

KEY *to the* HIGHWAY

*GULF COAST TO GREAT LAKES, PLANTATION SOUTH TO INDUSTRIAL NORTH.
THE GREAT MIGRATION AND THE HISTORY OF THE BLUES, SEGREGATION,
AND SOUTHERN REBIRTH. IN A \$1000 CADILLAC COUPE DE VILLE.*

*by DALE DRINNON
photography by MARTYN GODDARD*

An indelicate whiff of oil ooze onto the exhaust manifold must have reached the valet-parking desk of the distinguished New Orleans hotel even as I killed the ignition.

At least the water pump hadn't puked (yet), and the attendant remained oh-so-professionally composed as we skirted the Caddy's well-seasoned flanks to collect my luggage. Then he noticed the license plate, and with the faintest undertone of wonderment asked, "You drove this car down here from Tennessee?"

"Yeah, man," I say, "and I'm going up Highway 61 through Mississippi like the old blues men did, one club at a time, and then on to Chicago, and I'm gonna write a story about it." I give the trunk lid a little pat and hold out the keys. "Put my baby someplace nice, will you?"

There is the slightest undecided pause and he smiles, a wondrous, reassuring smile of the impromptu coconspirator. "Don't worry, sir," he says, "I'll do your baby right," nodding toward a front-row spot between a Lexus and a Mercedes. "And if we can help any way whatsoever, you ask for me personally." And he shakes my hand.

It is, I believe, a very Southern thing to do. Native Southerners understand intimately about leaving home and family in search of a better life or, in many circumstances, any life at all, and we have a gut-deep appreciation for the quintessential people's-liberation weapon that often made it possible; the cheap used car.

Factor in the Southern mystery DNA that originated most of the world's popular music genres, and following the trail to the Chicago recording studios where the Mississippi Delta blues giants inspired musical generations yet unborn becomes a sacred trust. Frankly, I wasn't sure any non-Southerner could ever fully get that—even well-traveled British photographer and blues fanatic Martyn Goddard—any more than I as a transplanted American will ever understand the Brits' whole God Save the Queen obsession. So from the day we hatched our blues-trip idea, I knew there was only one car that could bring everything together.

It would have to be a Cadillac, the cheapest possible cheap Cadillac with a few miles remaining. A "fake it 'til you make it" car that might bestow some small bluesman credit (I drive a Cadillac, baby...) if viewed from a dark, squinty distance. About a grand should do it, I thought, and asked my friend and former racing



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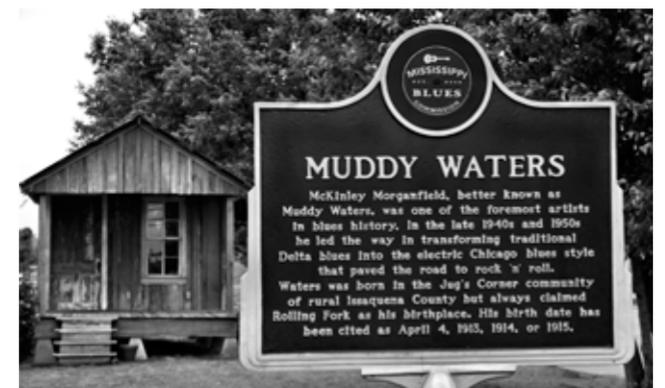
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partner Stan Heath in Knoxville to keep an eye open. Two weeks later he sent an e-mail. "Found a car," it read. "1981 Coupe de Ville, \$1000 all-in, photos attached." I studied them for a full minute and replied, "Buy it".

Highly skilled repair work was required when I flew in to collect our prize. I hammered the motor and tracks on the jammed power driver's seat until they surrendered in terror and then sweet-talked my ex-boss Lowell Arp, service manager at Twin City Buick, out of some secondhand tires. After much soul searching, I also splurged on a \$20 boom box to offset the radio-shaped hole in the dashboard and set forth to meet Martyn at the jumping-off point in New Orleans.

We picked New Orleans not only for its jazz history and convenient airport; the city was a trendsetter in establishing music as a viable profession for blacks in the traditional Deep South. In the immediate post-Civil War period, two critical civic assets made it a natural magnet town: (1) a booming, legal French Quarter red-light district called Storyville that was in need of musical entertainment and (2) easy access to a poor, ex-slave culture that had endured over three centuries, mostly through music.

It was a symbiotic system that worked well until World War I, when the Army squashed Storyville to save the doughboys at the





local base from immorality until they could be shot in France. *C'est la guerre*, I guess. Literally.

New Orleans' magnet tradition continues, though, and we spend a memorable afternoon in the day lounge of a huge name-brand McClub listening to a talented musician from Seattle named Colin Lake, lately come down to learn the blues trade. Early the following morning, we hit old U.S. 61—the renowned pre-Interstate artery that runs from New Orleans clear to Bob Dylan's childhood Minnesota doorstep—and head to the true heart of the blues, the Mississippi Delta.

The first hundred miles nearly turned us back. Highway 61 tours some less-than-scenic sections of Baton Rouge and was not improved by the torrential rain of a Gulf Coast frog strangler. Then, just north of BR, on a long, bleak dead-end road comes the biggest downer: the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

Huddie Ledbetter, a.k.a. Lead Belly and an acknowledged founding father of the blues, did time there. It's worth noting that in the 1930s, when Library of Congress musicologists John and Alan Lomax wanted to find examples of the oldest, purest forms of African-American music, they went to Angola—where they “discovered” Lead Belly. Angola is as grim as grim gets, and for once we don't linger for the perfect photo; we don't even stop rolling. Martyn grabs a pic through the windshield, and I romp the throttle.

Several miles pass silently. We have different blues appreciations, as you'd expect from different backgrounds. Martyn is a former professional rock 'n' roll photographer and a lifelong student

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of the blues who listens to it every day. His proudest family possessions are a John Lee Hooker autograph and a 1960s photo of his sister with Little Walter. Meanwhile, I don't know jack, but I grew up amid the poverty, racism, and inequality that produced the blues in the first place, and my love of the music feels somehow innate. For both of us, however, a slap from the ugly side of blues reality is a thoroughly sobering experience.

Fortunately, the car soldiers along, as if in compensation. The '81 Cadillac V-8-6-4 was a technological disaster, rarely combining the correct cylinder selection with the correct opportunity, but it's worlds better once stuck in permanent V-8 mode. A smooth, steady 55 to 60 mph works fine, interrupted only by interminable fluid refills, the master cylinder being worryingly one of them. Nonetheless, the mileage computer, still spot-on after thirty-two years, shows a respectable 18-mpg average when the long day's drive lands us in the Delta town of Indianola, Mississippi.

Officially, no one knows where or when the blues began. Unofficially, this area around Indianola, Clarksdale, and Greenwood might as well be it, based on its sheer effect. Blues music reached national white recognition in the 1920s. B. B. King is from Indianola; Muddy Waters grew up on the nearby Stovall Plantation, where Alan Lomax famously recorded him in 1941; Bessie Smith died tragically in Clarksdale; and Robert Johnson sold his soul to

the devil at the Clarksdale crossroads of Highways 61 and 49. As this is among the poorest area in the poorest state in the U.S., some of that provenance could also prove useful going forward.

The smart money here is now on blues tourism—and with good reason. At Poor Monkey, one of the few old-time country-juke joints left and virtually unfindable by anyone but locals, we see supercool European twenty-somethings with tight black T-shirts and stylish shoes, never mind that there's no live music anymore.

Likewise, at the heart-poundingly authentic Red's Lounge in Clarksdale, where the Saturday night attractions are fourteen-year-old guitar genius Christone “Kingfish” Ingram and significantly older vocalist Josh “Razorblade” Stewart (“Razorblade, 'cause he always look sharp”), the crowd is almost entirely tourists, both foreign and domestic. With memories of a considerably different Mississippi, I don't care whether that's the result or the cause of Indianola's new B. B. King Museum or the steadily revitalizing, blues-themed Clarksdale downtown. To me, it's a sign God does love Mississippi and all is forgiven.

Farther up Route 61 in Memphis, blues tourism is nothing new. Beale Street was an early Tennessee equivalent to Storyville (except the prostitution wasn't legal), and I can remember awesome blues nights on Beale even in the bad old Southern days. It must be the planet's only blues-oriented big-city festival district, and not that far off Beale is Sun Studios, where Mississippi native and blues fan Elvis Presley perfected the art of a black blues attitude inside a white, top-forty skin.

The studio that matters personally, though, is 150 miles away in Muscle Shoals, Alabama: Fame Studios is where Duane Allman made his breakthrough in 1968, legend says, by living in a tent outside until they'd let him play. Since Duane and his brother Gregg



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were white boys born in Tennessee who had long hair and hippie clothes, the critics called the Allman Brothers' music “Southern rock.”

At its core, though, it was the blues, the perfect music for kids of different races who were best friends in the late '60s South to share in the only place we felt safe—the car, usually a cheap used one, always moving. Duane's “Statesboro Blues” sounds as good in the Fame parking lot, too, as it did when I was eighteen.

After Memphis, it's a long road indeed to Chicago on boring, featureless interstate. The Caddy is still going strong, so strong we're talking about keeping it but not so strong that I dare push it past 60 mph. The anticipation of getting there has a certain poignancy. Chicago was the ultimate magnet town for the entire mult-million-strong migration of hopeful African-American Southerners to the north, and tonight we'll see the part the blues migrants most hoped for. Buddy Guy left Louisiana for Chicago in 1957 at age twenty-one, got his first record contract a year later, and became a superstar.

Eric Clapton has called Guy “the best guitar player alive,” and his world-famous club, Buddy Guy's Legends, is completely packed on a normal Tuesday night. Career fulfillment doesn't get any better in the blues business.

With mere hours left before Martyn flies home, a visit to Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, formerly Chess Records and a lynchpin of that same blues business, seems a nice place to wrap up. It's where the Mississippi Delta immigrants recorded new, electrified Chicago blues that wowed The Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, and a mention to our guide, Willie's grandson Keith, of seeing Kingfish in Clarksdale gets such a nod of the blues cred I've been coveting that I hardly notice his subsequent comments on Little Walter climbing those very stairs over there. But Martyn notices.

I've never, ever seen Martyn ignore his camera before, but he does now, and for a long time I listen to them chat about Little Walter's '64 European tour, Muddy Waters playing Manchester, and John Lee Hooker on the BBC. Until it clicks. Of course he gets it. The blues to him was a sudden blast of fresh air into a stale world, of possibilities never before imagined. It changed his life forever. For some, exactly like the Beatles coming to America; for others, like going north to Chicago. Or chasing hope with a cheap used car.

