

Highway 61 Revisited

What's the best way to see the South? Easy: from behind the wheel of a Ford Mustang, on a six-hundred-mile pilgrimage through the heartland of country, rock'n'roll and the blues. How sweet the sound. By GRAHAM BOYNTON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA BEHREND'S

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here you at? Where you at?"

I'm photographing the graffiti-strewn building that is Morgan Freeman's blues club in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and a well-dressed woman appears to be shouting and

gesticulating at me from across the street.

Recognizing me as a stranger in town, she is apparently trying to establish where I am from. She identifies herself as Princess, and immediately shoots out another question.

"You know Kingfish?"

I tell her I have no idea what she is talking about, so she rummages around in her handbag and pulls out a CD. It is a demo by Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, and Princess says she is his mother.

"He's playing tonight. Delta Blues Room. You should go hear him." And with that, she is gone.

That night, when I follow her tip, I can barely believe what I am seeing and hearing. Kingfish is a 16-year-old who's the size of a baby whale (note to Princess: put your son on a diet before it is too late), who plays blues guitar like a god and who sings the blues like a grizzled veteran. There are no more than 20 people in the shabby, dimly-lit Delta Blues Room, mostly British and Australian tourists, all as amazed as I am. Later, I drop into three more Clarksdale blues clubs, including Freeman's much celebrated Ground Zero, and in each one I hear virtuoso live performances that back home would fill the Albert Hall.

It shouldn't really be that surprising, for the South is the source of all the popular music we've been listening to for the past 50 or 60 years. Blues, rock'n'roll, soul, country, jazz, gospel, rockabilly—it all comes from the South. It migrated out of the Mississippi Delta, north along Highway 61 to America's big cities, when the cotton fields became mechanized in the early 1940s. And from those cities—Memphis, Chicago, Detroit and New York—the music spread across the planet and has become the soundtrack to our lives.

I have long had a thing about the Deep South. Perhaps that should read "thang". I love the accents, the people (particularly the Southern belles, who are as eye-flutteringly seductive today as they were in *Gone With The Wind*), the turbulent history, the vast, ever-changing countryside and, most of all, the music. And with every visit I become more intoxicated. This latest journey

has all the makings of a perfect Southern excursion—a 600-mile road trip that takes me from Muscle Shoals in Alabama, up through Tupelo, Mississippi, the birthplace of Elvis Presley, to Clarksdale, where the blues was born, up through the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta to Memphis and then finally across to Nashville. And although music is at the centre of the journey, there is much more. The South remains apart from the rest of the US, with a culture significantly different to that found north of the Mason-Dixon line and a people who have a great sense of place. To fully understand this you have to read Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner, visit the perfectly preserved Civil War sites, immersing yourself in the heartbreaking stories and gruesome, tragic battles, and, of course, drench yourself in the music and nightlife of these towns and cities. Added to that, you should take to these famous highways in a V6 Ford Mustang with the top down. That's Southern bliss, y'all.

I start in Muscle Shoals because it is one of the unheralded birthplaces of modern music. The sound that came out of its recording studios in the early 1960s, sung by a bellhop at the local hotel (Arthur Alexander) and a hospital porter (Percy Sledge), among others, provided the British beat groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones with their early inspiration and turned this modest place on the Tennessee River into the Lourdes of rock. What followed through the 1960s was a stampede of rock artists—the Stones, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon—eager to drink from this magic cup.

In fact, The Shoals is a collection of four tiny side-by-side villages—Florence, Muscle Shoals, Sheffield and Tuscumbia. In the 18th century the Tennessee River was known to the Yuchi Indian tribe living along its banks as Nun Nuh-Sae: the river that sings. I visit the keeper of the Yuchi flame, Tom Hendrix, who lives just outside Florence and who, over the past 25 years, has been building the Wichahpi Commemorative Stone Wall, now the largest dry stone wall in the US and the largest memorial to a native American Indian. That person is his great-great-grandmother, who in 1839 was removed from her Muscle Shoals home and relocated in an Indian reservation in distant Oklahoma. "When she got there," Hendrix tells me, "she said she listened to streams and rivers and there were no songs. So she decided to come home to this river and she walked all the way back. It took her five years."

So, if you are inclined to believe in such Jungian spiritual synchronicity, then this wonderful story offers some explanation of why W.C. Handy, the father of the blues, Sam Phillips, the father of rock'n'roll, and Rick Hall, the creator of the Muscle Shoals sound, have all emerged from these little villages on the Alabama border beside the river that sings. Handy and Phillips are long gone, but Rick Hall, now a remarkably fit 82, is very much alive, and if you visit his Fame studios you are likely to see him still attempting to turn some young discovery into the next Otis Redding or Wilson Pickett. Times have changed since the early days of Fame, for when he was

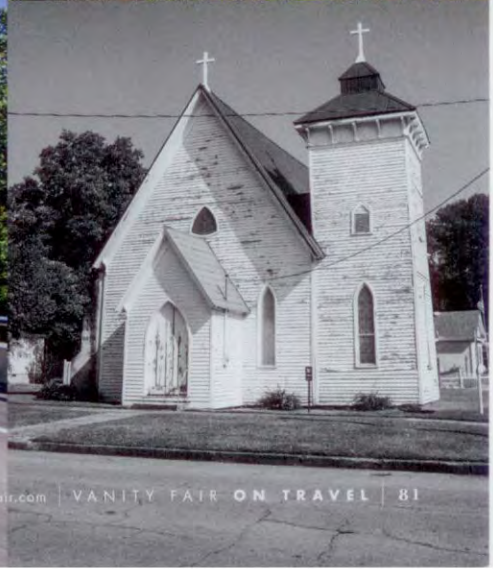


ILLUSTRATION: HEATHER GATELY



TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROAD

Clockwise from top left: the Belle Meade Mansion, Nashville; a Muscle Shoals farm fence and repair shop; six miles to go; a church, Muscle Shoals; the Natchez Trace Parkway; Carrington Plantation in Franklin, TN. Centre: a vintage Chevy truck on the Trace.





NASHVILLE SKYLINE

Clockwise from top left: Don Schlitz performing at The Bluebird Café; cowboy hats at the Trail West store; Broadway signage; a truck stop on Charlotte Pike; the writer entering downtown Nashville; Old Crow Medicine Show busking outside the Grand Ole Opry; busking on Broadway. Centre: a floorplate backstage at the Grand Ole Opry.



recording black artists and working with black and white musicians in the 1960s, Alabama was being torn apart by race confrontations, and white-separatist politicians such as George Wallace were preaching segregation. Talking in his cluttered office above the studio, Hall tells me he was recording the international hit *Land of 1000 Dances* with Wilson Pickett “the same day that George Wallace was standing in that schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama saying we didn’t want black people there. Down here, the music always wins.”

From Muscle Shoals, I point the Mustang west and head for Mississippi, stopping off briefly in Tupelo to join the daily throng visiting the shotgun shack where Elvis Presley was born, before arriving in Clarksdale. The thing about this town of just 17,000 residents, apart from being the birthplace of the blues (Robert Johnson is famously supposed to have sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for mastery of the blues at the crossroads here) and being a breeding ground for guitar prodigies like Kingfish, is that it has a history far above and beyond the music. In its day, Clarksdale was known as the golden buckle on the cotton belt; in 1920 the *Wall Street Journal* called it the Magic City because it was home to so many millionaires. It was also the social backdrop for Tennessee Williams’s plays. Over breakfast at the Yazoo Pass café, I am introduced to the proprietor, John Cocks, who reveals

In Memphis I park the Mustang for three days and bounce from landmark to landmark: Beale Street to Sun to Stax to Graceland and, of course, to the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was assassinated. It is now the National Civil Rights Museum, a \$25 million institution that traces the travails of America’s black people from the abolition of slavery through to the civil turbulence of the late 1960s to the rise of the country’s first black president.

I stay both at the historic Peabody, conveniently located a five-minute walk from the Beale Street clubs, and at the Madison, a hip contemporary hotel whose rooftop bar overlooks the mighty Mississippi River. It’s at the Madison’s Eighty3 restaurant that I eat my first decent meal in 10 days: a welcome respite after a succession of typically Southern repasts, which largely comprise a starter of deep-fried onion rings, a main course of deep-fried something (chicken, shrimp, catfish) followed by a dessert of fried something else (deep-fried ice cream. I kid you not). This is possibly the only place on earth where macaroni cheese is regarded as a vegetable, so to describe much of the South as a culinary desert is being kind.

My last day in Memphis is a Sunday, and I celebrate by attending Bishop Al Green’s Full Gospel Tabernacle Church.

ROBERT JOHNSON IS FAMOUSLY SUPPOSED TO HAVE SOLD HIS SOUL TO THE DEVIL AT THE CROSSROADS HERE

he is the son of the real Baby Doll. He also tells me that Brick, the Paul Newman character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, was actually Clarksdale’s sheriff in the early 1950s. Although a dusty shadow of its former self—you can buy a Southern mansion here for around \$300,000—Clarksdale is riding a wave of enthusiasm for the blues and is looking to tourism to fuel an economic recovery.

Memphis is only 70 miles north of Clarksdale on Highway 61, the Blues Highway, and the 90-minute drive through the white sea of cotton fields in bloom allows me a little time to channel-hop the local radio stations, switching from ranting right-wing talk-show hosts to hollering preachers to machine-gun-delivery DJs. After such an audio-barrage, it’s a relief to see the bright lights of Memphis ahead.

The very name Memphis evokes the romantic roots of rock and soul music. In Sam Phillips’s Sun Studios (still the most dramatic and best studio tour in the South), rock’n’roll was born way back in 1951. In the following decade, Stax Studios became, until Martin Luther King’s assassination, the heartland of Southern soul (Otis Redding, The Staple Singers, Sam & Dave and many more), and, of course, this was where Elvis Presley’s career was launched and where he created his garish mansion Graceland. It is a rough-and-tumble city where African Americans are in the majority; where real, uncompromising blues clubs are to be found in distant suburbs; and where on a Sunday morning the sound of gospel soars through the air like some enchanted call.

It’s an explosion of gospel music, wild dancing in the pulpits and firebrand preaching by the former million-seller soul singer himself. If only our own churches had embraced their religions with such unrestrained passion and pleasure, they would surely not be as empty as they are today. But they’ve got soul in the South, and even this hard-hearted atheist is moved almost to tears by these swaying, harmonizing, wailing parishioners.

That night I rather undermine my spiritual revival by spending a few hours in a dark-and-dirty blues club. I’ve met up with the ever-languid Dennis Hopper lookalike Tad Pierson, who operates a bespoke tour service called American Dream Safari (clients include Elvis Costello, Aerosmith and Wilson Pickett) and who has taken me to the city’s outer limits on previous trips. Tad believes that people are “called to Memphis, the altar of experience”, and he uses a beaten-up barge of a ’56 Cadillac that passes as pink (it’s more caramel) to transport his clients around the city. Tad takes me to The Blues Club, in a distant suburb at the far end of Lamar. We are the only white people there; everyone is gracious and friendly; and what we witness is the most wild, out-there, orgasmic blues and soul celebration of the whole trip. This is nightlife as unselfconscious sensuality writ large, an experience buttoned-down Caucasians should partake of at least once in their lifetime. What a Sunday.

It’s time to take to the road again, and on a bright sunny autumn morning I leave Memphis and head to the historic town of Corinth to spend a few hours at its Civil War Interpretive Center and to visit the nearby Shiloh National Military Park, the

best-preserved Civil War battlefield in Tennessee and possibly the entire South. Shiloh is now a 22-acre park that attracts 200,000 visitors a year. It transmits the same overwhelming sadness and sense of despair one feels in the First World War battlefields in Flanders. The battles of Corinth and Shiloh were fought over the Corinth railway crossroads in the centre of the town. It was carnage on a grand scale, with 8,000 dying in the battle of Corinth and more than 23,000 in the subsequent battle of Shiloh, the bloodiest in American history. Like Flanders fields, this is now a peaceful, idyllic park. Driving away from Shiloh towards Nashville, I feel vividly aware of why Southerners still refer to the Civil War as The War, as if none of equal importance has taken place since.

And so to my final stop: Nashville. I arrive just in time to drop my bags at the 404 Hotel—one of many new boutique hotels across a city that has a shortage of hotel rooms thanks to its success as a major convention centre—and head for the clubs. First stop is 3rd & Lindsley, a bar-and-grill venue, to hear The Time Jumpers, a collective of Nashville's top session players that included the country superstar Vince Gill and the brilliant Hall of Fame steel guitar virtuoso Paul Franklin. This is the antithesis of the previous hot, sweaty, rude night of Memphis blues. It's like Mozart string quartet meets the Hot Club Of France: genteel, lilting, melodic, all restraint and discipline. It also sums up succinctly the essential differences between the two cities. If Memphis is somewhat dishevelled, dangerous—it is the US's 10th most murderous city—and, in parts, down-at-heel, Nashville is well-groomed, neatly clipped and well-behaved. Small, manageable and friendly, Nashville consistently tops "favourite city" polls, and has seen many big stars (Nicole Kidman, Jack White, Ed Sheeran, Johnny Depp) buy homes here in recent years because it's safe and discreet. The surrounding countryside is filled with perfectly-coiffed farms and quiet, law-abiding dormitory communities. Cutting through it, and then on to Mississippi for some 400 miles, is the Natchez Trace Parkway, one of America's most beautiful roads. This impeccably maintained two-lane blacktop swoops through forests of maple, hickory and oak trees and tended grasslands that must require the attentions of fleets of giant lawnmowers.

The Tennessee countryside provides a perfect contrast to the neon-lit jukebox clamour of downtown Nashville, where the rowdy Broadway honky-tonks bang out live country/rock/blues/folk music from early afternoon until late at night, moving bands of outstanding musicians all playing for tips in the hope that some A&R man is going to come by and discover them. Then there is the more serious side where mainly Southern, mainly country music is played in those famous places—the Ryman Auditorium (home of the Grand Ole Opry), the Bluebird Cafe, the Station Inn, and 3rd & Lindsley. The big stars such as Vince Gill, Emmylou Harris and Brenda Lee are still around, but Nashville is much more than a retirement home for rich country singers. There are more hot, talented up-and-coming singers and songwriters here than in any other world music capital. This is, as the advertising slogans proclaim, Music City.

Then it's over. Twelve days on the road, 600 miles covered. But that barely tells the story. As Susan Sontag wrote, "If you start dancing on tables, fanning yourself, feeling sleepy when you pick up a book, developing a sense of rhythm, making love whenever you feel like it—then you know. The South has got you." And so it is. □

THE SOUTH

WAY TO GO

For further detailed information on similar US holidays, see discoveramerica.com. Luxury operator **Cleveland Collection** (020 7843 3531; clevelandcollection.co.uk) can tailor-make a 10-night self-drive Southern musical states itinerary visiting **Muscle Shoals, Tupelo, Clarksdale, Memphis** and **Nashville** from £1,550. This includes return flights, 10 nights' accommodation and Alamo car rental. You can hire a Mustang convertible with **Alamo** (alamo.co.uk/USA) starting from £198 per week.

NEED TO KNOW

☐ consider the following hotels: **The Lofts at the Five & Dime** (fiveanddime.com) in Clarksdale; **The Peabody** (peabodymemphis.com) or the **Madison** (madisonhotelmemo.com) in Memphis; **Printers Alley Lofts** (printersalleylofts.com), the **Loews Vanderbilt** (loewshotels.com) or **Hotel 404** (the404nashville.com/hotel) in Nashville.

☐ DON'T visit the South in summer. It is hot, humid and oppressive. The best time is either the spring months (May and June) or, even better, autumn (October and early November).

☐ have breakfast at the **Loveless Café**, just off the Natchez Trace Parkway outside Nashville. Get there early, as the waiting time around midday is sometimes two hours.

☐ DON'T set off on a road trip without GPS. The on and off ramps in most US cities are confusing and general signposting difficult to follow.

☐ book well ahead for performances at the **Ryman Auditorium, The Bluebird Café** and other top Nashville venues. Top shows sell out fast.

☐ DON'T miss the Civil War sites: **Corinth, Shiloh** (see main story) and **Franklin**, just 15 miles outside Nashville, the site of the bloodiest five hours in the Civil War—the South lost six generals.

READ ON

There are more books about the musical South than there are guitar pickers in Nashville. Read Peter Guralnick's **Sweet Soul Music** (Canongate), Stanley Booth's **Rythm Oil** (sic) (Pantheon), and Roger Stolle's **Hidden History of Mississippi Blues** (The History Press); also Shelby Foote's definitive trilogy **The Civil War** (Random House)—if you can find the audio books, with the author reading in his mellifluous Southern drawl, even better: the perfect driving companion.

PS

Chat up the locals. Most Southerners are as open, friendly and accommodating as their reputation suggests, and they do like British visitors. They're happy to offer advice and delighted to share that most valuable commodity: insider knowledge.