaco label in Jackson. Another blues personality of note, radio broadcaster and club owner Rip Daniels, was born in Gulfport. Gulfport's blues and jazz history dates back to the early 1900s when New Orleans jazz legend Jelly Roll Morton played the Great Southern Hotel as well as local gambling dens. Another early New Orleans figure, Lee Collins, and 1940s blues singer Albennie Jones spent some of their early years in Gulfport, and pianist Little Brother Montgomery was based here in the 1920s. Ma Rainey, "the mother of the blues," performed in tent shows in Gulfport, and the city also became an occasional stop for rambling bluesmen such as Robert Johnson and Big Joe Williams. Blind Roosevelt Graves, whose 1930s records exemplified some of the roots of rock 'n' roll, settled in Gulfport in his final years. Sollie McElroy, who sand with the doo-wop group the Flamingos, was born in Gulfport, as was white vocalist Jimmy Donley, a cult figure in "swamp pop" circles. Donley added another chapter to the Gulf Coast musical saga with songs he wrote for Fats Domino.