

OUT ON HIGHWAY 61

*Driving the road that bore the Blues from
the Deep South to Chicago – in a car that
cost less than the fuel needed for the trip*

WORDS Dale Drinnon // PHOTOGRAPHY Martyn Goddard



LIKE ANY CUNNING PLAN it was a considerable time in the making, and originally hatched during a now dimly remembered drive down some long, lonesome stretch of vast American road as Martyn Goddard and I listened to Muddy Waters on the radio. We should do a story in Mississippi Blues country, we decided, on illustrious Highway 61, driving through the heart of the Delta where the Blues were born.

We should, in fact, keep right on going along the Great Migration route that once took countless poor black Southerners to better lives in the industrial North, and giants like Muddy Waters to the Chicago clubs and studios where the Blues reached the wider world and changed popular music forever. And we liked the plan so much that for ages thereafter we were constantly, diligently, fine-tuning the details.

Somehow, though, we never quite pulled the trigger, mostly thanks to my fixation on finding

the Perfect Car. It plainly had to be a Cadillac, because that's what any self-respecting old-time bluesman (or blueswoman – and there have been many) with an urge to impress would want to drive to fame and fortune in Chicago. It had to be a cheap, used-up Cadillac, too, not a press fleet beauty or a 100-point resto classic, because used-up Cadillacs were the only kind old-time bluesmen coming from the Delta could have afforded. We should really just fly into New Orleans, I told myself, buy the first raggedy Caddy we find, and head to Chicago with it.

Fortunately I had the accidental good judgement to mention that suicidal idea to great friend, former racing partner, and long-time mechanical guru Stan Heath while visiting my native Tennessee last Christmas. 'Let me have a look around before you do anything,' he gently advised, and my jet lag hadn't evaporated from the return to Oxfordshire when I got his email.

'I think I've found a Cadillac,' Stan wrote. 'It's a 1981 Coupe de Ville, no major rot, and everything important works except the air con. New alternator, drives fine, and I can get it for a thousand bucks, dead-even.' I transferred the money to the States straight away, the full princely £656.36 of it, and called Martyn. 'Start booking hotels,' I said. 'The Blues trip is on... and we'd better finish before Mississippi hits air conditioning season.'

Consequently I arrived in Tennessee in mid-April, with a week to prep the car to a standard commensurate with the project's struggling-bluesman philosophy. I replaced one tail-lamp bulb and a windscreen wiper, hammered the balky driver's power seat into co-operation, and begged a bit of free help with the wheel cover locks from my buddy Alan Phelps at Cadillac of Knoxville, as well as two free second-hand tyres from ex-boss Lowell Arp at Twin City Buick (slightly too small but, hey, the critical word is 'free').



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Then I replaced the missing radio with a \$20 boombox from America’s equivalent to Poundland and, to set a proper bluesy mood, met Stan, wife Tina and son Stirling for a send-off dinner of our local Bishop’s barbeque – only available for home consumption, and only if you know who to ask and bring cash. The next morning I left for New Orleans to rendezvous with Martyn’s flight from London.

For anyone making such an expedition, especially a Brit, New Orleans is the ideal start. Besides having the largest international airport in the region, it’s historically the most delightfully laissez-faire city in the American South, and a few days in the French Quarter provides a painless introduction to the complexities of Southern culture. Or cultures, I should say; we’ve got bunches, all with different customs, cuisines, music, and especially accents.

So don’t worry if you don’t understand us immediately, we sometimes don’t understand each other, but we’re a gregarious and chatty lot (something else you’ll need to adjust to) and everything works out eventually if you go with the flow. Do remember, however, the pronunciation ‘New OR-lens’ is preferred to ‘New Or-LEANS’, unless you’re ZZ Top or Louis Armstrong – and don’t try ‘NAH-lens’ until you’ve lived there long enough to master

‘REMEMBER, IT’S *NEW OR-LENS*, NOT *NEW OR-LEANS*, UNLESS YOU’RE ZZ TOP’

the subtleties. After two years in Louisiana, I never could get it right.

Of course, the main French Quarter attraction is the music. Music first became a viable profession for black people in the Deep South soon after the Civil War, in the Quarter’s Storyville red-light district (part of our posh Dauphine Orleans Hotel was once a Storyville brothel). Music was furthermore among the few African-American jobs carrying appreciable earning potential, and both Jazz and Blues sprang from those beginnings.

Musicians of every discipline still flock there, too, and it’s a worthy education to wander club to club, listening for the Blues underpinnings behind so many genres, and with so many variations. A half-hour walk can easily take you from a righteous, straight-up Delta dobro performance by earnest young Colin Lake, to a

soulful, hard-charging R&B standard by Lil’ Red and Big Bad, to a Skynyrd tribute band shattering the eardrums of drunken lager louts in Confederate-flag t-shirts. Whatever you want, brother, all you gotta do is shop around.

New Orleans also happens to be the southern anchor of Highway 61, and an early start is critical if you’re to get any miles into the day; an hour north is Baton Rouge, and traffic can be as bad as it is in New Orleans, especially if there’s a Gulf Coast downpour en route. Once past BR, though, it’s smooth sailing, with good, open A-roads full to Memphis. Sadly, that’s irrelevant to us, since anything above 60mph slings out oil and transmission fluid faster than I can pour them in.

But at a steady 55 to 60 (about the legal limit anyway) the car cruises like a champ. As produced, it boasted what Cadillac called a V8-6-4, selectively dropping cylinders for fuel efficiency, which worked as erratically as 1981 electronics would predict.

With that feature thankfully long since kaput, it’s merely a nice American V8 land yacht, with decent power, a smooth ride, and as quiet as the tomb where any sudden change of direction would certainly send us – and the top-up stops do allow us ample opportunities to see the sights on the Mississippi Blues Trail map.

You will, however, spend about a year if you overdo those stops, and some priority-setting is wise. We limit ourselves to a peek at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola (which actually isn't on the map), where acclaimed Founding Father of the Blues, Huddie Ledbetter, aka Lead Belly, did time and was famously 'discovered' by Library of Congress musicologists John Lomax and his son, Alan. You will definitely not want to pause at the wretched place long, anyway, and we enjoy a counterbalancing layover in beautiful, antebellum, plantation Natchez. Seeing both back to back is another education, of a disturbingly different kind.

Extra stops notwithstanding, a comfortable day's drive will still get you to Indianola, geographic centre of the Delta as well as the historical centre. Most every significant event in the early history of the Blues happened within a 50-mile radius: BB King is from Indianola; Muddy Waters grew up on nearby Stovall Plantation and Alan Lomax recorded him there in 1941; Bessie Smith died tragically from a car accident up Highway 61 in Clarksdale; and Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil at the Clarksdale crossroads of Highways 61 and 49.

Best of all, savvy Delta residents are working to both preserve their Blues heritage and aid the local economy, traditionally among the poorest in the USA, through the medium of Blues tourism, and to good effect. The Delta isn't just a place to run from anymore; it can indeed be pretty inviting. The Lofts hotel rooms overlooking revitalised downtown Clarksdale are bigger than my house, with much better kitchens; Indianola's Blue Biscuit Bungalows are re-located, antique-filled old plantation buildings, directly across from the inspiring BB King Museum.

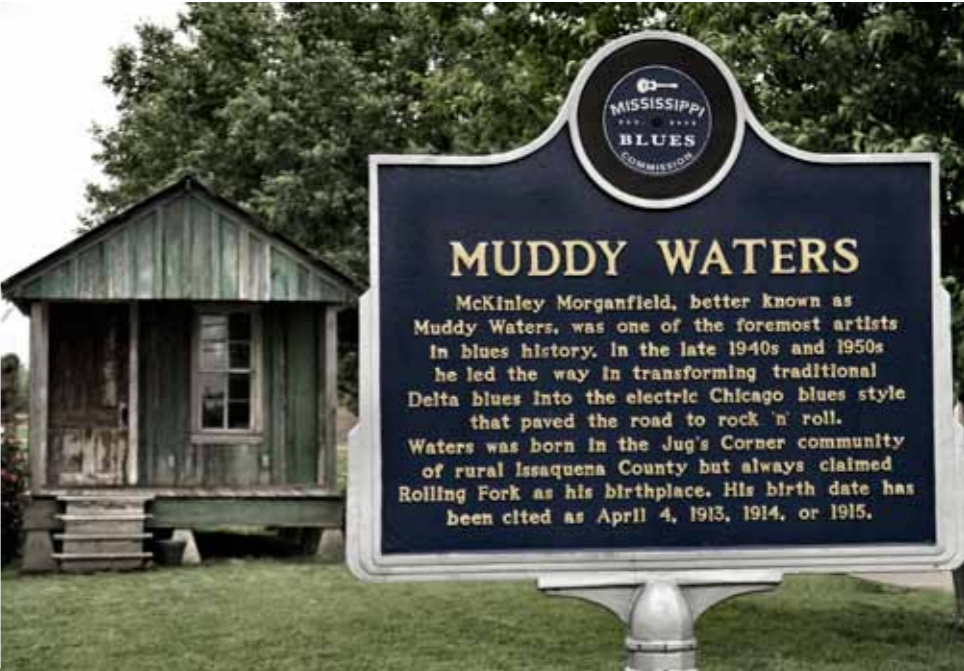
Most importantly, leave plenty of time for the music. Ground Zero, co-owned by actor Morgan Freeman, is almost always hopping; we saw the All Night Long Blues Band, a popular Mississippi group with a Delta/Western Swing sound and a nice combination of showmanship and genuine talent.

But don't pass up the rare chance to visit dying-breed, juke-joint-type venues, like Po' Monkey in Merigold (only open on Thursdays) and Red's Lounge in Clarksdale. They'll look rough, but you'll be safe as houses, and if you're lucky you might hear 14-year-old guitar genius Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram at Red's and, not long from now, brag that you did.

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Just be aware that Red is very protective of the talent, and gets tetchy if he thinks you're filming without giving them a cut of the action. Red doesn't completely understand the whole principle of YouTube, I'm afraid. It also pays to check with Roger Stolle at Cat Head in Clarksdale for the latest events; he's a goldmine of Blues info across the board.

Travelling north to Memphis will by contrast illuminate why Delta music was called 'Country Blues': Beale Street is so urban that cops deploy metal detectors on the weekends, like airport security. Even so, it must be the planet's only Blues-oriented big-city festival district, in business basically as long as the Quarter and, despite the crowding, everyone is well-behaved and civil (we are Southerners, after all). BB King made his professional mark in Memphis and now owns the biggest club on Beale, and close by is Sun Studios, where Mississippian Elvis Presley rather effectively applied the lessons he'd learned as a young Blues fan.

The studio that matters personally, though, is 150 miles away in Muscle Shoals, Alabama: Fame Studios, 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 brother Greg were white boys born in Tennessee, had long hair and hippie clothes, the critics called the Allman Brothers' music 'Southern Rock'.

But us Poor White Trash Southerners knew it was nothing but Blues, and for the few years before Duane died on his Harley in 1971, it probably did more in the South to connect poor white kids and poor black kids than anything besides school integration. I'd like to think that the fruits of that connection may be flowering in the Delta even as we speak.

After Memphis, there's a long road to Chicago, and on boring, featureless motorway, but the Caddy continues going strong; no problems in the well-over one thousand trip miles save a puncture in Mississippi – mended, my friends, for a paltry five quid.



**'ONLY SCHOOL
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SEE, DO, EAT, SLEEP:

Dauphine Orleans Hotel, New Orleans: classic French Quarter elegance, historic Storyville location. Very cool indeed.
www.dauphineorleans.com

Blue Biscuit Bungalows, Indianola: vintage plantation lodgings, funky atmosphere, outstanding location. Book early.
www.thebluebiscuit.com

BB King Museum, Indianola: highlighting Indianola's favourite son. Brilliant Blues and civil rights exhibits.
www.bbkingmuseum.org

The Lofts at the Five & Dime, Clarksdale: upscale, tasteful accommodation in rejuvenated downtown Clarksdale.
www.fiveanddimelofts.com

Ground Zero Blues Club, Clarksdale: blues, honky-tonk and a touch of roadhouse. Always something happenin'.
www.groundzerobluesclub.com

Red's Lounge, 395 Sunflower Ave, Clarksdale: old-school Delta juke joint, one of the few left. Raw-edged, simple, but an absolute must.
(Website? Man, I don't think they even got a phone.)

Po' Monkey's Lounge, Merigold: much like Red's, but down a country road and rarely has live music – again, the last of its kind. You'll need to ask for directions, and your sat nav won't help.

Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale: includes Muddy Waters' childhood log cabin from Stovall Plantation.
www.deltabluesmuseum.org

Rock & Blues Museum, Clarksdale: huge collection of memorabilia, privately owned by an avid Dutch fan.
www.blues2rock.com

Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art Store, Clarksdale: part record shop, part gallery, part research centre, and the brainchild of Blues historian and author Roger Stolle. Worth the trip all by itself.
www.cathead.biz

Holiday Inn Express, Cleveland: perfectly placed and reasonably priced. Spend your money on the music instead!
www.hiexpress.com

River Inn of Harbor Town, Memphis: refined, spacious suites overlooking the mighty Mississippi. Turn-down service includes a civilized glass of port.
www.riverinnmemphis.com

Marriott Downtown, Memphis: secure, friendly, helpful, and easy walking distance to Beale Street.
www.marriott.com

Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, Chicago: museum in the former Chess Records premises, where the magic entered the vinyl age.
www.bluesheaven.com

Buddy Guy's Legends, Chicago: live Blues most nights and sometimes genuinely by the 'Legends'.
www.buddyguy.com

Mississippi Blues Trail Information: the place to look if you want to find Robert Johnson's birthplace.
www.msbluestrail.org

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1981 CADILLAC COUPE DE VILLE

ENGINE 6036cc (368ci) variable displacement V8, OHV, throttle-body fuel injection **POWER** 140bhp @ 3800rpm
TORQUE 265lb ft @ 1400rpm **TRANSMISSION** Three-speed Turbo-Hydra-Matic automatic, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Power-assisted recirculating ball
SUSPENSION Front: double A-arms, tube shocks, coil springs, anti-roll bar. Rear: Live axle, four-link location, tube shocks, coil springs
BRAKES Discs at front, drums at rear **WEIGHT** 1883kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 130mph. 0-60mph 14.2sec

Even more amazingly, the ancient but surprisingly accurate trip computer is now hovering close to 20mpg.

Meanwhile, the anticipation of Getting There is almost unbearable; Chicago was the ultimate magnet town for the entire Great Migration, and the place to see what that meant for the Blues.

If you want the amazing stories and anecdotes, go see Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven, located in the former premises of Chess Records, where Dixon and the other Southern immigrants developed the style known as Chicago Blues (the Delta sound, but electrified, louder and more exuberant) that wowed John Mayall and Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page. It's a museum run by the Dixon family, and Willie's grandson Keith knows 'em all.

If you want the feelings, go to Buddy Guy's. Buddy left Louisiana for Chicago in 1957, aged 21, got his first record contract a year later, and became a superstar, based on the Chicago Blues sound. Clapton called him 'the



best guitar player alive', and his slick, world-renowned club, Buddy Guy's Legends, is completely packed on a slow Tuesday night, even though Buddy himself isn't on the bill. Career fulfilment doesn't get any better in the Blues business, and I can't help but look at the awards in his trophy case and think of Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson and the hard road up from the Delta.

And in the morning I deliver Martyn to his London-bound plane and roll the Caddy back on the highway south. It's a long drive to Tennessee alone, but I've got a boot full of oil and tranny fluid, and a homemade Allman Brothers CD, and as I nudge the speedo dangerously close to 70, I cue up 'One Way Out' and crank it. Next time, I think, maybe we should do this on bikes, and hey, my friend Wesley has a couple of Sportsters that would be perfect. *End*

THANKS TO Roger Stolle of Cat Head, Clarksdale, Mississippi, and to Robin Arnold of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for their technical assistance.