

## What The Experts Say

### Blues in Mississippi

\***Alan Lomax** in his book , *The Land Where the Blues Began*, said, “Although this has been called the age of anxiety, it might better be termed the century of the blues, after the moody song style that was born sometime around 1900 in the Mississippi Delta.” Lomax goes on to credit black Delta blues musicians by saying, “Their productions transfixed audiences; and white performers rushed to imitate and parody them in the minstrel show, buck dancing, ragtime, jazz, as nowadays in rock, rap, and the blues.”

\*While there was indeed anxiety between blacks and whites in Mississippi, at least one venue demanded mutual respect - - - music. **Robert M. Baker**, author of *A Brief History of the Blues*, said, “...blues is a native American musical and verse form, with no direct European and African antecedents of which we know. In other words, it is a blending of both traditions.” However, there is no question that rhythmic dance tunes brought over by slaves influenced greatly the development of the blues. Blacks took the instruments and church music from Europe and wove them with their ancestral rhythms into what we know as the blues.

\***Christine Wilson**, in the Mississippi Department of Archives publication, *All Shook Up, Mississippi Roots of American Popular Music*, said, “ Music that emerged from Mississippi has shaped the development of popular music of the country and world. Major innovators created new music in every form - - - gospel, blues, country, R&B, rock, and jazz.”

\***William Farris** in *Blues From the Delta* wrote, “Blues shape both popular and folk music in American culture; and blues-yodeling Jimmie Rodgers, Elvis Presley, and the Rolling Stones are among many white performers who incorporate blues in their singing styles.”

For another example, **Joachim Berendt's** book, *The Jazz Book*, outlines the development of jazz from its blues roots. He indicates that folk blues led to classic blues, boogie, swing, bebop, Dixieland jazz, and to other forms of modern day jazz. Consequently, all of these jazz forms had their beginnings in the delta of Mississippi.

\*Although Charlie Patton may be the first folk blues artist to be recorded and recognized, he was not the first folk blues artist. That person is unknown. And while **W. C. Handy** may be called the Father of the Blues, he did not “invent” the blues. He said in his book, *Father of The Blues*, “Then one night at Tutwiler [Mississippi]...A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. His song struck me instantly. ...In this way, and from these materials, they set the mood for what we now call blues.” From that experience, we know that W. C. Handy went on to compose and popularize the blues, thanks to that unknown folk blues artist in Tutwiler, Mississippi.

\* “H. C. Speir was the godfather of Delta blues. He was to 20s and 30s country blues what Sam Phillips was to 50s rock'n'roll - a musical visionary. If it hadn't been for Speir,

Mississippi's greatest natural resource might have gone untapped."*Chasin' That Devil Music* by **Gayle Dean Wardlow**.

\*Connecting Mississippi Blues and Country Music - As blues developed in Mississippi after the 1900s and into the 1920s, it began to emerge into the mainstream of popular music. For some time it had been described as the devil's music and was performed mostly in juke joints and local parties. Black and white musicians in Mississippi did things together in the 1920s that even in the 1960s would have been unheard of. Jimmie Rodgers, for example, invited Ishmon Bracey and Tommy Johnson, both black blues artists, to perform with him at the King Edward Hotel in Jackson. This was after Rodgers heard them playing on the street in front of the hotel. The blues influence on Jimmie Rodgers can be heard in many of his songs, such as *Train Whistle Blues*, recorded in 1929.

\*Reader's Digest, May 2008, Pg. 149 - "Cotton, sugar, rice: The Mississippi Delta has some of the richest soil on the planet. But it was another export from that fertile land that truly changed our world: the blues. All of America's popular music - jazz, country, rock and roll, and hip-hop - had its roots in the sound and spirit of the Delta blues."

**If we assume that the blues is the basis for today's popular music, then, again, we can assume that Mississippi is the birthplace of America's music.**

## **Country Music in Mississippi**

\*In his book, *Elsie McWilliams, I Remember Jimmie*, **Edward Bishop** said of Jimmie Rodgers, "...the man who set the style of modern country music and who is looked upon as the most prominent pioneer in this field, is popularly called THE GREATEST COUNTRY ARTIST OF THEM ALL ... was a Mississippian."

\*Jimmie Rodgers went on, of course, to be called the Father of Country Music. However, according to **Gale Dean Wardlow** in his book, *Chasin' That Devil Music, Searching for the Blues*, Jimmie Rodgers came to Jackson in 1926 to record a demo tape for RCA Victor with then talent scout H. C. Speir. Speir had a music store on Farish Street and had discovered many great blues artists in the 1920s and 1930s. For that, he is called the Godfather of Delta Blues. But after hearing Rodgers play, Speir said, "Jimmie, you're not ready to record right now." Speir told Rodgers to go back to Meridian, work up some more songs, and come back later. Six months later, Rodgers found another way to get his songs on Victor. The rest is history.

\*Jimmie Rodgers went on to be the first country singer to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. He is the only musician to be inducted into four different music halls of fame.

\*Again in his book, *Elsie McWilliams, I Remember Jimmie*, **Bishop** wrote, "If Jimmie Rodgers was the FATHER OF COUNTRY MUSIC, then Elsie McWilliams was the midwife." They were a team. And when the final curtain came down May 26, 1933, Jimmie Rodgers had

recorded 110 songs in the six years of his recording career, 19 of which bear, Words by ELSIE MCWILLIAMS,”

\*In *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers* by Barry Mazor, this statement appears. “ Whether that music would, over time, come to be labeled country, rock and roll, bluegrass, blues, western, Jazz, or American pop, wherever there was space for music of the body and heart, not just the spirit and the head, Jimmie Rodgers would be there.”

## Rock ‘N’ Roll in Mississippi

\***Cub Coda** writes in the introduction of the *AMG All Music Guide To the Blues*, “That rock’n’roll comes straight from the blues is one of the few facts about its history that you get a room full of critics, musicians, or fans to agree on.”

\*The most influential figure in rock and roll music ever was Elvis Presley from Tupelo. **Sam Phillips** of Sun Records said that Elvis took from country, blues, white and black gospel, and western music and developed a new form of rock and roll. Elvis was greatly influenced by gospel singer James Blackwood and the Blackwood Brothers, also from Mississippi.

\*However, Jackie Brenson of Clarksdale and Ike Turner are said to have recorded the first true rock and roll recording, *Rocket 88*, in 1951.

\*Finally, The Illustrated History of Rock and Roll, published by Rolling Stone, considers Blind Roosevelt Graves to have been the first to record a rock and roll song. *Barbecue Bust* and *Dangerous Woman* were recorded in 1936. Roosevelt and his brother lived around Hattiesburg, MS.

## Summary

**Blues** - born in the Mississippi Delta.

**Country music** - born in the singing of **Jimmie Rodgers** and the composing of **Elsie McWilliams**, both of Meridian.

**Rock N’ Roll** - born in the minds of **Jackie Brenston** and **Ike Turner** (now considered the Father of Rock N’ Roll) with their recording, “*Rocket 88*.” The recording is widely considered the first true rock n’ roll record. Both men were from Clarksdale. OR Blind Roosevelt Graves, of Hattiesburg, with *Dangerous Woman* recorded in 1936.

\*In an article in *The Clarion Ledger* on March 30, 2000, writer **Donnie Snow** summed it all up. “Mississippi is music. From Elvis Presley to Jimmie Rodgers to Robert Johnson, you’d be hard pressed to find some form of American music that can’t find its history burgeoning either in the rich, dark Delta soil or under the warm Mississippi sun. Many around the world revere Mississippi as the holy land, and not because of the fine religious folk.”

**Mississippi Healing by Robert Joiner of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

“Still, my thoughts are fixed on the Mississippian puzzle. The state has given the world so much grief and yet so much joy. For every Ku Klux Klan member who sings of Dixie and separatism, there must be 10 Mississippi-born musicians whose creations appeal to our common humanity. In fact, Mississippi is the birthplace of some of the world’s happiest musicians, even if they’ve since been claimed by Nashville, Cleveland and Branson, MO.

Like an old bluesman, Mississippi’s in an uphill battle. The state is trying to get past its terrible history of repression; perhaps one path to rebirth and redemption lies through its diverse contributions to music.”