

“Blues Isn’t All About Some Guy Sitting on a Corner”:

An Examination of Blues Music and Culture Through the Lens of Mississippi Blues Festivals

Gunter Gaupp

2014 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Rooted in the emotive Gospel traditions of southern sharecroppers, Blues music is an art form of rich heritage with widespread influence in American music. In more recent decades, there has been an increase in public interest in the culture and heritage of the Blues as more tourists have made pilgrimages to the Mississippi Delta to interact with historic landmarks in an area that gave rise to some of the genre’s most influential artists. This increase in tourism has led to the addition of various historic markers, the creation of Blues museums, and the expansion of Blues festivals across Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> In addition to bringing money into the region’s economy, these festivals provide a venue for blues musicians from across the nation to express their various interpretations of the blues in a shared space with new audiences. That being said, the current state of blues music is somewhat ambiguous. In order to continually increase festival attendance and broaden their audience, several festivals market themselves as an environment to hear “authentic” or “real” blues. However, this form of marketing suggests a limit to the capacity of blues music, implying that blues must adhere to a certain standard and that any deviation from that standard is no longer a “real” expression of the blues. It is, of course, impossible to

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Mississippi tourism visit [visitthedelta.com](http://visitthedelta.com)

define exactly what the blues is, but through a study of Mississippi blues festivals it is apparent that the blues has evolved into at least two distinct styles of music, each with its own musicians, audiences, and traditions. There is a link between them though, and they ultimately share a common heritage.

While there is a tendency to think of blues music as a unified genre, “the blues” has historically been used to refer to a variety of sounds and styles. Though blues was recognized as a distinct style of music by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not popularized until W.C Handy began arranging popular blues charts for his house band on Beale Street around 1912.<sup>2</sup> Handy, credited with having founded the expansion of blues music in the United States, was largely responsible for bringing the blues to the public’s attention after he began arranging music for larger ensembles in the style and form of the music he had heard from the Mississippi Delta. The tonalities and twelve-measure structure Handy incorporated into his blues charts grew in popularity as more bandleaders began mimicking this style. By the 1920s, the standardized structure evolved from the larger ensemble setting to feature blues singers accompanied by smaller ensembles. Though drawing from the same traditions of structure and blue notes, the vocal timbre and instrumentation of this early blues from singers like Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith had an urban sound that modern audiences would more likely associate

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<sup>2</sup> King, Stephen A.. *I'm feeling the blues right now blues tourism and the Mississippi Delta*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. 26-28

with jazz rather than blues.<sup>3</sup> Around 1925, the emergence of country blues from artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, and Son House replaced the era of urban blues singers. This style of blues, which was typically performed by a solo male singer accompanying himself on an acoustic guitar, emerged largely from the Mississippi Delta and became popular nationwide with particularly successful markets in Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis, and Detroit.<sup>4</sup> Though the popularity of blues music dwindled throughout the 1930s and 40s, it continued to influence African American music through the development of R&B in the late 40s and Soul music in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>5</sup>

While the blues had largely fallen out of mainstream popularity by the late 1940s, it survived among a niche group of fans and record collectors that ultimately caused a revival of the country blues traditions in the 1960s. Upon the end of their music careers, most successful country blues artists returned to their homes in the south and fell out of touch with the music industry. However, in the 1950s Pete Whalen, owner of the Origin Jazz Liberty record label, began the revitalization of the blues by releasing two separate reissues of old country blues recordings; each selling only about five hundred copies internationally over the course of four years.<sup>6</sup> These reissues, which were largely

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<sup>3</sup> Gioia, Ted. *Delta blues: the life and times of the Mississippi Masters who revolutionized American music*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008. 38. And in fact, many early jazz artists, like Louis Armstrong and Eddie Lang, participated in these recording sessions.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Oliver. "Blues." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 25, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03311>.

<sup>5</sup> For a full detailed history of blues music, see Ted Gioia's *Delta Blues*

<sup>6</sup> Gioia *Delta Blues*. 349.

assembled from Whalen's personal record collection, combined with publications on blues history from writers like Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver sparked other researchers and country blues enthusiasts to begin a search for the forgotten blues artists of the 1920s and 1930s. These researchers, who were predominately white males, used clues from the lyrics of old recordings to discover the hometowns of country blues artists so they could meet with them and convince them out of retirement. For instance, Son House was rediscovered in 1964 after researchers Dick Waterman and Nick Perls attempted to find House in his hometown of Robinsonville, Mississippi only to learn he had moved to Rochester, New York.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, after Bob Dylan covered Bukka White's song "Fixin' to Die Blues," researchers John Fahey and Ed Denson traced White to Memphis, Tennessee and convinced him to record a new album.<sup>8</sup> These newer recordings of the country blues grew in popularity and allowed an entirely new generation of blues artists and fans to emerge. Additionally, popular British Rock bands of the 1960s, like Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones, further sparked interest in the blues as they credited their musical inspiration to old blues artists like Robert Johnson and Charley Patton.<sup>9</sup> However, by the time the blues revival reached critical mass, racial tensions in the delta were becoming hostile with the rise of the civil rights movement. At this point, the blues artists from Mississippi and the delta area who established their careers in the wake of the blues revival moved from the south to Chicago where blues music continued to thrive.

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<sup>7</sup> "Son House - Tunica." Son House. <http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/son-house> (accessed July 25, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> "White, Bukka." *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed.. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 25, 2014.

Though the Mississippi Delta was a prosperous agricultural hub in the early 1900's while blues music was becoming popular, by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the majority of the Delta's cash crops had been outsourced to other countries. In order to combat the economic decline associated with the loss of agriculture, cities in the Delta in collaboration with the federal government's Millennium Trails program were able to successfully market the Delta's connection with the Blues and increase the flow of tourism into Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> In addition to improving the economic integrity of major cities along the Delta, the influx in tourism has encouraged a deeper historical appreciation for Blues music. In order to bring in more tourists, numerous artists like Robert Johnson, Ike Turner, and Howlin' Wolf have been commemorated through historical markings and the construction of Blues museums. Furthermore, local blues artists have been provided more working opportunity as more local businesses promote live music. For instance, actor Morgan Freeman has invested money into the music scene of Clarksville, Mississippi with the opening of his club, Grand Zero, which regularly hosts live blues music. Additionally, the foundation of Blues tourism has caused an increase in popularity of local Blues Festivals. Originally founded during the 1980s, Mississippi Blues festivals represent the culture of Blues music both past and present. However, while the festivals of the Delta successfully promote blues music to international audiences, they also raise serious questions about the current state of the Blues and the music that is being performed at festivals that brand themselves as being authentic or traditional.

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<sup>9</sup> King 17

<sup>10</sup> Gioia. *Delta Blues*. 20.

In studying the audiences, promotional material, and musicians featured at various Mississippi blues festivals, it is apparent that active festivals can largely be divided into two, distinct groups—those marketed specifically as being traditional or authentic blues experiences and those that are not. In most cases, it seems that festivals that promote their authenticity attract a different audience demographic, feature different artists, and are more economically successful than those that do not. However, the fact that both groups claim to promote the same genre of music but have such different results suggests that there is a fundamental difference in each group's understanding of "real" blues music and is therefore indicative of a larger, unspoken, ideological debate about delta heritage and the sound and image of blues music.

As with the bulk of blues tourism in Mississippi, the larger more successful blues festivals thrive on the idea of authenticity. More so than smaller festivals, festivals like the King Biscuit Blues festival in Helena Arkansas, the Sunflower River Festival in Clarksdale, Mississippi and the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage festival in Greenville, Mississippi are able to attract a larger audience by promoting themselves as a place to hear "authentic" blues music. In fact, these festivals showed a massive influx in attendance with the creation of the Blues Trail and the increased interest in Blues heritage in the 1990s. For instance, while the Sunflower River Festival claimed an audience size of 10-15 thousand between the mid 90s and early 2000s, the audience has increased to 20-25 thousand annually for the last five years.<sup>11</sup> As evident through their promotional

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<sup>11</sup> "Welcome to the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival." Welcome to the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival. <http://www.sunflowerfest.org/index.cfm?page=history> (accessed July 25, 2014).

material like posters, slogans, and websites, these festivals are dependent upon their claim of authenticity to draw a crowd of tourists.

A consistent representation of the larger tourist festivals' notion of authenticity can be seen in their visual representation of a Delta Blues musician. Among larger festivals, an official poster is used annually to increase profit as it is both used as advertisement prior to the festival and sold as a popular souvenir during the festival. Therefore, these posters provide a visual representation of how the festivals sell themselves to their audience. As pictured below, the art of larger festivals encourages the notion of their authenticity with a standardized stereotype of a traditional blues musician: an older, African American male performing alone with an acoustic guitar, often in a rural environment.<sup>12</sup>



The image of the traditional bluesman appears regularly in some fashion throughout the visual art of white festivals like the Sunflower River Fest and the Key Biscuit Fest over the last ten years. Additionally this image is frequently coupled with slogans that remind

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<sup>12</sup> Images from left to right: 2004 official King Biscuit festival poster, 2013 official Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage poster, 2009 official Sunflower River festival poster

the audience of the delta's role as the birthplace of many influential blues musicians. For example, the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage festival's poster from 2013 featured the slogan "Da Blues is like Comin' Home". Similarly the Sunflower River festival's poster from 2004 promoted the theme "Coming Home to Clarksdale". This representation of the ideal Blues musician can be traced back to "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy's story of how he first discovered Blues music. According to Hardy's description, he had fallen asleep at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi and was awoken by the sound of an unfamiliar music:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages . . . The singer repeated the lines three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard<sup>13</sup>

This image originally became connected with country blues artists in the 1920s as record companies would run ads for new country blues recordings in newspapers that frequently depicted "an old man riding down a dirt road on a tired mule, or a wide mouthed minstrel caricature"<sup>14</sup>. The image emerged more prominently with the blues revival of the 1960s as the older country blues musicians became the faces of the genre. Interestingly, however, while the white festivals seem to venerate the idea of the "traditional bluesman," the Blues artists they honor mostly do not match this image. For example, Robert Johnson, arguably the most well-known country blues artists, typically performed wearing a "wide-lapel, pinstriped suit, his tie with broad diagonal stripes and shiny metal

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<sup>13</sup> Wald, Elijah. *Escaping the delta: Robert Johnson and the invention of the blues*. New York: Amistad, 2004. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Wald. *Escaping*. 13.



clip, with his handkerchief neatly folded in the breast pocket<sup>15</sup>”. The same could be said for artists like Tommy Johnson, Skip James, Son House, Charley Patton, and John Hurt who, in all surviving portraits and images, were very well dressed.

This notion of associating an artist with a particular image remains pertinent to modern blues musicians as many artists seem present themselves in a way such that they will be associated with the country blues heritage. Artists like Blind Mississippi Morris, and Taj Mahal, for example, who either are too young to have experienced the country blues legacy or were raised outside of Mississippi, emulate the images of older country bluesman in order to authenticate their music. By posing for black and white photos with acoustic guitars in rural settings, these artists are able to thread their public image into the country blues traditions.<sup>16</sup>



However, while some artists have capitalized on the traditional bluesman image, others have rebuked it. For instance, Little Milton, a singer and guitarist from Greenville, Mississippi, has spoken for the irrelevance of the old image in modern blues:

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<sup>15</sup> Wald *escaping*. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Left: Blind Mississippi Morris (59 years old), Right: Taj Mahal (New York native)

Blues isn't all about some guy sitting on a corner, on a store porch or in a little dingy joint, with overalls on and patches on them, singing about his woman left him and took everything. You know, rich women leave rich men as well. Educated men, educated women leave each other, so I fail to see the significance of just the down and out... There's nothing wrong with coming onstage looking like you're somebody that's successful... I call that 'class' of an individual; makes no difference what type of music or profession they might be in.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Milton suggests that the universality of the themes of blues music transcend class and contradicts the idea of confining the music or the artist to a particular image.

Apart from featuring caricatures of blues musicians on festival posters, another means of visual promoting the idea of authenticity can be seen in how the King Biscuit and Sunflower River festivals honor recently deceased blues musicians. In these instances, rather than promoting a nameless caricature of authentic blues, the festivals will commemorate real, active musicians but use their image as an archetypal depiction of blues musicians. For instance, the upcoming Sunflower River festival will be held in honor of Mississippi native Big Jack Johnson who died in 2011 and the corresponding poster, included below, features his portrait. When the poster was announced, its description depicted Johnson as “the city’s most extraordinary musician/songwriter since the legendary days of Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, and Muddy Water.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wald. *Escaping*. 9.

<sup>18</sup> "Welcome to the Sunflower River Blues"

<http://www.sunflowerfest.org/index.cfm?page=history>.



While Mr. Johnson undoubtedly deserves recognition for his involvement with the Mississippi blues scene, the language used in describing the portrait (coupled with the fact that he literally radiates blues in the image) links him to a romanticized ideal of blues music that further promotes the authenticity of Clarksdale festival.

While the larger festivals actively promote the idea of a romantic past through their visual art, the posters of smaller festivals take a different approach. Rather than crafting an image of the music tradition, the promotional posters of these festivals are typically monochromatic and consist of a list of performers. If there are any images on the poster, they are usually promotional pictures of the listed artists.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>19</sup> Left: Promotional poster from the Legendary Blues Fest in Helena, Arkansas  
 Right: promotional poster of the 2014 Grassroots blues festival in Duck Hill, Mississippi

Additionally, the posters are not typically sold at merchandise tents during the festivals. Therefore, it would appear that, rather than selling the idea or culture of the music, these smaller festivals sell the music itself. Furthermore, the fact that the festival imagery depicts only the artists suggests that the idea of “the bluesman” at these festivals is much different from that of the larger festivals. Rather than focusing on the musicians of the past, these smaller festivals venerate the living Blues musicians. To these festivals, the blues is not that of the long-deceased sharecroppers, but a living blues that has adapted and changed over generations.

Fortunately in my research I was able to meet with renowned modern blues musician Bobby Rush, to get a deeper understanding of what a modern blues performer is. At over 80 years old, Mr. Rush, an internationally acclaimed blues musician, has been playing music professional for over sixty years and has continued to grow in popularity even into his later career.<sup>20</sup> In his continued success and fluid musical identity, Mr. Rush depicts an alternative model of a Blues musician. Born to a lower class family in Homer, Louisiana in 1933, Mr. Rush began his career and became involved in the Chicago blues scene around 1953. Here, Mr. Rush befriended musicians like Muddy Water and Ike Turner. Since the start of his career, Bobby Rush has recorded over three hundred albums and has been recognized by numerous organizations for his success as an entertainer and musician. While there are some similarities between Bobby Rush and the image of authenticity promoted by larger festivals, Mr. Rush’s attitude and lifestyle denotes

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<sup>20</sup> The information from this section was received from a personal interview with Mr. Rush conducted on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014

several important differences. Like the traditional model, Mr. Rush is an older, black, male southerner with a rural background. However, Mr. Rush has spent the majority of his career in an urban environment, and, though he lives relatively modestly, has earned a considerable amount of wealth. Additionally, though he often performs in what is considered the traditional format (with a solo guitar and/or harmonica), Bobby Rush's more known performances depict a clear shift from the traditional perception of delta blues. For example, and in contrast to the solo acoustic performance, Mr. Rush typically performs with a five-piece band along with a group of three to five dancers. Building this larger ensemble allows for the creation of a larger and more visually stimulating performance than is possible in a solo show. Furthermore, the incorporation of a larger band and amplified instruments creates the possibility for new timbres to be introduced into the music as well as the interaction of different rhythmic layers. Additionally with a stage full of dancers, this style of blues is designed to be danceable. Rather than preserving the ideals of the original country blues, these innovations in style and textures reflect a style of blues that continues a lineage from country blues genres like Soul and R&B. These more recent influences reflect a blues that is actively changing with the course of the culture of black American music. Rather than acting as the grandfather of these new styles, as blues is often called, this model for modern blues depicts delta blues as an active participant in the changing scene. Interestingly, this idea of a continuously changing genre is demonstrated in the language surrounding Mr. Rush's image throughout his career.

Though Mr. Rush claims that he has never changed his style of music or performance, he has not always been described in the media as a blues artist. Rather, in the earlier years of his career, he was described more as a “soul man,” or his role as an entertainer was more of a focus than his ability as a musician. However, in the more recent decades, Mr. Rush has begun to be described almost exclusively as a blues artist in the media and, in some instances, even a “blues legend.”



Though the language surrounding Mr. Rush’s career in the media demonstrates the fluidity and relativity of public opinion in terms musical denominations, Mr. Rush has always thought of himself as a blues musician. According to Mr. Rush, what really defines blues music is its ability to tell a story that can be understood universally. In this sense, Mr. Rush’s blues is as authentic as any other style. Though the experiences of both modern blues musicians and listeners have changed considerably since the impoverished sharecroppers of the Delta supposedly first founded the blues, Mr. Rush claims that the universality of the music has remained constant. In fact, according to Mr. Rush, it is the modern blues artist’s job to recognize the emotions of a modern audience and continue to

innovate how the story is told so the music can continue to grow and remain universal. For instance, though Mr. Rush claims the most universal topics that Blues music can express are “making love and making money,” he says that exactly how he expresses that narrative is the subject of constant innovation. In this way, though clearly Mr. Rush represents a very different model for authenticity in modern Blues music, he has an equal claim in the authenticity of his music as he has kept the Blues story alive.

The ideas of authenticity and artist portrayal presented by a festival are designed to more successfully target a particular audience demographic based on that audience’s cultural experiences with blues music. For instance, festivals that emphasize the idea of authenticity typically target white, many times international, tourists while festivals more focused on promoting the soul-influenced style of blues are designed for a local, black audience. To the average tourist, the blues music has something of a romanticized twist because of its revitalization the 1960s and the reemergence of the idea of the delta bluesman. The blues revival was, in a sense, a retelling of the blues narrative from a white perspective as those who spurred the revival were primarily white researchers, fans, record producers, and British rock musicians like Eric Clapton, Jimi Page, and Keith Richards.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the revitalization of the blues narrative was dictated with a substantial amount of bias.

So now, the passionate tourist who wants to physically interact with the heritage of blues music in the delta comes with an expectation to experience a style of blues similar to that of artists from the 1960s. To these visitors, the draw of the delta is its

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<sup>21</sup> King, Stephen A.. *I'm feeling the blues right now blues tourism and the Mississippi Delta*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. 17.

relationship to the history of the music and influential artists. In contrast, the local black community has a different perspective on what the “traditional” delta blues is. By the time of the blues revival, the country blues that northern record collectors began searching for had largely fallen out of popularity with the local audience. The old country blues artist that were rediscovered no longer even played that style of music and had to relearn old songs as they were pulled from retirement<sup>22</sup>. Rather, local listeners and artist had been influenced by newer styles and musicians. For example, by the 1960s blues music had developed into soul music in New York and in 1962 Malaco Records was established in Jackson, Mississippi to promote and record delta soul musicians.<sup>23</sup> Though the blues tradition was still important to local audiences, they have adopted a style of blues with noticeable elements derived from soul and R&B. Interestingly, however, while black audiences are a small minority at larger festivals, their presence seems to be an important facet of the tourist’s interaction with delta culture. According to one study on the concept of authenticity in tourism, tourists look for a local crowd to reaffirm the idea that their experience is legitimate and not artificially fabricated to seem authentic, so locals are taught to “play the native in order to appear ‘authentic’”.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, to improve their success, festivals marketed towards tourists must actively seek out the local

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<sup>22</sup> King. *Feeling the Blues*. 43.

<sup>23</sup> "Malaco Records." *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 25, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/38628>.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, Erik. 1982 *The Pacific Islands from Utopian Myth to Consumer Product: The Disenchantment of Paradise*. Cahiers du Tourisme, Ser. B. No. 27.



African American demographic. For instance, one festival in northern Mississippi that purposely focuses its promotional efforts to attract tourists must correct for the lack of a black crowd by allowing members of the local community to earn free admittance to the festival in return for posting a certain number of promotional flyers around the area.

Though the flyers do little to increase the amount of local African Americans who pay to attend the festival, those attending for free serve as a means of branding the authenticity of the festival to visiting tourists.

Additionally, while the benefits of tourism are undeniable, it is important to note that larger tourist audiences have a somewhat complicated relationship with the local music. On one side of things, the influx of tourism and festival attendance has encouraged the foundation of new festivals around the delta and, therefore, has provided more opportunity for local working blues musicians. Also, the money tourists spend in the delta improves the local economy, which, in turn, allows for more opportunity to develop local music. However, because of the tourists' expectations for the music and the power of tourism dollars, foreign audiences dictate the prevailing narrative of the music. Because the tourist expects a "traditional" blues that hails from the music of the 1960s revival and has more purchasing power than local audiences, a successful festival is one that complies with the tourist's idea of the delta blues and broadcasts to an international audience. Though both the traditional and more modern styles of blues are typically represented at major festivals, musicians without national recognition are largely ignored. Therefore, the newer, local interpretation of the Delta blues loses influence in the common understanding of blues music.

However, the Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage festival in Greenville Mississippi provides a noteworthy exception to the trends of other major festivals. Though this festival is one of the largest in Mississippi, averaging a profit of three million dollars annually<sup>25</sup> and advertises its relationship to the history of the blues in its promotional material<sup>26</sup> it attracts an overwhelmingly African American audience (as depicted in the photo below).<sup>27</sup>



I think this deviation is predominately resultant of the fact that the Greenville festival was the first blues festival to be held in Mississippi and has maintained a focus on promoting local musicians to new audiences. Because the festival has prioritized booking exclusively local acts from Mississippi, the festival portrays an idea of authenticity of place. Though the festival posters depict the same bluesman stereotypes as those of the King Biscuit and Sunflower River festivals, the music featured and headlined changes

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<sup>25</sup> "Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival - History." Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival - History. <http://www.deltablues.org/history> (accessed July 25, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Image of the 2013 Delta Blues and Heritage poster discussed earlier, page 7

<sup>27</sup> Bobby Rush performing at the 2013 Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival

with the changing blues scene. In fact, this idea of an eternally growing blues culture is represented in the festival's mission statement as it focuses its attention on introducing younger audiences to blues music saying, "There is a need for the youth of today to become familiar with the themes of alienation in and around the Blues art form because these themes embody truths that we can draw inspiration and education from."<sup>28</sup>

Through a comparative analysis of music from major festival headliners in the last five years, it is evident that the different styles of blues have a complex relationship with each other as well as the Delta's history. For example, the music of Bobby Rush, a popular act among local, black audiences and the music of T-Model Ford, who is popular with white tourist audiences depict very different portrayals of a shared heritage. T-Model Ford, a Greenville native and regular festival headliner who died in 2013 at age eighty-nine, was likely the closest representation of the idea of the "traditional bluesman" circulating in blues tourism. Mr. Ford was an illiterate, self-taught musician born into a poor, rural family, and though he was a successful performer in the Mississippi blues circuit, he never truly escaped poverty. Also, while his profile fits that of the blues man model, Mr. Ford was heavily influenced by major figures of the 1960s blues. These influences are evident in his performances as he typically performed solo or in a small ensemble and played a type of blues that mimicked the early country blues artists both in composition and style. For example, his song "44 Blues" follows the standard twelve bar blues harmonic progression with a basic accompanying rhythm that accents the second and fourth beat of each measure. Stylistically, even though the song's structure consists

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<sup>28</sup> Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival – History.  
<http://www.deltablues.org/history>

of a standard I-IV-V harmonic progression, Mr. Ford takes liberties in terms of tempo and meter as he sporadically drops and adds beats in different measures, changes harmonies early, or speeds and slows tempo. Though this style of playing might seem sloppy, it seems to be done tactfully to emulate the country blues traditions as, just like in recordings from Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson, these metric irregularities occur in regular-almost formulaic-increments.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, Bobby Rush who is recognizably influenced by 1960s Malaco artists, represents a style of blues that has developed independently from the country blues tradition. For Instance, Mr. Rush's song "I Ain't Studdin' You" is structured with a clear verse, chorus, and bridge and follows a very different form than the standard blues progression. Rhythmically, rather than the straight quarter note accompaniment utilized in T-Model Ford's work, Bobby Rush incorporates more complex, syncopated rhythmic patterns layered throughout the ensemble. However, despite the differences between the two artist's styles, they are linked to the same tradition in that the music of both artists is constructed around narrative.

Because so many of the older delta musicians were, like T-Model Ford, so liberal with meter and harmonic rhythm, their music was driven less by changing harmonies and more so by the story conveyed through the song. Instead of establishing a harmonic rhythm that changes after a set number of measures, the harmonic rhythm follows the changing lyrics. Often measures will contract and expand and occasionally the entire

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<sup>29</sup> T-Model Ford's "44 Blues" compared to Charley Patton's "Down in the Dirt Road Blues" or Son House's "Death Letter Blues" for example

meter of the song will change to match cues from the developing narrative. This style of performance creates a sense that the music is more focused on sharing an experience or emotion than it is with formal development. Though Bobby Rush's style of blues, as presented in "I Aint Suddin' You," has a cleaner, more organized sound, the structure of the song is centered entirely on the idea of storytelling. As the song begins, the first verse establishes a sense of narrative as Mr. Rush begins speak-singing:

My so called friends always come up to me sayin', 'Bobby Rush, I saw your old lady down at whatever and with whoever while you was gone' And I just say, 'Hold it,' because if they was really my friends they wouldn't be talkin' about what they saw her do...

This manner of singing continues until he finishes that portion of the story and then continues into a repetitive chorus of "I Ain't Studdin' You" before continuing the narrative in the subsequent verse. In this sense, the chorus serves only to break up the ongoing narrative of the song. Furthermore, the length of the verses changes with every live performance. While the first verse of the song's official studio recording is an even eighteen measures, in various live performances it has been extended anywhere from nineteen to twenty-two measures. Therefore, it is evident that the progression of the song is not determined by any specific musical design but strictly by the length of time required to finish the story. This story-centric song structure, rooted in the traditions of African music, seems to be a common element in all modern styles of the blues.

Even among lesser-known acts at smaller festivals, like Louis "Gearshifter" Youngblood, narrative seems to take precedence over structure. Mr. Youngblood's style of blues seems to be some combination of that of Bobby Rush and T-Model Ford in that,

while he will incorporate Soul and R&B rhythms over a single chord vamp like Mr. Rush, some of these songs have no formal structure at all to propel the song forward. Rather, as he almost randomly jumps from verse to guitar solo and back, the story of the song provides the only structural support. Additionally, Louis Youngblood's style further broadens the potential of small festival music as he frequently incorporates unconventional tonalities into his improvisations. While common practice blues improvisation is typically limited to the six pitches of the blues scale, Youngblood incorporates the harmonic minor scale, some modal elements, and even tri-tones in his improvisations. Expanding the set of usable tonalities in this manner could potentially stem from Son House's style of guitar playing in which he would add odd half steps to a melodic line that was otherwise entirely composed from the blues scale, or it could potentially derive from more complex harmonic structures in jazz music. In either case, however, Louis Youngblood's obscure style of playing portrays the potential of the Delta blues to continue to grow beyond the general public's expectations.

With differences in audience demographic, musicians, and image, it is evident that blues music has evolved into two distinct schools of musical style; separated primarily by the notion of authenticity. While blues music continued to develop naturally throughout the 20th century, founding new genres which ultimately returned to influence modern Mississippi blues artist, the blues revival of the 1960s founded a public emphasis on the country blues traditions of the 1920s and 30s which continues today as something of a "classic" or "historic" genre. These two styles of blues are represented very differently

among various festivals in Mississippi as one is promoted as an “authentic” style and seems more popular among white tourists while the other is promoted more simply as “blues” and is more popular with a local black audience. Though the two styles stem from different traditions and have very different sounds, they share an element of communicating universal themes through narrative that has always been at the heart of the blues.