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*We humbly and respectfully
slaved Africans who were
against their will and who
to the music we have come*

*We cannot begin to compare
of this marvelous artistic art
it, celebrate it, and encourage
of this book.*

*This book is also lovingly
shows us everything that is*

*Finally, we dedicate this
us with the utmost respect*

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Chasing the Blues: A Traveler's Guide to America's Music

Synopsis

Chasing the Blues explores the roots of the blues—the music birthed in the Mississippi Delta by African Americans who fashioned a new form of musical expression grounded in their shared experience of brutal oppression. They used the power of music to survive that oppression, creating a simple-in-structure, emotionally complex form that transformed and upended culture and became the bedrock of popular song.

Tracing the music back to its geographical and cultural origins in the Delta is key to understanding how the blues were shaped. Over time, the Delta blues have touched virtually every form of popular music (rock and roll, soul, R&B, country-western, gospel), creating the soundscape of our lives.

What makes this book unique? Fathoming how the music flowed from living and working conditions in the heart of the Deep South; appreciating how life-changing events like the Flood of 1927 sparked a mass migration away from plantation life, spreading the blues to the cities in the North and becoming the soundtrack to the civil rights movement; how blues musicians interacted, "cross-fertilizing" their music by learning, influencing, and imitating each other.

The habits of travel are shifting, and there is more interest and a larger market for diving deep into destinations closer to home. Interest in Black history and culture and the role Black Americans played in shaping America is at an all-time high. By appreciating the roots of this most American style of music, readers will have a richer experience listening to songs and visiting blues' holy and sacred sites.

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INTRODUCTION: TO THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

The front door to our house is sapphire blue. It's a regular door on an ordinary street, but if you look closely you can see dings and scratches left by a steady flow of guitar cases, unwieldy keyboards, and music stands. When you play, create, and teach music, the gig comes with a stream of musicians and their gear. There are times when a wide barn door on a sliding track would be more suitable—more elbow room, fewer chips in the paint.

The dings and marks tell just one part of our story. To us—a writer and a writer-musician—our blue front door is the portal to a lifestyle that blends our passions of music, writing, and travel. It's the color of the sky and the sea; it's often part of a song title; it's the cover of our Canadian passports; and in the pecking order of American-born song, blues is the root from which much twentieth-century popular music grew.

Our Story

The first thing people want to know is how we ended up “living the dream.” Two pre-retirement adults, with our dog, in a tricked-out camper van, no schedule (so they think), bags of cash (imaginary), stoked with wanderlust and going with the wind.

It begins with a deeply ingrained curiosity. We both read voraciously and are obsessed with current events as well as how the arc of history sculpts the land and people we encounter. One of us—Jo—is a full-time travel writer with the kind of gig you wish you had if you really wanted to work for pennies an hour and be traveling one-third of the year, following a schedule to all points of the compass, from the high desert of Arizona to the savannah of Kenya to the Arctic tundra, and all destinations in-between. Craig writes public policy as part of the growing gig economy, and is a lifer musician who paid his dues in the 1970s and 1980s, learning his chops on bandstands from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island. Picture the kind of guy who could spend every waking hour happily playing and singing jazz, folk, blues, rock and roll, or reading politics, philosophy, and history.

In our household, the overlapping lifestyles of writing and music produce a creative synergy and when we looked we saw a field of possibilities. As a writer and a musician (two get-poor-quick careers), we almost always travel on a shoestring budget with writing assignments in hand, an overarching mission, and a grueling timetable. We wanted that “dream” lifestyle, but with only imaginary bags of cash in hand, we needed to find a realistic way to make it happen. Conjuring up a plan to explore the roots of American music seemed a natural fit: music, travel, culture with some history, and a lot of local foods on the menu. We decided a long road trip was in order to search for the headwaters of the music on which we were raised. The southeast part of the United States is a hothouse of roots American song—the musical forms that grew from this region changed the world.

That was the easy part. We combined our passions, stocked the van, loaded the dog, locked our blue front door, rolled down the driveway, and pointed ourselves south. Along the way, we learned everything we possibly could about the music, gathering material and experiences to write about those song-infused destinations.

So when we hit on the idea of following that music to its source, we knew we were in for an intense learning experience. What we didn't know was that we were going to have so much fun and be eyewitnesses to the lives of so many fascinating people.

A Journey of a Thousand Miles

We knew we needed to be mobile; to go to communities large and small, talk with people, play music on their front porches and stages, eat their foods, swap stories, and laugh with them. Step one was to purchase a used Class B recreational vehicle (RV)—also known as a camper van conversion—and learn the road tripping lifestyle. This turned out to be the ideal device for our purposes: spacious enough to live and sleep in but nimble enough to navigate remote twisty back roads; small enough to park in a standard downtown space but large enough to create a compact, on-the-road office (well, *almost* an office space as it does take some juggling and a certain commitment to compromise).

We are also dog lovers, so we needed enough room to take Eleanor Rigby—our personable English Shepherd—who turned out to be more popular than either of us. We quickly learned that to instantly break the ice with total strangers, get a smart, well-trained, good-looking dog and take it everywhere.

Over the past seven years, we've nurtured this nomadic work-life combo of itchy feet, planning, and a good measure of luck into a series of long road trips, each with a specific theme that always includes the music of the region. Our first trip in 2013—exploring the roots of American music—was 5,600 miles over six weeks from Ontario, Canada to the Southeast states. We followed one drawn-out, serpentine trail, studying the styles of music that took root and flourished in America. We visited several times more, once spending more than a month delving as intensely as possible along the back roads and into the small communities of Mississippi. We had the time of our lives meeting people, listening to their written and musical stories, walking through their neighborhoods, and learning how music forms the sonic backdrop of their experience.

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THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Whether entering the Delta from the south or the north (we've done it from both directions), it's like a switch is abruptly thrown to reveal a spectacle of dramatic and often punishing contrasts spread out as far as the eye can see (thank you to Paul Simon for the image of "shining like a National guitar").

Approaching from the south, the change in geography is that sudden. You don't so much arrive as have the Mississippi Delta presented to you in a tableau of unending acres stretched to the horizon. Rich and poor. Renovated and shuttered. Vintage and contemporary. The one thing it is, all over, is flat. Anvil flat. Billiard table flat. Chalkboard flat.

We drew an east-west line through Cleveland and, in our travels, thought of the stretch to the north as the upper Delta and the remainder to the south as the lower Delta. For practical travel purposes it just made sense to look at each section separately. The entire Delta is formed and heavily impacted by the flow and ravages of the Mississippi. The entire region has a long and heartbreaking struggle with the inequity and harshness of a plantation economy. The lower Delta was the site of the country's most devastating flood, forever changing the landscape, the economy, and the people. The power of the river is never forgotten here.

Most fans of the blues know about Clarksdale in the upper Delta. It's considered ground zero for every blues pilgrim. Across the wide expanse of the lower Delta there is a wealth of blues history that may not have the press coverage and the caché of Clarksdale, but it is notable as the birthplaces and street corner busking sites of blues greats like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and Jimmy "Duck" Holmes. It's also where "the Southern cross the Dog" (read more about that under Moorhead in this chapter).

With time, the fullness of the blues was nurtured, grew, and flourished across the lower Delta. It's home to the haunting Bentonia sound at the historic Blue Front Cafe. The lower Delta is also where B. B. King (the "King of the Blues") was born, raised, and never forgot his hometown roots. No exploration of the roots of the blues in Mississippi is complete without spending a day at the excellent B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola. And, of course, the lower Delta is also home to Greenwood, an important site of civil rights history, and its small neighborhood of Baptist Town. Clarksdale may claim the Crossroads (and yes, that is a highly contested claim) but there is no doubt that the Greenwood area owns the spot Robert Johnson died and was buried.

The lower Delta may not have Clarksdale but it's got its own wild stories, birthplaces, burial sites, fantastic museums, and live blues music scene in almost every small town. Miss it and you'll be missing half the story.

Exploring the landscape of the lower Delta took us along historic Highway 61, the river-hugging Mississippi portion of the Great River Road National Scenic Byway. By visiting small towns, walking the famous levees at Greenville, and admiring the blues murals at Rolling Fork, we found an experience that brought land, water, and communities together. (experiencemississippiriver.com)

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Road tripping the Lower Delta

Like much of the upper Delta, driving across the lower reaches brought home the heartbreaking story of abandonment. Countless homes and businesses were boarded up as their owners left in search of a sustainable income and lifestyle. To us, this was the reason why understanding all of the forces---historical, cultural, technological, and political---was so important. Because the stories of these small towns, deserted main streets, and tumbledown homes with plywood nailed over the windows were about much more than just present day economics. They tell a history of the Great Flood of 1927, of technology wiping out jobs once done by hand, of racial strife and violence driving people to find safer and more accepting communities. Learning about and appreciating that history was key to our search for the roots of this American-born music that flowed from the Delta.

With the American Civil War and then Emancipation of the slaves, it was blues and gospel that impacted heavily upon life across the Delta, eventually spreading across America. It became the foundation for many of the musical genres that are popular today: African spirituals touched the music of protest with stories of overcoming great adversity; and the joyful, uplifting sounds of gospel influenced rock and roll and rhythm and blues.

After being thoroughly church-ed in the power of the blues while crisscrossing the upper Delta (at shrines like Clarksdale and Dockery Farms) we weren't sure if the lower Delta could meet our expectations. But what we found was a treasure trove of history and blues sites that easily pulled its own weight. As in the upper Delta, many were part of the Mississippi Blues Trail system---look for the large blue signs. (msbluestrail.org)

We began our exploration in Greenville, the small city that was at the tragic center of the Great Flood. Greenville may not have much present-day blues activity but it has an amazing story to tell, calming strolls along the levee, and is home to the small but excellent 1927 Flood Museum. We can't say it enough: understanding the flow of the Mississippi River and the history of seasonal flooding is key to appreciating how the blues birthed, and grew, and spread. It is a perfect illustration of how geography spawned history.

From Greenville, we made our way east along Highway 82 stopping at Leland, tiny Holly Ridge (in search of the gravesite of Charley Patton, the "Voice of the Delta"), Moorhead, Berclair, and Indianola. On its own, Indianola is enough reason to venture into the lower Delta: the hometown and final resting place of B. B. King, one of the greatest of the blues greats. The B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is, hands-down, one of the most impressive music museums we've ever visited. And the town shines with pride for its hometown son. Onward from Indianola, we spent time in Greenwood and its historic neighborhood of Baptist Town, a true magnet for fans of all things Robert Johnson.

Zigzagging along back roads we pointed the van further south and stopped at towns like Belzoni, Rolling Fork, Yazoo City, and Bentonia, all rich with the history of the roots of the blues. Along the way we sampled barbecue, sat on front porches listening to stories, and drove along dusty country roads in search of those distinctive Mississippi Blues Trail markers.