

Music along the Mississippi River

Memphis

Our trip along the Mississippi brought us to Memphis. The city is situated in the southwest of the State of Tennessee, south of the confluence of the Wolf and Mississippi rivers. With its 676.000 inhabitants it is the largest city of the state of Tennessee, followed by Nashville, the capital of Tennessee, with 605.000 inhabitants.¹

Memphis is the home of various American music genres including Blues, Gospel, Rock'n'Roll and country music. Everything started in the 1950s with singers like Johnny Cash ("King of Country music"), Elvis Presley ("King of Rock'n'Roll"), Isaac Hayes ("King of Soul music") and B.B. King ("King of Blues"). Everyone of the above mentioned started their career in cooperation with the label Sun Records and recorded various hits in Sun Studio, which is located in the heart of Memphis.

Another musical highlight in Memphis is Beale Street. Beale Street is situated in Downtown Memphis and runs from the Mississippi River to East Street. It was created in 1841 by attorney Robertson Topp, who named it after a forgotten military hero, General Beale, whom he met in Washington². The original name of the Beale Street was Beale Avenue. In the beginning, Beale Avenue was divided into two parts: the western end at the Mississippi river, with shops of trade merchants, who traded goods, like cotton wool with ships along the Mississippi river. The eastern part developed as an affluent suburb.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, many African-Americans came to Memphis, especially to Beale Avenue, the former name of the street, because of its various economic opportunities. In the 1860s, the first black travelling musicians began to perform on Beale Avenue and the avenue developed to a melting pot for all kinds of musicians. In 1890 Beale Street underwent renovation and the Grand Opera House was built, today known as the Orpheum.³

In the early 1900s clubs, restaurants and shops were added and the owners were African-Americans, those who travelled and performed earlier on the street.

The change of the name from Beale Avenue to Beale Street was undertaken by W.C. Handy, the father of the Blues, who created the "Blues on Beale Street". Handy wrote a song called "Beale Street Blues" in 1916, which led to change of the street's name. Between the 20s and 40s blues and jazz legends like Louis Armstrong and Muddy Waters played on Beale Street and the legendary

1 <http://www.citypopulation.de/USA-Tennessee.html>

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2 Memphis Housing Authority: Beale Street USA: where the Blues began: a brief historical sketch of the fabled street. The Authority, 197?.

3 <Http://orpheum-memphis.com>

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Memphis Blues originates from them.

In 1977 Beale Street was officially declared the Home of the Blues by an act of Congress.

Today many attractions can be found on Beale Street like the Ground Zero Blues Club – which is owned by Morgan Freeman - the Coyote Ugly, the Hardrock Cafe, the Historic and the New Daisy Theatre.⁴

Expectation and finally experiencing Beale Street

What can you expect when you come to Beale Street?

Exactly what every travel brochure tells you about this famous Street: right at the beginning of the street we saw a group of African-Americans performing street dances and acrobatic stunts. The street was very crowded and it is not forbidden to take alcoholic beverages with you on the street. At every corner of the street there is a musician or a band playing songs. Blues songs, of course. But we were surprised that there were not as many African-Americans as we thought. Most of the Blues singers were Caucasian the night we went there.

But the visitors of Beale Street presented a lively melting pot. Of course, Memphis is a tourist magnet. Many people come to visit Graceland, the place where Elvis Presley lived and died. Also, many of them want to visit the Home of the Blues as well. But there are also inhabitants of Memphis who come regularly to Beale Street to have a drink, listen to performances and to meet people from all over the world.

You can wander around with a drink in your hand and listen to the music, to saxophones and trumpets. It is a nice atmosphere and people of every skin color and origin celebrate the Home of Blues and the police of Memphis maintains law and order and smiles for tourist photos.

4 [Http://www.mojohand.com/blindteem.htm](http://www.mojohand.com/blindteem.htm)



But does the lack of Black musicians on Beale Street affect the authenticity of Blues music on Beale Street?

To answer this question, let's have a look at the history of the Blues at the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale.

Delta Blues Museum Clarksdale

The Delta Blues Museum is a cosy little museum housed in the historic Clarksdale freight depot built in the year 1918 for the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad. It displays a lot of pictures of Blues musicians and their original clothes and instruments. If someone does not know much about Blues music, most of the musicians will be unknown to him or her. The highlight of the Delta Blues Museum is the Muddy Waters Exhibit. There, visitors can marvel at Waters' displays and read about his life and music. At the core of the cabin is also a life-size statue of him. Screens show excerpts of Waters' biography and every five minutes the visitors can listen to the catchy song "Manish boy".⁵

The Delta Blues Museum shows that music really changed on Beale Street. In former times Blues music was only made by Afro-Americans. But nowadays Caucasians also perform Blues music on Beale Street.

5 [Http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org](http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org)

Ground Zero Blues Club

At the Ground Zero Blues Club, we got a supplemental impression of the Blues. It turned out to be an old house, with a lot of old couches on the porch next to the entrance. It seemed empty when we arrived there, recognizable to be a club only by a tiny sign in a window at the front side of the house. Unfortunately, we visited Clarksdale during the day, so we could not attend any performances. Nevertheless, we had a nice and interesting chat with one of the employees of the Ground Zero Blues Club and he told us about the Blues festival which was going to take place the weekend after our visit. He told stories of Blues legends who have performed on the stage of the Club. It was very interesting and stirring, especially while still having Muddy Waters' "Manish Boy" ringing in our ears.⁶



New Orleans

We got a completely different impression on our musical tour in New Orleans. More precisely on Bourbon Street, located in the French Quarter.

We thought that Memphis' Blues and Beale Street were the equivalent to New Orleans' Jazz and Bourbon Street. But before I talk about the music in New Orleans, let me give a brief outlook concerning the history of New Orleans and Bourbon Street first:

With 1,2 million inhabitants New Orleans is the largest city in the state of Louisiana.

New Orleans is widely known as the birthplace of Jazz. And the French Quarter, also known as

⁶ [Http://www.groundzerobluesclub.com](http://www.groundzerobluesclub.com) 19.10.2010

Vieux Carré is the origin of New Orleans Jazz.⁷ Its mixed architecture shows Spanish, French, Creole and American influences and it is in fact the only intact French Colonial and Spanish settlement remaining in the U.S. In the heart of the French Quarter is Bourbon Street, a street full of bars, restaurants and clubs. Bourbon Street, also known under the name Rue Bourbon, was named after the former royal family of France.⁸

Bourbon Street spans the length of the French Quarter and a big part of it caters to gay people from New Orleans and gay visitors. What we found interesting is the fact that there are also many strip clubs on the street. Whereas on Beale Street you could not find a single strip club, Bourbon Street is full of them. The preponderance of these clubs made Bourbon Street a little bit of a disappointment to us, because we expected more Jazz music and less sex. Unfortunately, when we went into a pub to have a beer and to listen to Jazz music, we listened to a band playing remakes of all kinds of music instead. The street musicians concentrated on Rock and Country music, too. So we were a bit disappointed that we couldn't listen to Jazz music as much as we wanted to.

Conclusion

Our conclusion is that if you want to listen to real Jazz music, Bourbon Street is not the right choice. Nevertheless, in the French Quarter we had the chance to listen to some nice street musicians playing catchy Jazz songs. Also Beale Street and the Delta Blues museum lived up to our expectations and provided an insight into the musical history and its huge influence for the Mississippi Delta.

Starr, Eric. The Everything rock & Blues Piano Book: Master Riffs, Licks, and Blues Styles from New Orleans to New York City. Everything Books, 2007.

⁷ [Http://www.neworleansonline.com](http://www.neworleansonline.com) 19.10.2010

⁸ [Http://www.discoverneworleans.com/frenchquarter.html](http://www.discoverneworleans.com/frenchquarter.html) 19.10.2010