

2008

Creating a blues playground: a comparison of Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, and Farish Street in Jackson, Mississippi

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CREATING A BLUES PLAYGROUND:
A COMPARISON OF BEALE STREET IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE,
AND FARISH STREET IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

In

The Department of
Geography and Anthropology

by
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August, 2008

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Abstract

Are tourists looking for something resembling the landscape described in the music they listen to or are the cities creating a false front to entice tourists to visualize what was (is?) described in folklore and myths of blues music? This paper will focus on the urban landscape of Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee and Fariah Street in Jackson, Mississippi. These cities are part of a trend called "new blues tourism" in which these cities, in the Mississippi Delta are promoting an authentic black heritage landscape. My paper critiques the authenticity of this urban heritage landscape.

There have been many studies concerning the authenticity of heritage areas. The niche I have found concerns the authenticity of buildings that are being used today for commercial purposes while designated (either de facto or de jury) as part of a heritage area. There are three questions my work looks to answer concerning the components of both districts I researched. Has the building always kept its current function? What significance, if any, did the building hold previously? How do the current owners articulate the building's history? By reading the landscape via photographs (past and present); I am seeking to understand the usage of these buildings in the past and their significance for tourists today. With this knowledge, I seek to have a better understanding as to what attracts tourists to a particular site and what attracts people to refurbish or establish a business that caters to this particular niche of tourists.

Introduction

The history of the blues music genre is broad and often difficult to trace, yet it is also punctuated by significant events. Described as the root of all American music by one performer (Cobb 1999), blues music has evolved from African rhythms, some three-four hundred years ago, to field hollers and work chants alongside spirituals during the nineteenth century, to the inclusion of instrumentation at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the post-World War II styles that are both acoustic (thought to be rural influenced) and electric (thought to be urban influenced) (Humphrey 1993, Wyman 2001).

There are many definitions for blues music. Some say it's the (musical) "blue notes," those fourth and seventh tones of the European scale that were raised or lowered on a diatonic scale (Charters 1993). Others cite the standard musical format of blues songs: the twelve bars with AAB stanzas (where the first line is repeated and the third line is an extension to that) (Cobb 1993) as the basis for the blues. Others still would call the blues, a feeling, an extension of the original European usage of the blues as merely a synonym for depression (Arkell 1994, Cobb 1999). Blues musicians themselves, over the last century, have had their own definitions for blues music. Noted bass player Willie Dixon said of blues music, "they is but the facts of life" (Cobb 1999: 47). Noted Houston bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins called the blues nothing more than a man and a woman. The legendary Robert Johnson once sang that, "The blues, is a lowdown shakin' chill. Well, the blues, is a aching old heart disease. Like consumption, killin' me by degree" (Taft 1983: 148).

While there are many sub-genres of blues music based on regional differences, as indicated above, there are also understood to be two broad types of blues music. There is country blues (or acoustic blues as it is called now) and urban blues (or electric blues as it is called now).

Because blues music originated on the rural plantations, levee camps, and labor camps of the Mississippi-Yazoo delta at the end of the nineteenth century, country blues emerged first. When that music reached US cities, urban blues was born. With country blues, the instrumentation was acoustic; lyrics would end up being free-floating while the meter of the songs tended to be idiosyncratic (Humphrey 1993). The performance settings could be a house party, a street corner, or an outdoor stage or porch. Urban blues came to be during World War II and just after. Started by practitioners of country blues when they moved to various urban centers across the country, urban blues is noted for the amplification of instruments while the music is described as “crisper, harder – more of a piece with the urban landscape” and sophisticated (Humphrey 1993: 152). There are still practitioners of country blues, though the contemporary term for it is acoustic blues. Nationally touring musicians such as Corey Harris, Steve James, and Roy Bookbinder continue this style today.

Though never America’s most popular musical genre, today, other than for two significant periods of interest (from the late fifties through the sixties and then through the nineties (Lornell 1998)) blues music has been ignored by the general population of our country in regard to their listening and buying interests when compared to more “modern” genres such as soul, rap, rock, and pop music, as shown by record sales and music downloads when you search sources such as Arbitron, Billboard magazine and Amazon.com, among others.

Due to that discrepancy, there have been various efforts, both public and private, over the last thirty years to preserve the blues music genre with festivals, appreciation societies, education, and independent record labels. Examples of these efforts would include blues music appreciation social groups, specialty record labels, music festivals, and in several locations, developing cultural travel programs such as Shangri-la Projects Ultimate Rock n’ Roll Tour

(Shangri-La 2005) and Trail of Blues Tour in the Delta (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* 9/25/2004).

Cultural and heritage tourism are popular terms within cultural geographic studies and within local and regional governmental agencies. Several southern states and communities have, in the last twenty-five years have made a huge push in developing and promoting their cultural heritage. Some well known examples of this exist in the Lower Mississippi Valley, primarily in New Orleans, Memphis, and the northwest corner of Mississippi, more commonly known as “The Delta.” But while these locations might be considered “success stories,” there are other cities that are attempting to attract capital to their cities by means of cultural tourism. Cities such as Baton Rouge, Lafayette, and Shreveport in Louisiana, and Jackson, Mississippi have tried or are currently attempting to create a cultural-tourist niche (Freeman 1998).

Within this realm of cultural tourism is the idea of authenticity. Authenticity, as described in Webster’s dictionary is “not false or imitation and worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact” (Merriam-Webster online). Within heritage tourism, is a desire to seek an authentic experience. Blues fans will contend that blues music is one of the last authentic representations of our soul (Wyman 2001). While I will not engage in a debate about society’s search for authenticity compared to our non-authentic lives, this search for representations does consume many and controls many dollars.

In a way I find that the title that I gave these districts, “blues playgrounds,” suits them well. While not a playground in a children’s sense of the word, adults can go out to these entertainment districts to get away from their work life. To go out and have fun, relax, engage their fantasies. Surrounding these playgrounds one can usually find a heightened police force to keep visitors safe, such as a playground monitor watching over the children during a school recess. While the spectators are partaking in the various scenes in these “blues playgrounds”,

hopefully they will learn something about blues music along the way. There are various postmarks to mention the significance of each individual part of the district, but how much anyone takes heed of them has yet to be determined.

It has taken me a little more than fifteen years to get here. My interest in blues music was sparked by my growing interest in Texas blues-rock bands such as ZZ Top and Stevie Ray Vaughn, watching The Blues Brothers movie and hearing (and seeing) John Lee Hooker while a teenager. From there, hearing blues men Hound dog Taylor and Howlin' Wolf sent me scouring the Columbus, Ohio airwaves searching for more blues music. After I acquired gainful employment, after high school, I had extra money to spend and discovered magazines covering blues musicians (past and present). I even came upon, and later joined, my hometown blues-music-appreciation organization (known as the Columbus Blues Alliance).

After enrolling at Ohio State University and starting my studies in Geography, I became interested in traveling beyond the borders of Ohio. Combined with my interest in blues music I made a trip following the Mississippi River from the confluence with the Ohio River all the way past New Orleans as far south as I could. Much of that trip was spent in Mississippi searching for blues landmarks in Holly Springs, Greenwood, Belzoni, Yazoo City, Jackson, Greenville, Cleveland, Tutwiler, Clarksdale, even Parchman Farms (now known as the Mississippi State Penitentiary).

My biggest revelation from that trip was Memphis and Beale Street. On my first visit (in the middle of June), I spent two nights on Beale Street, visiting the Museum of Southern Culture, Handy Park, BB King's Restaurant, and Sun [Records] Studios. As a neophyte, I was entranced by the energy from the crowds and performers along Beale Street. The look of the buildings, I

thought, would give any visitor to the neighborhood what they believed to be an authentic blues experience.

I made a return trip to Memphis and the Mississippi delta in 2003. This time around I had several guidebooks in hand assisting me in locating the various blues landmarks in the region; however I was still viewing the area with a wide-eyed optimism that this was the end all concerning what was “real” with blues music. I had yet to turn a critical eye as to creation of this “playground” because I was enjoying going around and sightseeing, just like the countless thousands of others who come through Memphis and the delta.

I only started to view the creation of “Beale Street” and the other communities that had started to promote their blues music heritage with an academic curiosity in the last five years. The starting point for me was watching an archival film clip showing the tearing down of buildings along Beale Street in the documentary, “The Road to Memphis” (part of the PBS documentary series, “Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues”). That thirty second clip fostered the idea that I have pursued in this project. The idea of “man” recreating history for the present. In this thesis, I investigate the recreation of Beale Street from the “black” business district that it started out as back in the nineteenth century, to shopping and entertainment during the first half of the twentieth century, to the slums of the 1960s and 1970s, to the tourist destination for all races that it has been recreated as in the last thirty years by political and economic interests in Memphis and now part of a grander scene encompassing much of Memphis’s musical heritage from different parts of the city.

Investigating the re-creation of Beale Street was not enough however for many of the small towns in Mississippi have looked at the income created by Memphis’s recreation of Beale Street with interest. Towns from as small as Tutwiler to as large as Jackson have designed

buildings, erected monuments, painted murals, and opened museums detailing their cultural history. Of these towns I found that Jackson had the closest representation to Beale Street.

Jackson is the largest city in Mississippi, and by virtue of that, the largest city between Memphis and New Orleans. The “black neighborhood” of Jackson was as vibrant and significant as any other in the American south (WPA Guide 1938). Unlike Memphis, New Orleans, or even the plantation communities to the northwest in the Mississippi Delta though, the black musical community of Jackson attracted little notoriety. Some of that was due to the state-sponsored racist policies of Mississippi, some of that was due to the paucity of local musicians born and raised in Jackson (though plenty have performed there). Unlike Memphis and New Orleans which have multiple nodes from which their musical heritage could spring forth, Jackson, Mississippi is banking on just one location to bring their city into the blues music heritage forefront - the black community based along North Farish Street.

Based along the axis of North Farish Street, Jackson’s black community was structured very similarly to Beale Street in Memphis. Both streets were home to storefronts, professional services, entertainment options, churches, and housing. Over the last ten years, the politicians of Jackson have attempted to change their Farish Street into a facsimile of modern Beale Street. The city of Jackson went so far as to hire Performa Entertainment Real Estate, the developers who have guided Beale Street since it’s reopening, to help redevelop Farish Street into an entertainment district (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* 2002). This last correlation was what led me to investigate the history of Farish Street in Jackson and its significance within the blues music community.

Since 2005, I have researched the history of these two communities. Along with that, I researched how each of these communities represent themselves as paradigms of authenticity.

What I want to show in this thesis is how these communities were constructed, the reasons for their significance, and how these districts represent themselves, one building, one owner, one renter at a time. The story here is how we have reconstructed our blues music heritage in an attempt to convince those, without a direct connection to our blues music heritage, to visit and by extension, spend money, in these districts.

Methodology/Literature Review

This study is based in the subfield of cultural geography. Following a humanistic approach to examining an urban landscape, I seek to pursue the idea of authenticity.

Geographers' recent interest in authenticity has come from the basis of combining critical theory with cultural studies, otherwise known as the "cultural turn." The leading figures of this "new" cultural Geography include Denis Cosgrove (1983), James Duncan (1990), and David Ley (1987).

Since then, tourism and authenticity have been engaged in geography in the last decade on subjects such as representation of social history, heritage, and landscapes through stately homes (Nuala Johnson 1998) and tourists' interpretations of the construction of authenticity within ghost towns (DeLyser 1999). DeLyser also discusses how Bodie State Historic Park's authenticity was constructed and kept while tourists used their preconceived notions of "the West" to interpret Bodie State Historic Park.

From an anthropological point of view, the idea of authenticity is also viewed through a broadly social constructionist, post-structuralist lens. Edward Brunner discusses the idea of copies and originals based on the reproduction of the town of New Salem, Illinois (1994). Brunner believes that tourists are consuming nostalgia for a simpler bygone era while still celebrating America (1994: 398). Brunner goes on to say that "the tourists are seeking a discourse that enables them to better reflect on their lives. New Salem and similar sites enact an ideology, recreate an origin myth, keep history alive, attach tourists to a mythical collective consciousness, and commodify the past" (1994: 411). However, Eric Gable and Richard Handler disagree with this idea and instead criticize "authenticity-as-impression-management as a symptom of an ongoing preoccupation in American culture with a certain kind of past" (1996:

575). Concerned about myths in terms of both their creation and to whom the myths are directed, Gable and Handler concluded their article with the following statement; “Natives exhibit what to us is a kind of divided consciousness. On the one hand, they continue to be preoccupied with the past as the last refuge of the really real. On the other hand, some of them, at least, allow for the possibility that the really real is myth. Yet, according to them, it is ‘myth’ that, if institutions such as Colonial Williamsburg and the American nation itself are to survive and prosper, people must believe” (1996: 576).

James Nolan and Ty F. Buckman expand upon this idea with their article comparing the preservation and restorations of Monticello and Montpelier (homes to Presidents Jefferson and Madison respectively)(1998). They state that “Montpelier’s story of its later owners is told alongside of-and in a few cases on top of-Madison's own through its “radicalized preservation” (1998:254).

While not a geographer by trade, David Grazian’s ethnographic study of blues clubs, their customers and performers in Chicago in his book *Blue Chicago* (2003) discusses the idea of authenticity within blues clubs in Chicago. These clubs appear authentic to first time visitors, yet these clubs end up having similar decor, similar food and drink, and a rotation of the same bands performing the same blues standards (2003: 5). Yet the musicians, who perform in these clubs, feel that there is a double standard by the club managers in stifling their creativity and booking primarily black performers so that the audience is given a preconceived “authentic” performance of an earlier era (2003: 147), not necessarily the modern era. Stephen King wrote about the rhetorical strategies heritage museums, in the Mississippi Delta, use in constructing and perpetrating the blues mythology in the region for a mostly white audience (King 2006). King wrote that, “...promoting ‘authentic’ images of primitiveness and impoverishment—iconic

symbols that reflect larger, more encompassing, blues mythic narratives—that arguably satisfy (White) tourists who share culturally specific memories of the blues. At the same time, these mythic narratives serve to racially reinscribe predictable and stereotypical images of the downtrodden, dispossessed blues subject (2006: 248).”

There has been a long line of works done concerning tourism as well. Most prior works on this topic concerned tourists as willing consumers of false realities. Dean MacCannell’s book *The Tourist* (1976) was among the first. In his introduction, MacCannell wrote that he wanted his book to serve as a demonstration that ethnography could be redirected away from primitive and peasant societies, that it could come home (1989: xv). When MacCannell discusses Erving Goffman’s theory of structural division, of front and back regions it relates to both Beale and Farish Streets because both were regarded as “back regions” by the white population during segregation. Beale Street has only changed over to a “front region” in the last twenty years; Farish Street is still in its transition.

Erik Cohen starts out his article (1988), “Authenticity and commoditization” quoting Greenwood’s statement that “tourism is said to lead to ‘commoditization’” (1988:372). Several other articles since then have sustained that idea in respect to blues tourism in Helena (Rotenstein 1992) and on Beale Street (Stern 1995).

However in the last decade, tourism studies have developed a counterpoint to that philosophy. Richard Prentice (2003) writes in his article that the nonstandard is now accepted by the majority. He also notes the curious switch within Great Britain of those who use the word heritage have changed to culture. Meanwhile, Prentice disparages tourism as a middle-class activity with a bias towards consumption, (which the trinket shops restaurants, built and planned along Beale and Farish Streets fulfill) which can not appeal to lower social classes. He even

mocks recent high-tech, publicly funded cultural projects in Great Britain that are not attracting the number of tourists the government was hoping for, as a warning that heritage sites will need more than “new toys” to be sustainable. In all, Prentice would have you believe that “new” tourism could be the next economic bust.

In another example, Gregory Ashworth (2003) wrote that tourism studies regularly neglect cities. In fact, Ashworth proposes several dichotomies pertaining to tourism studies and cities. He believes that urban studies neglect tourism and tourism neglects urban studies (Ashworth 2003). Ashworth also states that more tourists visit cities than “rural” areas, while tourism is more important, economically to the “rural” areas than to the cities (2003:150). Ashworth also believes that geography’s interest in tourism comes from recreation studies and land economics (2003:148). Interestingly, Ashworth concludes, in regards to urban tourism policies, “that most cities have neither consciously developed such policies nor felt any particular need to do so. Indeed the cynic could argue from historical cases that the success stories of urban tourism have occurred in the absence of policy, while policy has only been devised in the face of looming failure and thus the existence of a comprehensive local tourism policy is a good indicator of trouble” (2003:153). Now while Ashworth uses London, Paris, and Amsterdam in Europe (2003) as examples of those statements, is that what occurring in Memphis and Jackson as well?

There are both social and physical constructs when discussing landscape (actually cityscapes), blues music, and tourism. One can find countless brochures promoting cities, regions, and states. These writings take on both the physical and social constructs for tourists. Beale Street, as an emblem of commoditization, has had its share of articles written about it concerning this facet. Jane and Michael Stern wrote about A. Schawbs on Beale Street for

Atlantic Monthly back in 1995. They wrote, “Urban renewal has made Beale Street bright and wholesome, and new kinds of businesses have come to offer safely packaged Memphis soul for tourists (25).” An unnamed article in the *Economist magazine* from 1997 bemoans the blandness of the music being performed there and cover charges that only allow the affluent to enter the clubs. Ron Sitton (1999) focused on the trials and tribulations of the Center for Southern Folklore in an article he wrote for *Southerner Magazine*. At that time, the Center for Southern Folklore was being evicted from its home on Beale Street and was looking for a “stay of execution” while arguing that they represented the “real history” of Beale Street (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 1999).

While not specifically speaking about Beale Street, Daniel Lieberfield wrote about commodifying black culture through his visit to a House of Blues nightclub (which ironically, does not have a location in either location I studied) (1995). The House of Blues restaurant/club chain is owned by a white male and while at first glance appears to be supporting blues music (if you look at the memorabilia along its walls), it seldom showcases blues-music acts. When you look at their schedule of bands performing, at their various locations, you will see listings of bands from various genres that will bring in paying customers.

Aspects of tourism with blues music have been sources of previous writings as well. David Rotenstein discussed, in a 1992 article for *Southern Folklore*, how Helena, Arkansas had ended up commodifying its blues heritage to promote the town but taking away its authentic character. Just this past year an article was published concerning the performance of blues tourism in the delta (McGinley 2007).

The magazine *Living Blues* has dedicated whole issues (1998, 2004) to the theme of blues tourism in Mississippi, providing (regional) guides of musicians, bars/clubs, festivals, gravesites,

and other points of interest. For the 2004 edition, writer and blues-records producer Jim O'Neal wrote, "Over the past several years, a small but active influx of promoters, supporters, business investors, and performers from other parts of the country has joined forces with locals who are turning to the blues, and in the new millennium the blues is more visible and acceptable to a wider spectrum of the population." (O'Neal 2004:19). Among those local supporters is Steve Cheseborough who has two editions of his book *Blues Traveling* published (2001, 2004) and Richard Knight with his travel guide, *The Blues Highway* (2001). Both of these books highlighted important locations concerning the history of blues music (and included sections on both Beale and Farish Streets) and helped me to locate sites I talk about in this thesis.

On a more local scale, Jeff Todd Titon's 1996 article entitled "The New Blues Tourism," Ronald Johnson's 2001 article entitled "The Lower Mississippi Delta Study: a National Park Service Approach to a Region's Heritage," and Stephen A. King's 2004 article entitled "Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals" are the closest parallels to what my thesis discusses. These three articles discuss blues tourism and how it is experienced. In the case of Jeff Todd Titon's article, it gives an overview to various cottage industries developed to show tourists around Memphis and the Mississippi Delta. Ronald Johnson's article detailed the creation of a Mississippi Heritage Park and the involvement of several agencies in its creation. Stephen King's article primarily discusses blues tourism pertaining to blues festivals in the Mississippi Delta. Titon and King's articles distinguish modern blues tourism as being organized and mediated by historic markers, tour maps, chambers-of-commerce literature, and a growing group of presenters and musicians who interpret the music for outsiders (Titon 1996).

Even movies have gotten into the act. Robert Mugge has directed two documentaries about blues music. His first film, "Deep Blues" (released in 1991) starts in Memphis talking

about the musicians who played on Beale Street. Another film he directed, entitled, “Last of the Mississippi Jukes” (released in 2003), concerns the reminiscences of a club (juke joint) in Jackson, Mississippi. Another director, Richard Pierce, filmed a documentary entitled “The Road to Memphis,” as part of the PBS mini-series ‘Martin Scorsese presents The Blues.’ This film featured BB King and Bobby Rush and also the history and significance of Beale Street to blues music.

I was fortunate to find that someone had written about the physical history of Beale Street in Memphis. That was *Beale Street Talks* by Richard M. Raichelson (1999). Mr. Raichelson discusses some eighty addresses along Beale Street, reviewing the changes in ownership and, where it occurred, changes in architecture of the addresses as well.

The social history of Beale Street was covered in *Beale Black & Blue* by Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall (1993). These two spent months taking interviews and piecing together previous writings to recall how blacks lived in Memphis through the prism that was Beale Street. Larry Nager also touched upon the history of Beale Street in his book, *Memphis Beat* (1998). Though that book is more about the history of music from Memphis, it briefly discusses Beale Street during W.C. Handy’s time, again in the post war era, and concludes with the state of Beale Street during the last boom period for blues music in the 1990s.

Interestingly enough, there is almost nothing concerning blues music within the subfield of music geography. The only article I found concerning blues music, within a geography journal (or book) came from Thomas Arkell (1994). Arkell’s aim was to study the spatial diffusion of recording locations and birthplaces of blues musicians (from 1890-1950). Along with that Arkell gave a chronological history of blues music. Arkell wrote that, “Blues is the culmination of several different strands of traditional African-American music born in the American South but

with its ancestral origins on the west coast of Africa” (1994: 55). In describing the regional variances in blues music at the turn of the twentieth century, Arkill wrote, “Alabama remained tied to its gospel traditions, while the Memphis style was more influenced by the secular traditions that preceded the blues. The Mississippi delta had its own brand of blues, which was characterized by the ‘bottleneck’ or slide guitar. In Texas, western Louisiana, and Arkansas, the blues remained heavily influenced by the cotton-field holler. On the Atlantic coast and Appalachian foothills of Georgia and South Carolina, blues was more influenced by the white rural ‘hillbilly’ tradition” (1994: 58).

The subfield of music geography, within the subfield of cultural geography, has only come about in the last 40 years or so. The inklings for this field, according to George O. Carney, came from the writings of Bruno Nettl back in 1964. Carney quoted Nettl as writing that- “studying the geographical distribution of musical phenomena and the ways in which music changes, and participates in culture change, is important to an understanding of the role of music in culture change” (1994: xviii).

The start of the music geography subfield is credited to Peter Nash for his paper “Music Regions and Regional Music” (1968). This was followed shortly after by Jeffery Gordon (1970) and Larry Ford (1971). Jeffery Gordon is credited with completing the first thesis on music geography (Carney 1994) while Larry Ford is credited with the first article on music geography published in an American geography journal (Carney 1994). Carney, in his article on the history of music geography (1994), assessed the productivity of music geographers. His findings were that only twenty-seven articles were published and twenty-six papers were presented between 1968 and 1989 (Carney 1994: 26). The various genres and styles of music covered included country, bluegrass, Rock n’Roll and Classical (Carney 1994: 26). The research approaches to

music geography has included perception (and place), cultural hearth and diffusion, culture regions, spatial interaction, and human environment relationships (Carney 1994: 28).

On the down side, music geographers and their research have been described as “frivolous,” “untraditional,” and “unscientific” (Carney 1994: 24) while being “criticized for diverse results, unscientific methods, and scattered results” (Carney 1994: 28). Where geographers have come late and infrequent to the study of music, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and music historians have filled the void and written about music instead (Carney 1994) (as shown by the literature list in this thesis). It is the comparative lack of material in music geography that caused me to look in other geographic subfields for answers for my research.

The primary methodology for this research has been qualitative. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (2000:3). Out of those representations, I went through a variety of empirical materials covering written descriptions of the two locations along with photo interpretation as I viewed both locations on numerous occasions with my cameras.

Finding material about Beale Street and Memphis music was relatively easy. With the long history of Beale Street, many musicians hailing from or spending a significant portion of their career in Memphis, and a population of four hundred thousand (and a metro population of close to two million) (Memphis Tourist Bureau 2007), there are plenty of sources to choose from. With Farish Street and Jackson, Mississippi, the variety of material detailing its history and culture is similar to Beale Street and Memphis, but there is not the depth of material

available compared to Memphis. For example, one can collect many various flyers and advertisements about the businesses along Beale Street at any visitor center in Western Tennessee and Memphis. In comparison, there are no promotional materials currently out for the Farish Street neighborhood businesses.

For detailing the history of each neighborhood, I went to the public library for Memphis, the state archives for Mississippi, and the Jackson State university library to locate newspaper accounts of the debates about the re-development of both locations along with the occasional magazine article detailing the history and significance of specific sites in each neighborhood. I also used various books written about both locations and the personalities associated with both neighborhoods. Those materials were located at the libraries of Louisiana State and Ohio State universities, and within my personal collection. With the increase interest in blues music, several video documentaries have been released in the last two decades that reference both locations. In the case of Beale Street, I had the added benefit of various flyers and advertisements about the various restaurants, bars, stores, and museums promoting present-day Beale Street.

As Gillian Rose points out (2001), “the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies” (Rose 2001: 6). Notions of “truthful” photographic representations have been constructed (Rose 2001: 19) and have led me to research the representation of authenticity (re: truthfulness) in the construction of these neighborhoods. This style of photography has been categorized as documentary, in that the aim of the photographer is to be as objective and accurate as possible in their depictions (Rose 2001: 20). While this work is not about my photography, it is featured prominently in this study. That is why I devote half of both primary chapters of this thesis to the visual construction of these two

neighborhoods. I did not manipulate the photos of the buildings¹, but the buildings along both Beale Street and Farish Street (that I focused on) have been manipulated over time by their various renters and landlords.

I photographed the buildings along Beale Street in early June, 2005 all on one day during the mid-day period. My reasoning for this was to show the buildings without any artificial light. These buildings way look less attractive during the day than at night without their neon lights, but I was looking to show these building as they are. If I had photographed them at night, the buildings would look different. Two other factors to me photographing Beale Street during the day include fewer people around to distract me and my inexperience in photographing at night (with or without a flash).

I also chose to photograph the buildings along Farish Street during day as well, but for different reasons than in Memphis. Unlike Beale Street in Memphis, Farish Street, at the time of my field work, had minimal street lighting at night, also very few businesses were open after sunset so there was minimal artificial lighting from the buildings along the way. While Beale Street has been completely gentrified, Farish Street is still in the throes of this transformation, so I was not comfortable being on Farish Street past sunset. Once the transformation of Farish Street is completed, maybe a comparison of what Farish Street and Beale Street look like at night can be accomplished.

I used 35 mm film for all the photos used in this thesis due to the availability and cost involved. I then proceed to scan all the photos used and scaled them to fit the page format for this publication. My focus is on the manipulation of the exterior of these buildings, on what

¹ I did manipulate the color of the photos after I scanned them in Photoshop, but only to make them more representative of what one would see with their eye.

many have declared to be historic streets. Often, as this thesis will show, the manipulation of these building exteriors was done to entice tourists to visit both the neighborhood, as a whole, as well as the individual establishments, with the belief that what tourists are viewing, at these locations, are authentic blues (music) related structures.

When comparing the exterior of these buildings in the present to their past, I used photographs of the buildings found in written publications. In the case of Memphis, I used the photos and descriptions from Raichelson's book about Beale Street (1999), the archival photo page from the official Beale Street website, and the book *Beale Street Black and Blue* (1993). In the case of Farish Street in Jackson, there was nary a photograph or illustration of Farish Street buildings in the three archives I searched at, those being the State Library of Mississippi, Jackson State University Library, and the University of Mississippi Library.²

I should note that while the urban renewal process of the 1960s through 1980s has diminished the number of buildings I could study in both cities, the collection of sites along Beale Street in Memphis are more densely packed than along Farish Street in Jackson, Mississippi. That has caused me to have fewer locations to report on in my study along Farish Street than along Beale Street. I will expand upon that situation more in the conclusion.

² I actually visited the State Library of Mississippi and Jackson State University Libraries, where as I had to request someone else to search at the University of Mississippi library, so I have to go by their word that nothing was available on Farish Street.

Beale Street

Beale Street History

“Beale Street is more than a place. It is a legend, symbol of the spirit of another era. The recreated Beale Street will capture this spirit and carry it forward into the twenty-first century.”
– Charles Dinkus, Chair of the Beale St. Historic Foundation in 1975.



Figure 1: 21st Century Beale Street (Photo by Author)

Look at this photo. What do you notice? The cars? The traffic lights? The signs?

This is the western entry for the Beale Street entertainment district in Memphis. Tourism has become a profitable business for Memphis. The Memphis Convention and Business Bureau has estimated that Memphis received more than nine million visitors, of which four million visited Beale Street, that has generated almost one-hundred twenty-three million in local and state tax revenue just in 2006 alone (Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau 2007: 3). It was not always the case. This chapter will discuss the cultural history of Beale Street (that is being profited from today), the lead-up and creation of the entertainment district, and what is being represented there

today. Beale Street is in the middle of a debate as to what is authentic in blues music, tourism, and history. I will focus on the appearance of what is supposed to be the “home of the blues.”

The black community that formed along Beale Street came together in the bleakest hour of Memphis’s history. Yellow Fever epidemics during the 1870s had reduced Memphis to a taxing district for the state of Tennessee. However, the black population of Memphis had fewer occurrences and casualties from Yellow Fever, and they found themselves caretakers for the remains of the city (McKee 1993).

It was a black man, Robert Church Sr. who is credited as the “savior” of Memphis. Church became a millionaire during the 1870s by simply buying up land along Beale Street, between Second Street and Wellington Street (present day Danny Thomas Blvd), that was vacated due to the mass exodus of folks due to the Yellow Fever epidemic (McKee 1993; Nager 1998; Raichelson 1999). When the “tax district” of Memphis offered bonds to start the process of regaining its city charter in 1881, it was Robert Church who purchased the first (full price) thousand-dollar bond (Raichelson 1999). That was not all, Church would go on to donate some of that land for what became Church Park in 1899 (which still exists today) and later start Solvent Saving & Loans in 1906, both along Beale Street (Nager 1998; Raichelson 1999).

Another factor towards the conglomeration of black population near Beale Street was the construction of the First Baptist Beale Street Church in 1871 (Raichelson 1999). Consider it the yin to the various bars’ and gambling halls’ yang along Beale Street. At the dawn of the twentieth century, while blacks could only conduct their business along Beale Street, businesses did not necessarily restrain their transactions to fellow blacks as noted by the various ethnicities that ran businesses on Beale Street.

While the Yellow Fever epidemics effectively curbed the formation of distinct immigrant enclaves (Nager 1998), there were still smatterings of ethnicities along Beale Street at the turn of the twentieth century. Various ethnicities owning business along Beale Street included Chinese, French, German, Greek, Irish, Italians, and Jewish (Freeman 1998, Raichelson 1999). In his 1934 biography, Lieutenant George Lee had several descriptions for Beale Street. Lee's most famous quote about Beale Street was "owned by Jews, policed by whites, and enjoyed by Negroes (1934:13)." Lee also described Beale Street weekend shoppers with the following description, "They bargain with the Jews for clothing, buy groceries from the Piggly Wiggly and fish and park chops from the Greek, and sometimes moonshine in the 'blind pigs'" (Sigafos 1979:117). While Jim Crow laws effectively restricted blacks to only their neighborhoods, other ethnicities were allowed to work or visit any part of Beale Street. However these other ethnicities did start to vacate their Beale Street businesses as early as the Great Depression (McKee 1993).

The musical genre that we refer to as blues music, depending on your source, started as early as the 1890s to as late as 1909. In many of these cases, the key figure involved with these stories is William Christopher Handy, better known to the populace today as W.C. Handy. Handy was a black band leader and composer, born in Florence, Alabama in 1873. After a decade mixed between performing and teaching, Handy brought his family to Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1903 and led the Knights of Pythias band (Handy 1941: 72). After six years, Handy moved up to Memphis (Handy 1941: 93).

It is Handy's residence in Memphis that brings the later date concerning the birth of the blues into discussion. The Memphis Convention and Visitor Bureau website along with their printed tourist guides use the 1909 date, when Handy moved to Memphis (and subsequently

wrote the song *Memphis Blues*) as the “birth of the Blues.”³ When Handy came to Memphis, his family first took residence at 246 Ayres Street (Handy 1941: 168) but later moved to a shotgun house on 964 Jeanette Place, in what was called the “Greasy Plank” section of Memphis (Nager 1998: 35). That house would later be moved to Beale Street in 1985 (Knight 2001).

Legend has it that Handy wrote “Memphis Blues” while at a cigar stand in Pee Wee’s Saloon on Beale Street (Raichelson 1999: 55). The truth of the matter is that Handy did his writing, and shuffling of musicians for his various engagements, from an apartment-turned-studio at 392 Beale Street (Handy 1941: 170). However, Pee Wee’s Saloon did contain a rarity

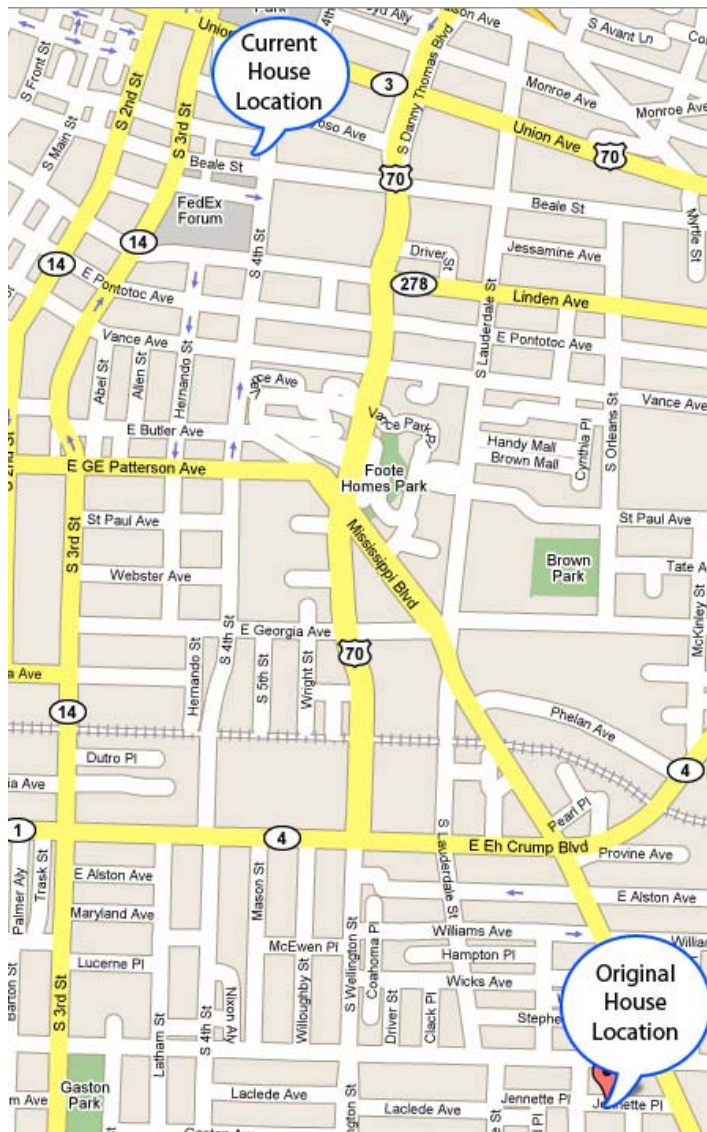


Figure 2: Map showing difference in location for Handy’s house from original location to present location. Google map, accessed in 2006

at that time: a pay phone (Raichelson 1999). Thus Handy would broker engagements for himself and other musicians from there. While Handy only lived in Memphis for eleven years before

³ As part of the nebulous beginning of the blues, by congressional order, the year 2003 was declared as the year of the Blues to mark the 100 anniversary of blues music. Supposedly blues music did not exist prior to W.C. Handy’s chance meeting with a guitar player at a Tutwiler, Mississippi train station that year.

moving on to New York City in 1918 (Handy 1941: 185), he achieved the majority of his notoriety while living in Memphis, using his presence and prominence to declare their city the “Home of the Blues,” and Memphis has held him in their collective heart as well.

While W.C. Handy is the most well known of the writers and bandleaders from turn-of-the-century Memphis, his residence there is not the only reason for Memphis’s significance in music. Along with brass bands, jug bands (sort of a cross between blues and bluegrass music) were popular in Memphis (Nager 1998). By the time Handy had left Memphis for New York City in 1918, female singers had supplanted jug bands and recorded music would do the same to sheet music (Nager 1998).

By the start of the twentieth century, Memphis had cleaned up its water supply by tapping artesian wells deep beneath the city (Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau 2007), to preclude anymore outbreaks of Yellow Fever. Memphis’s population had tripled so it was re-granted its city charter by the state of Tennessee in 1893 (Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau 2007). White farmers who were tired of working the land, and blacks, also looking at getting away from the sharecropper system, or stopping by before heading north, were the main cause for this growth. Of note though is that at this time, the population of Memphis was already fifty-fifty blacks to whites (Guralnick 1994).

During the Jim Crow era in Memphis, for blacks the only alternative to segregation was exclusion. If blacks did not create their own segregated accommodations, they would have no services or arrangements (Cantor 11: 1992). During the Depression and World War II, black performers only had three arenas to showcase their talents. All three were situated along Beale Street, the Amateur Night on Beale Street (located at the Palace Theatre); the talent portion of the Cotton Makers’ Jubilee (called the Jubilect); and Booker Washington’s Ballet (Cantor 1992:

37). Beale Street was where you went for your banking, dentistry, clothes and food shopping, and to have a good time (Black Politics 54). Those were among the ways Beale Street, to quote Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, “became as much a symbol of escape from despair as had Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad.” There were plenty of places one could go to “have a good time.” Saloons, pool halls, gambling dens, and sex workers were easily found along Beale Street. And music could be found there as well between Hernando and Fourth Streets (Weeks 1982). While Beale Street commerce has changed from day-to-day living during the first half of the twentieth century to tourism trade as we passed into the twenty-first century, people still go to Beale Street looking for a good time (Freeman 1998).

In the post World War II years, cultural changes to Memphis had wide ranging effects that lasted for years. The rigid segregation of Memphis had started to crumble at the onset of the 1950s. The first blow against Memphis’s style of segregation was the demise, and subsequent death, of E.H. “Boss” Crump.

Once the protector of Beale Street and all its illicit activity, Crump decided to “clean up” Beale Street in 1939 (after Tennessee ended their own prohibition) (Freeman 1998) and make Memphis’s segregation even stricter. Crump had created a Memphis board of Censorship with Lloyd Tillman Binford as its board chair. Anything that had a hint of bi-racial (or even social) equality were either edited out or banned from Memphis (Nager 1998). Thankfully, for the citizens of Memphis, they could cross the Mississippi River into West Memphis, Arkansas and see all the movies and club shows that were deemed unfitting for Memphis proper. With Crump’s death in 1954, Binford soon retired the following year (Nager 1998).

Before Crump’s death, the first radio station to feature all-black programming came to fruition in Memphis in 1948 with WDIA (Evans 1993, Gordon 1995, Nager 1998). While

restricted to only daytime operation, at fifty-thousand watts, WDIA's signal covered the entire Memphis region (Gordon 1995). Their broadcasting of "black music" was one of the first barriers of segregation breeched in the south. As well, their immediate success at gaining listenership caused the other radio stations in Memphis to alter their formats as well. One other Memphis station in particular, WHBQ, took notice and within a year of WDIA's change to an all-black format, they started playing Rhythm and Blues music after sunset (Gordon 1995). Of note is the on-air personality WHBQ brought on as deejay for their change, Dewey Philips. Dewey Philips is best known as the first deejay to play an Elvis Presley record (Gordon 1995, Nager 1998), but Dewey was also one of a few *white* radio personalities, during the 1950s, to be playing black music over the airwaves (Gordon 1995). How WDIA and WHBQ got around Crump and Binford's censorship board in the forties and fifties was not explained in the various resources I searched. However, this was the start of the "mixing of races" that for the short term did not bode well for Beale Street, but in the long term has helped to expand Beale Street's legacy to what it is presently.

Plans for Beale Street

By the end of the 1950s there was already concern with the condition of Beale Street and what could be done with it. In July, 1959, Mayor Edmund Orgill stated his desire to turn Beale Street into Memphis's version of Bourbon Street. (Doyle undated; Bane 1982; *Memphis Commercial Appeal* -2/7/1999). Within several years ideas as to what a new Beale Street should look like were being produced. One plan from 1966 had Beale Street being closed to automobile traffic from Main to Fourth Streets with Second and Third St being rerouted over or under Beale. In this plan, Handy Park would be expanded and specialty shops would be developed along Beale Street from Handy Park to the Mississippi River (Watkins 1979).

In another plan, announced in 1967, a group of local African-American investors revealed a proposal for a bank and hotel building, to be named the Beale Street Tourist Plaza, which would occupy an entire block of downtown Memphis bounded by Main, Beale, Second, and McCall, at a cost of five million to construct (Finger, 1999). Later, in the early 1970s, after some of the buildings on Beale Street were demolished (Doyle undated: 16), the next plan to be proposed was of a “blue light district” consisting of tourist attractions, nightclubs, a theatre, and a music museum (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* – 3/19/1973; Freeman 1998).

In each of these examples the buzzword used to describe people’s desires for a new Beale Street was “amusement area.” In a 1973 article for *Rolling Stone* Magazine, Ron Barassi said, “We want to give it a theme park effect – but not a theme park; we don’t want to call it a theme park (Dawson 1973:21).” Yet the belief, from as far back as the 1950s, was that Memphis wanted a clean Beale Street for whites and the middle class (Bane 1982).

Yet while outsiders were coming up with flowery plans for Beale Street, the city had started the process to eradicate the street. In 1963, the first urban renewal contract was signed (*Memphis Commercial-Appeal* -2/7/1999) and with that Memphis in 1964 granted their first approval of application for tearing down buildings (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 4/22/1973). However, supporters of Beale Street did try to fight back. In 1966 Beale Street was first listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Watkins 1979; Bane 1982; Freeman 1998), but that declaration served little purpose. Already stricken by declining sales and attendance due to blacks’ newly gained right to frequent stores, restaurants, and clubs that were previously white only, the Beale street strip had become a bastion of pool halls and pawn shops by the end of the 1960s (Yale 2008:38). Or as Walter Dawson described it for *Rolling Stone* Magazine, “it [Beale

Street] had gone from a place where a person could choose his own vice to a double row of pawnshops, barbershops, clothing and department stores, and assorted dives (1973: 21).”

It was the riots that followed the untimely death of Martin Luther King in April of 1968, just two blocks south of Beale Street, which finally pushed Beale Street into the urban slum abyss. At the end of 1969, the department of Housing and Urban Development gave the Memphis Housing Authority eleven million dollars (and the blessing to spend up to sixteen million) to purchase land and tear down buildings along Beale Street (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* – 11/28/1969).

With the clearing of the old buildings and collecting of federal money, Memphis started taking submissions for the rehabilitation of Beale Street. By November of 1972 a Beale Street Design Review Board was formed consisting of William Clark Jr., Ed Williams, Roy Keathley, Daniel Moore, and Linzy Albert (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 11/9/1972). Charged with selecting the best plan for Beale Street, they saw three different proposals. The first proposal came from Beale Street Blue Light Corporation which was led by Art Gilliam Jr., a vice president for Universal Life Insurance, and Philip S. Morris, chair of interior design at the Memphis Academy of Arts (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* – 3/19/1973). The second proposal came from R.P. Barassi and Associates. Led by Ron P. Barassi, a special agent for John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance (and from Chicago) and Warren Creighton, president and chairman for UMIC, Inc. (investment firm and financial advisors in Memphis) (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* – 3/19/1973) they had more financial backing than Blue Light and were willing to spend more money (*Memphis Press Scimitar* – 4/13/1973). A third group came forth a day after the Barassi group was approved by the review board. This group, led by two local politicians, A.W. Willis and Lewis Donelson, had their own study on Beale Street redevelopment done by the Match

Institute of Washington along with Marcou, O’Leary, and Associates. They wanted to put Beale Street under a “national foundation” lease proposal to organization (*Memphis Press Scimitar* – 4/13/1973). Willis fully believed that Beale Street as a commercial enterprise would not work. He was quoted as saying, “To assume commercial interests would come in on their own is a wrong concept” (Denley, *Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 4/22/1973: 1).

During the time that Beale Street was “closed” (1969-1983)⁴, two factors kept the remodeling from being completed. The first issue was cost, the second was race. When the first ideas of remodeling Beale Street were circulating in the 1950s, the estimated cost was thought to be twenty million. In 1968, while negotiating with Housing and Urban Development, the Memphis Housing Authority believed the cost to redevelop Beale Street was to be twenty-six million dollars. Five years later, the Beale Street Design Review Board had hoped to keep costs under fifty million (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* - 3/19/1973). However, Ron Barassi felt that his (chosen) plan would cost sixty million in March of 1973 (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* - 3/19/1973). He further shocked everyone six months later when he said two hundred million dollars would complete this odyssey (Watkins 1979, Freeman 1998). With estimates rising and the federal government winding down their payments, grandiose ideas such as pedestrian malls, marinas, and beacons were for naught (Watkins 1979).

Outside economic forces helped to bring about this economic meltdown concerning Memphis and Beale Street. The era in which Memphis engaged in the “urban renewal” of Beale Street was marked as a time of global economic unrest. From 1969-1973, the United States and Great Britain attempted to continue their postwar economic boom through loose monetary

⁴ Evidently Beale Street was literally closed with the street fenced off from the public (Beale Street Merchant Association Website last accessed on April 10, 2008)

policies (Harvey 1989). By pumping excess funds into the market, while productive investment outlets were diminishing, these countries had caused great inflation (Harvey 1989). When the respective governments attempted to diffuse this situation, the first oil crisis for the western world occurred in 1973 with O.P.E.C's oil embargo, after the Arab-Israeli War. This event further exasperated the US economy and triggered, in the United States, the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. The subsequent deflation of the dollar (between 1973-75) showed that the finances of the state had become over-extended in relation to resources (Harvey 1989). This led to several municipal bankruptcies (New York City 1975 and Cleveland 1978) and left corporations with plenty of excess capacity they were unable to use (Harvey 1989). It is interesting to note that it was not until the US finally escaped this period of economic doldrums that the Beale Street rehabilitation project was finished in 1983. But even if these national and local economic problems had never occurred, the racial component of Beale Street and Memphis still would have been an obstacle for all to overcome for the project's completion.

Long-held tensions and decades of discrimination led to direct conflict after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 (Sigafos 1979; Weeks 1982). Already distressed by the destruction of their neighborhood, blacks wanted their say as to how Beale Street was to be rebuilt. Thus when Barassi's (all white) group was chosen to redevelop Beale Street in 1973 (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* – 4/13/1973), this led to city councilmen Willis and Donnelson's counter plan and contentions that a new Beale Street commercial enterprise would not work, without black input (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 4/22/1973). Willis did get his wish for non-profit development, somewhat, when Memphis mayor Chandler announced the formation of the

non-profit Beale Street National Historic Foundation (BSNHF) for developing Beale Street in April of 1974 (Doyle 2008: 23). The BSNHF was a quasi-governmental organization that would be the “owner” of the property along Beale Street while they were to contract out to Barassi’s group, now called Beale Street U.S.A., the actual construction of the buildings (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 4/27/1974).

The only set of plans drawn up by Beale Street U.S.A. were rejected for funding by the Advisory Council on Historical Preservation in 1976 on account of that it would not preserve the historical flavor of the street and would have an "adverse effect" on the Beale Street Historic



District (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 2001). Six months after their proposal for restoring Beale Street was rejected for federal funding and tired after two years of sparing with the BSNHF over their hiring practices, Beale Street USA was given a hundred thousand dollars by the BSNHF to have their contract canceled.

By this time Beale Street had become a burned-out shell of its former self (Nager 1998: 217). Four hundred and seventy-four buildings were demolished, and a block wide

Figure 3: Beale St. in the mid 1970s, from *Cotton Row to Beale St.* 1979

moat of empty lots and parking spaces kept the remaining buildings along Beale Street separated from the African-American community (Bane 1982, Lovett 1998). The only original buildings left standing were along a two-block stretch between Second and Hernando Streets. To the west (towards the river) some restoration was occurring. What was once the Randolph Building was now the home to the headquarters for Memphis Gas, Water, and Light (Raichelson 1999). It was this time frame (Mid to late 1970s) that things looked the bleakest for the restoration of Beale Street with no leadership and no money coming in.

In 1979, the city of Memphis was awarded two million dollars from the Federal Economic Development Administration, with the stipulation that it would be matched with over three million in local funds (US Department of Commerce Memorandum 1979) to spend on Beale Street for restoration and gave that money to the Beale Street Development Corporation (BSDC)(after the Beale Street National Historic Foundation was dissolved in 1977 (Sigafos 1979)) and Carlisle Properties Ltd⁵ (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999). Work even started again on Beale Street in 1980 (www.devingreaney.com/dtmemtimeline.htm accessed on April 8, 2008).

However, the head of BSDC, George Miller, found himself in constant conflict with Gwen Awsumb (who was the supervisor of development for Memphis in the late 1970s) and other city officials (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999). The problems ranged from the saving of the facades along Beale Street to the economics involved. Allegations ruffled back and forth between the BSDC and the city as to the management of funding for restoration. (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* - 2/7/1999) All the acrimony led to the BSDC hiring James Smith, a local

⁵ Carlisle Properties Ltd would put their Beale Street holdings under Beale Street Properties (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999, *Main Street Journal* – 1/12/2007, *Memphis Business Journal* – 5/6/2002)

store owner, to be chairman and George Miller was given a new position of executive director in 1980. James Smith's first act was to perform an audit on BSDC. This was finished by February, 1981 when at that time George Miller was fired for mismanagement of funds (*Memphis Commercial Appeal*) – 2/7/1999). The offshoot of that audit was that now federal authorities (the FBI and the IRS) were now investigating BSDC's financial records. In spite of all the financial debates between the city of Memphis and BSDC they did come together and signed a lease concerning Beale Street in 1982 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999).

At this time a third different group was brought in to develop and manage the properties along Beale Street. That group was Elkington and Keltner Properties Inc. John Elkington had just graduated from Vanderbilt University Law School while his partner, Steve Keltner had previous experience in rehabilitation of buildings (Freeman 1998). They were part of the lease between the City of Memphis and BSDC in 1982 with the promise of nine million dollars in city, state, and federal funding (Freeman 1998: 57). Finishing the work begun before them, Elkington and Keltner had Beale Street “reopened” in October of 1983 (Nager 1998; Freeman 1998; *Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999).

However, just reopening Beale Street did not instantly attract a crowd. John Elkington even said in an interview for *Preservation Magazine* that when looking back on Memphis in the mid-1980s, they did not have that critical mass of people living near downtown planners, present day, talk about (Freeman 1998:57). For well over a decade after it's opening, the “new Beale Street” was surrounded by empty lots, cutting it off from the rest of the city (Nager 1998). Many early establishments came and went (Freeman 1998, Nager 1998). Yet, besides A. Shawbs, three other businesses have established themselves along Beale Street as sort of bellwethers as to the viability of the district. Those three are the Rum Boogie Café (opened in 1985), BB King's

(opened in 1991), and the Hard Rock Café (opened in 1997) (Freeman 1998). Interestingly, since Hard Rock Café opened on Beale Street, several more national nightclub chains have opened on Beale Street, where as previously there were no national nightclub or restaurant chains along Beale Street. Rum Boogie is the longest consecutively opened restaurant/bar along Beale Street (opened in 1985 (*Memphis Downtowner* 2008)) since its reopening and BB King's is the most widely known to those outside of Memphis.⁶

Beale Street Today

What started as Elkington and Keltner Properties Inc. soon became Beale Street Management after they took over development of Beale Street in 1982 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999). Steve Keltner left sometime around 1984, and the company was renamed Performa Real Estate Development in 1994 (Freeman 1998). It took Elkington's company seven years until they turned a profit with Beale Street (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 2/7/1999). However all this did was start a new round of bickering with the city of Memphis, the Beale Street Development Group, and Elkington's lenders all wanting some of the money that Beale Street was generating.

Yet Memphis has learned. Today, within a four block area of the Beale Street bars, you have the (refurbished) Peabody Hotel, Peabody Place Mall, Auto Zone Park (home to a local minor league baseball team), Fed-Ex Arena (home to a professional basketball team), and more than several condominium and apartment complexes along the bluffs of the Mississippi. All of which lead people to visit Beale Street. Along with the recent inclusion of attractions within the immediate proximity of Beale Street, several other museums and attractions, concerning

⁶ BB King's has two other restaurants (NYC and LA, with maybe a third coming in Jackson, Ms), Pat O'Brian and Wet Willie both have restaurants in New Orleans, Coyote Ugly has opened on Beale St in the last several years.

Memphis music have opened in the last quarter of century. Graceland (former home of Elvis Presley) and Sun Studios were both opened in the 1980s (*New York Times* – 8/16/1982) (www.rockabillyhall.com/SunStudios1.html- accessed June 9, 2008) while Beale Street's rebirth was still in its infancy, both of these attractions tether themselves to the Elvis legacy. Where as the Stax Museum opened five years ago (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 4/2/2003) looking to both re-establish their legacy and add to the palette of music heritage that Memphis has accumulated over the three centuries.

What is good for business along Beale Street is not good for self-declared blues purists. With the emphasis on Beale Street currently as part of a larger entertainment district (where as before, Beale Street *was* the entertainment), blues-music fans fear that Beale Street is losing its identity (Nager 1998; Economist 1997; Sitton 1999). They point out that fewer blues acts are performing in the bars along Beale Street. The change of Handy Park to (originally Budweiser, but now) Pepsi Pavilion in 2000, a general crackdown on street musicians performing (literally) on Beale Street (Sitton 1999),⁷ have left blues preservationists at best discouraged, at worst ready to leave Beale St to the history books.

Yet there is still plenty that has been refurbished along the street. Obviously not all original structures were kept, and even of those that remain, half do not appear like they did before urban renewal took place along here. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the outside appearance of the buildings along Beale Street.

⁷ It is rumored, but not proven, that Performa Entertainment (“owners” of Beale Street) have asked Memphis to do this so to encourage visitors to spend their money on bands inside the bar instead of leaving tips for free performances out on the street.

Authenticity of Beale Street

It is hard to judge the authenticity of an urban district. Buildings go up and come down at different times. On Beale Street, the purists such as Nat D. Williams, Michael Bane, and Jim Dickerson, among others, lament what was torn down during the Urban Renewal era of 1969-1972 (Bane 1982; McKee 1993; Nager 1998). While it is true that much was taken away during that time, many of the buildings that survived had already been altered once or twice since their original completion.



Figure 4: Front of the BB King's Company Store, from 2005

Take for instance the building now used as the gift shop for B.B. King's restaurant and night club at 147 Beale St (photo on previous page). This one story building was originally constructed as a three story building. A previous owner in the 1950s took off the top two floors

(Raichelson 1999). Does this make the building any less authentic than the other buildings that were restored during the late seventies to early eighties along Beale St?

While the building was a fairly non-descript white-washed brick building, prior to and through Beale Streets renewal process, the current owners have dressed it up a little. The glass panels were extended (both up and downward), brass trim pieces were added, both as an ornament and safety feature (it's a sharp edge otherwise). Though do not let the date in fine print, above the entrance, fool you. The year 1947 has nothing to do with building or the store inside, instead that was the year that B.B. King first made his way to Memphis, to pursue his dream of "making it" in the music business (Palmer 1982; McKee 1993; Waterman 2001). The mentioning of 1947 is just an attempt at playing with visitors since of authenticity.

According to the collection of addresses compiled by Richard M. Raichelson for his book, *Beale Street Talks*, there were fifty-seven buildings (addresses) that comprised the original black business district along Beale Street from Second Street to Danny Thomas Boulevard. Of those fifty-seven, a quarter of them, fifteen buildings, were torn down during the urban renewal era of 1968-1972 leaving empty lots or new buildings that would not match the original character and appearance of Beale Street. In comparison, when Beale Street was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, only half of the buildings from Second Street to Fourth Street were the same from prior to World War I, while another quarter of the buildings had not been altered prior to World War II (NcKithan and Sheely 1987). Of the remaining sites, some look duller, some look more extravagant, and others look similar to what was there before.

The building that now houses BB King's restaurant (145 Beale St) has gone through several significant changes over the years. The original building was torn down in 1924. The

current building held several commercial enterprises along the ground level while offices for dentists, doctors, lawyers, and realtors were stationed on the second story (Raichelson 1999: 23).

When BB King's restaurant (and nightclub) was created in 1991, the building kept its shape but its function changed. Where there were formerly four parts to this building (139 on the far right, 141 in the middle, 143 on the left, and 145 on the far left for the second floor (Raichelson 1999: 23), it was now consolidated into one for the restaurant. Where the horizontal line of windows in the building exists today, it was all brick and plaster formerly. In the middle vertical section (previously 141) of the building today, there is no trace of the former entrance (Raichelson 1999). Speaking of previous entrances, what was the entrance to the second story offices (previously 145) at this location (bottom left corner of the photo below) is now an inconspicuous maroon-colored steel door. In the days before urban renewal, the second



Figure 5: Front of the B.B. King's Restaurant (facing Beale Street) 2005

story entrance had a fashionable white-trim-and-glass inset. Inside, the second story offices were gutted to make for balcony seating and booths along with making room for kitchen ventilation and climate control for the interior (Wyman 2001).

While BB King's restaurant is not an exact replica of the former businesses here, one could argue that it looks better now than it did before. The owners kept same style of downspouts and headstone (note the grey block in the upper right corner in the photo on the previous page), so it was not a complete makeover for the exterior.

At first glance, the building that currently houses Memphis Music (149 Beale St), would appear to be exactly as it's been through the years of its existence. But there have been some minor changes to it over its one hundred twenty year existence. The faded whitewash that currently envelops the building is a modern attempt at feigning planned degradation. For many years, the



Figure 6: Front of Memphis Music [store], 2005

façade was the natural grey brick color. Where once there were fire escape stairs across the front of the second and third story, there are now several American flags. Lastly, you can barely pick up the third story of this building being cut off. This was most likely cut off due to deterioration, photographs of the building from the early 1970s show the full third story for this building (Raichelson 1999).

What little remains of the third story stays empty, while the billboard facing eastbound traffic is a recent addition. There was nothing along that side of the building until the twenty-first century (and only been exposed for the last fifty years). Yet the front façade has kept the same architectural style for all its one hundred twenty years. Besides the removal of the fire escape stairs, the only other major difference in the appearance was changing the sign above the entrance from painted sheet metal to glass.

A. Schwab is a most interesting story along Beale Street. Occupying the same address for almost a century (and existing on Beale Street for a hundred and thirty years), its building is the only building that was not touched during Memphis's urban

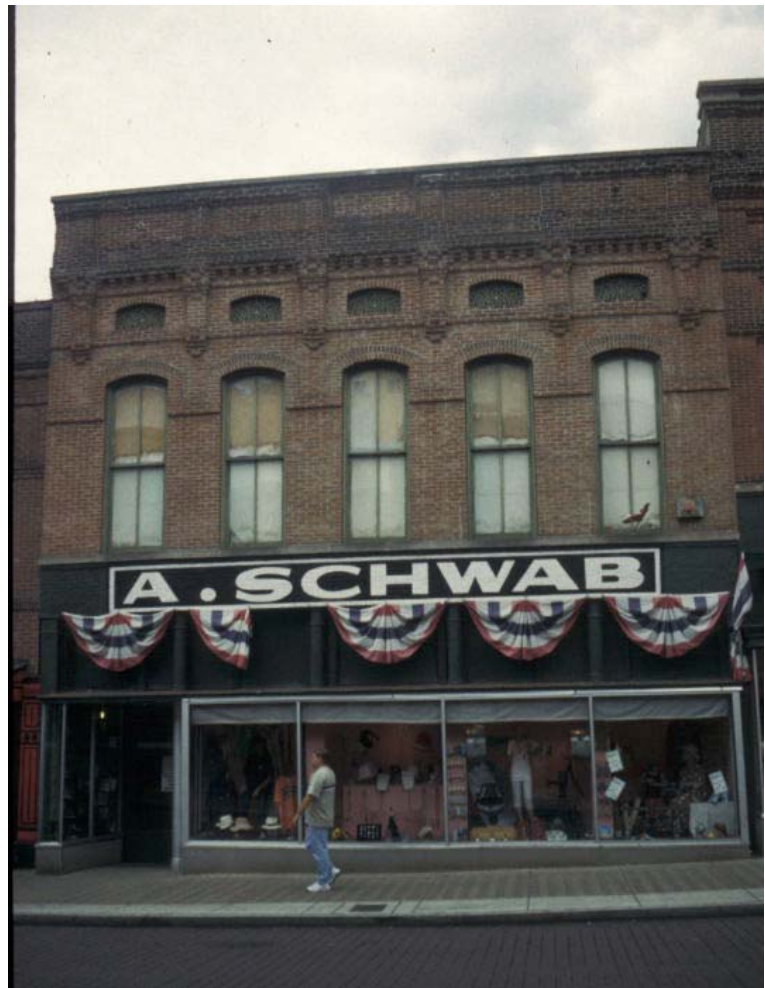


Figure 7: A. Schwab in 2005

renewal and rebuilding efforts, in spite of the many ways the city had its disposal back then (Gordon 1995). Founded in 1876 by Abraham Schwab, A. Schwab's has stayed in the hands of this Jewish family through the years (Stein 1995). As if in return for continuing into their third century, any hotel, restaurant, and tourist center that offers brochures (in Tennessee), that I visited, contained one for A. Schwab. Having personally visited A. Schwab, the collection of wares they sold would make your local dollar store look like a Macy's Department store. Focusing on incense, voodoo supplies, toys, trinkets, and other lesser items that were organized haphazardly and sold at such a discount you had to wonder if the item(s) would stand for repeated usages.

The exterior of the building, in comparison to its colorful history, appears drab. There are no neon signs to alert your eyes to the existence of A. Schwab (though there are photographs of a sign over the sidewalk, in front of the store, from the era prior to urban renewal (A.Schwab pamphlet 1999). In fact, the Schwab family has kept the same plain white text on black background for the last seventy-five years of its existence. In his second edition of *Beale Street Talks*, Richard Raichelson, in describing the exterior of A. Schwab's, mentions the "rich red color of the bricks" (1999: 31). In the six years between his writing and my photo above, the red bricks have faded into dirt and dullness. The second story windows have been covered with papers of some sort (maybe newsprint and wax paper). This contrasts against most of the other establishments along Beale Street who use some variation of translucent glass to obscure the sun from adversely affecting customers or items in storage (unless they have no active upper stories, thus keeping their window spots open with no glass). Yet the original exterior cornice work still stands, the metal grates still hold, and all appears solid as ever, all the way to their basement.

With A. Schwab's usage of unglamorous exterior design, they set their building apart from the others along Beale Street by going after the lowbrow. A. Schwab's would appear antiquated to the untrained eye compared to the other shops and restaurants along Beale Street. Yet these discounted trinkets, oddball incenses, voodoo talismans, and discounted clothing has been a constant for nine decades and is part of its charm now (Stern 1995).

A couple of buildings down the street you can find the current home to Strange Cargo (170 Beale Street). The building was originally built in 1903 and crossed Bayou Gayoso. The building originally had three parts to it; two storefronts along the street level and a second floor. Over time, through various shop owners, the two street level storefronts came under one owner, Abe Berg's clothing (Raichelson 1999). Unfortunately, very little is known about the second story and its occupants.



Figure 8: Strange Cargo, 2005

Strange Cargo came to this address in 1984, shortly after Beale Street was “reopened. (*Memphis Business Journal* – 5/18/1992)” The exterior of the building had changed little; the entrance(s) were designed to be recessed already as to extenuate an already slight brick awning overhead. However, the second story roof and interior had to be gutted out due to neglect⁸. The stairwell to the second floor was removed as well (you would need to see a photo of the place from before urban renewal to know to look for a doorway)

Since this store opened the exterior of the first floor has evolved. Blue paint appears as a dominant feature along the ground level panels and windows. The windows above the entrance have been filled with murals – representing significant locations concerning blues music and Beale Street. Left to right the panels show Delta Cotton Fields, Beale Street levee, Pee Wee’s Saloon, Crossroads, Rum Boogie Café, and Handy Park.

There appears to be some conflict concerning the identity for this building. The ground level displays are designed to promote Beale Street and are interesting to look at, yet they are designed for a modern appearance, not historical. Bright colors and historical depictions catch our eyes, but are not part of the historical representation of this neighborhood. Bricks, bland colors, and awnings are what you see in photos of Beale Street prior to its upheaval (Raichelson 1999; Library of Congress website 2008; Beale Street.com 2008). The removal of the second story diminishes from the complete appearance of the building, yet the façade for the building has held true for the entire time. Interestingly, on the National Register of Historic Places form

⁸ Neglect meaning structural deterioration caused by moisture trapped in the unheated, timber-frame structures during several freeze-thaw-cycles due in part to the city of Memphis boarding up the then empty buildings to protect them from vandals during the 1970s (Freeman 1998:57). 170 Beale Street isn’t the only location still showing the scars from that effort. 149 Beale St (Memphis Music) and 171-183 Beale St (Silky O’Sulivans) also have had their buildings affected from this unwise preservation attempt.

for Beale Street, this building was classified as non-contributing to Beale Street's historic character, with no reason given for this decision (McKithan and Sheely 1987).

Some of the buildings along Beale Street are only designed to make you believe they are authentic. The most noticeable example of this would be the Terry building (*Memphis Flyer*-11/23/2005) along the southside of Beale Street between Third Street and Rufus Thomas Boulevard. From street level one would think there are five different buildings here. If you look at this block of buildings from above you would see that all but one of these facing are of the same building⁹. Of the five building facades that compose this block, only 203 Beale Street has been changed since the urban renewal era.

In the case of the building at 197 Beale, the arched entrance-ways facing Beale Street

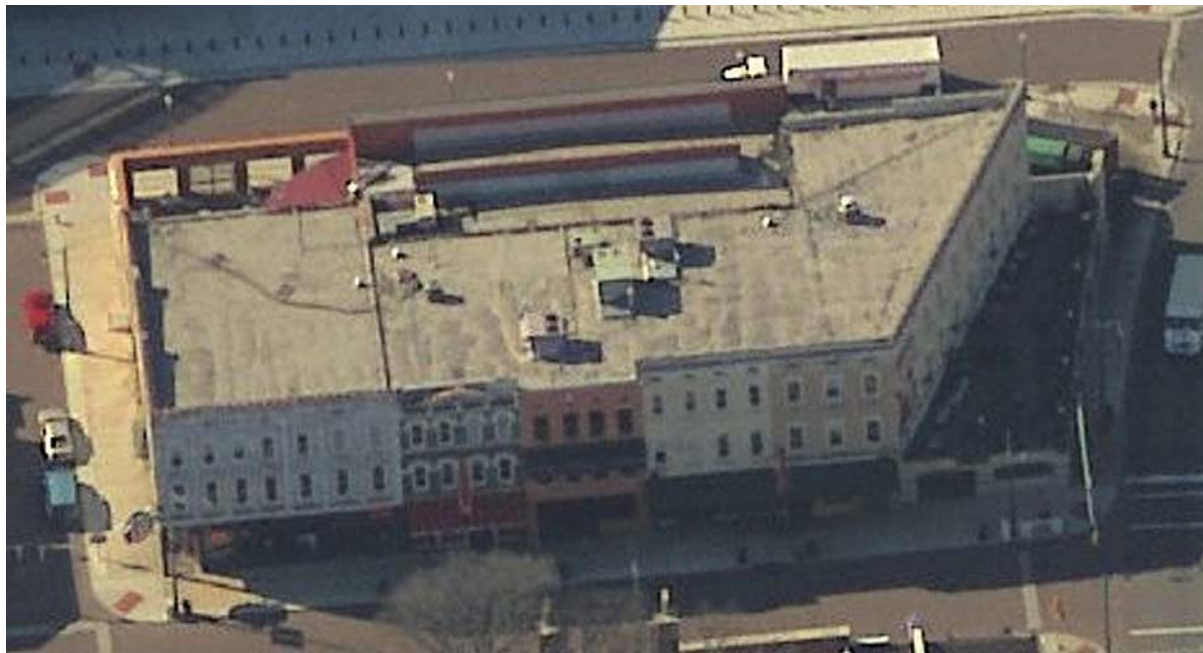


Figure 9: Overhead view of Beale Street between Hernando and Third Streets (looking south), from (Microsoft) maps.live.com, 2007. Left to right: Wet Willies, Dyers Hamburgers, Performa Real Estate, and Alfreds.

⁹ The building at 209-211 Beale St, which currently houses Wet Willies Daiquiri bar (photo on page 49), is partitioned off from the rest of the buildings on this block.

disappeared when the façade was being rebuilt after urban renewal, replaced by square windows. Along the west side of the building, the street was set back from the building during urban renewal and for the first twelve years after Beale Street “reopened” there was a park here (or as much of a park one could have with approximately Eighteen hundred square feet) on this reclaimed land till the owners decided to put a one story patio and parking garage there instead in 1997 (Raichelson 1999). This patio does incorporate arches in its design, but they are wider (approximately the width of an automobile), fewer, and flush with the wall (original arches had a lip around the top).

The building next door at 201 Beale Street has always looked very similar to 197 Beale Street. There are only several slight differences between the two facades when you look at the



Figure 10: From Left to right: Wet Willies (partial) Dyers Hamburgers, Performa Development, and Alfreds Restaurant from 2003

upper two stories. The grills at the top (beneath the cornice) are arched on 201 where as they squared on 197 and the windows on 201 are slightly narrower than along 197. The one major feature that has always differentiated the two buildings was the ground floor. The entrance for 201 was set back behind three fluted columns where as 197 had three arches.

The middle building in this collection is home to the offices for Performa Entertainment Real Estate (John Elkington) and several radio stations. This nondescript building, according to Richard Raichelson, was revamped so as to have a breezeway going from front to back (1999:48). In addition the National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form stated that this building was *not* eligible to be an historic façade because the window sash and storefront were not restored to the masonry openings (McKithan and Sheely 1987). Along with the lack of cornice work at the top, compared to its neighbors, it is easy to spot that this building does not look authentic in respect to early twentieth century architecture along Beale Street.

The front for 205 Beale Street may well be the most ornate of all the buildings within the Beale Street Historic District. Whether the blue paint for this building is traditional is questionable, but it is better than the whitewash that it had to endure during the urban renewal era of the 1970s (Raichelson 1999). Yet work has been done to maintain the intricate cornice work at the top (though it appears that the very top is transitioning from blue to white or vice versa). The building was originally constructed in 1884 as a liquor store and stayed in that capacity for thirty years. Following a revolving door of businesses, this address was used as a department store by Harry Levitron for twenty years leading up to the urban renewal era (Raichelson 1999).

The last building on this block takes up 209-211 Beale Street. Best known as the home for Pantaze Drug Store #2 (Southernfolklore.com, last accessed on February 23, 2006;

Raichelson 1999; Lauterbach 2006), this building was built in 1884, but its noted tenets did not arrive till 1896. First with George Battier (from 1896 to 1929) and then with Abe Plough (from 1929 to 1971), the first floor of this building was used as a pharmacy for seventy-five years. The upper floors of the building were accessed by a side entrance from Hernando Street. From there one could enter what was first a colored rooming house, then in 1944 upgraded to a hotel, on the third floor, with a lounge, on the second floor. This operation was run by Andrew Mitchell and was called the Domino Lounge, before renaming it the Club Handy (Raichelson 1999; Lauterbach 2006). With the onset of urban renewal, the building sat unused for most of the 1970s till rehab work started in 1979 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 2004; Mallofmemphis.com, accessed April 10, 2008).

Since Beale Street “reopened” it has been the last two renters of the former Pantaze Drug



Figure 11: Wet Willies Daiquiri Bar, 2003

building that have been the most significant names there in the last twenty-five years. From 1996 through 1999, the Center for Southern Folklore used the ground floor to hold their displays, sell goods, and let musicians play there. A non-profit entity, they were constantly running a deficit which hampered the ability of the Center for Southern Folklore to pay their rent (Sitton 1999). Thus when Performa had a commercial entity, Wet Willie's, willing to rent out on Beale Street, Southern Folklore was evicted under the pretense of unpaid rent (Sitton 1999).

Even with Wet Willies as the present tenant, the design of the building's exterior has stayed the same through the years. The most notable difference would be the entrance being painted black, a change from when the building was entirely painted with the same off-white color. Reportedly, this building did have some cornice work at the top only to have it removed (Raichelson 1999). Unlike most other building facades along Beale Street, the front of 209-211 has been allowed to have the paint fade, or peel away from much of the building. The only other building along Beale Street whose facade would appear as faded as Wet Willies would be Silky O'Sullivan's at 183 Beale Street (not covered in this thesis). It would appear that this is a planned effort so that the visitors believe the rebuilt building looks older than it really is.

The architecture, along Beale Street, changes after one cross Hernando Street, continuing their walk away from the Mississippi River. Unlike the previous two blocks where much of the architecture was saved, "new" buildings outnumber the saved "older" buildings along this last stretch of the Beale Street entertainment district. The most outrageous example of this is Pat O'Brian's at 308-312 Beale Street (across the street from Handy Park).

On the site that Pat O'Brian's Memphis club now stands once stood a general store of non-descript architecture. It was torn down during the urban renewal era of the early 1970s (Raichelson 1999; McKithan and Sheely 1987). Originally the cleared land was used as part of a

new road called Handy Circle (McKithan and Sheely 1987) in the mid-seventies, but even that was scraped and became an empty lot till someone made an impromptu club on the location with a large circus tent in the beginning of 2001 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 3/28/2001-5/10/2001).

While Performa had been in negotiations with Pat O’Brian’s to come to Beale Street as far back as 1991 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 10/23/1991), it was decided that the new Pat O’Brian’s appearance would mimic its older brother in New Orleans, not the landscape of Memphis and Beale Street (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* – 1/1/2002). With that in mind, French doors and balconies were laid out for the (new) two story building for people to conglomerate upon while the building minimal cornice work and brown stucco finished helped to give the building that French Creole look the original Pat O’Brian’s maintains.



Figure 12: Pat O’Brian’s along Beale Street in Memphis, 2005

Considering that Memphis and New Orleans were economic rivals through much of the Nineteenth Century (due to the Mississippi River), it was interesting to see the addition of Pat O'Brian's to Beale Street. However Pat O'Brian's addition to the Memphis bar scene was not for the history of Beale Street or Memphis Blues music. It was brought on with the thought that a known entity that was different from the other bar/club/restaurant would help business along Beale Street while requiring little effort from Performa Industries in promote Pat O'Brian's significance to those visiting Memphis.

Along with Pat O'Brian's, which has no historical connection to Beale Street and Memphis, there are other structures that do not match up with the "preserved" section of Beale Street. Pee Wee's Saloon, which is promoted as the "office" for W.C. Handy, stood near the intersection of Hernando and Beale. That location is now home to the modern looking structure of the Hard Rock Café. It should be noted that the building in which Pee Wee's Saloon was



Figure 13: (From left to right) 335, 333, and 331 Beale Street, 2005

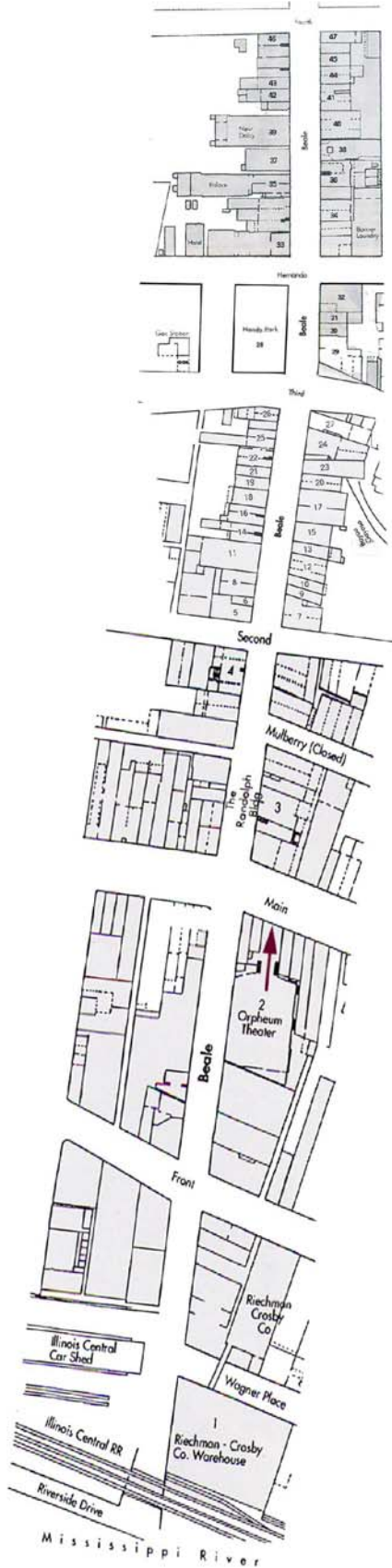
located in was torn down in 1956, with its replacement torn down as well during the Urban Renewal process of the early 1970s (Raichelson 1999).

Along that same side of Beale Street, there is a long one-story modern-appearing building that is broken into three stores. It was supposed to mimic the building that stood there before. However the original building used white ceramic tile along the top and had more ornamentation. Unfortunately, efforts at preserving the building failed and it was torn down in 1981 (Raichelson 1999). The new building has nothing of visual impact concerning its design. You have canvas canopies over each entrance, simulated columns of bricks above each entrance, and too much exposed cinder blocks making the building as stylish as vanilla ice cream.

Modern Beale Street has become a dichotomy. The city and developers try to sell visitors of Memphis on the history and authenticity of Beale Street, as an excuse for people to go there and party. As I have shown here though, the authenticity of Beale Street is as fleeting as the success one would have had at one of the backlot gambling rooms in the numerous bars along Beale Street at the turn of the twentieth century. Judith Johnson, the executive director for Memphis Heritage (as of 1998), was quoted in *Preservation Magazine* as saying, “Today, I would not endorse Beale Street for listing in the National Register for any reason other than its cultural significance. Very few of the buildings retain their architectural integrity” (1998: 57).

Yet as the blues musicians and architecture along Beale Street quietly fade away to modern pressures, other cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina; Columbus, Georgia.; Jackson, Mississippi; and Richmond, Virginia.; and Shreveport, Louisiana have looked at what Beale Street and Memphis have become and attempted, through Performa Inc., to imitate it (Sitton 1999). Do these other cities understand what they are attempting to do? For my next case study, I dissect the attempts of Jackson, Mississippi over the last thirty years as the politicians and

developers tangled with the residents, scholars, and historians as to how the Farish Street neighborhood is presented to the outside world.



Not to scale.

Numbers correspond to buildings I referenced.

7. BB King’s Restaurant

9. Gift Store for BB King’s Restaurant

10. Memphis Music

16. Strange Cargo

17. A.Schwabs

29-32 Alfreds, Performa, Dyers, Wet Willies

33 –Pat O’Brians

34 – Hard Rock Café

41, 44 – Eel Industries, Y Not Souvenirs, & Pizza of

Beale

Figure 14: Map of Beale Street, from Mississippi River to Fourth Street. Cartography from Raichelson, 1999.

Farish Street

Significance of Jackson

Jackson sort of gets lost when it comes to cultural heritage in Mississippi. The delta in the northwest has the cotton plantations and a large concentration of rural blacks that would form the basis for blues music. The southwest had the river cities of Vicksburg and Natchez with their history in battle and trade. The Southeast has the Gulf of Mexico and the resort towns along that coast. The Northeast part of Mississippi has Elvis in Tupelo and Faulkner in Oxford. The center of the state contains the political power due to the state capital being there, but it gets bypassed by travelers going between Memphis and New Orleans.

It was not always this way. In the early twentieth century, Jackson was one of the options if you wanted to go to “the big city” with Memphis, Greenwood, and Clarksdale. The Works Progress Administration Guide to Mississippi, from 1938, described Farish Street as “the spinal cord of the Negro business district” (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 6-20-96). If you were a musician in the delta looking for someone to record you, you could go to Memphis or you would go to Farish Street in Jackson to see H.C. Speir, or (later) Lilian McMurrey, or Johnny Vincent. Those record producers are part of the city of Jackson’s basis to remake North Farish Street into an entertainment district. Yet the residents and shop owners along the street disagree.

What is Farish Street? Is it the historic home to Trumpet Records, the Alamo Theater, the Crystal Palace and the Farish Street Blues Museum? Or is the home to the NAACP, three furniture stores, a barber shop, a shoe repair, a small market, Pig Ear sandwiches, and still plenty of residents? The city of Jackson, Mississippi for the last thirty years has been debating what to do with their historic black neighborhood along Farish Street. The politicians have attempted

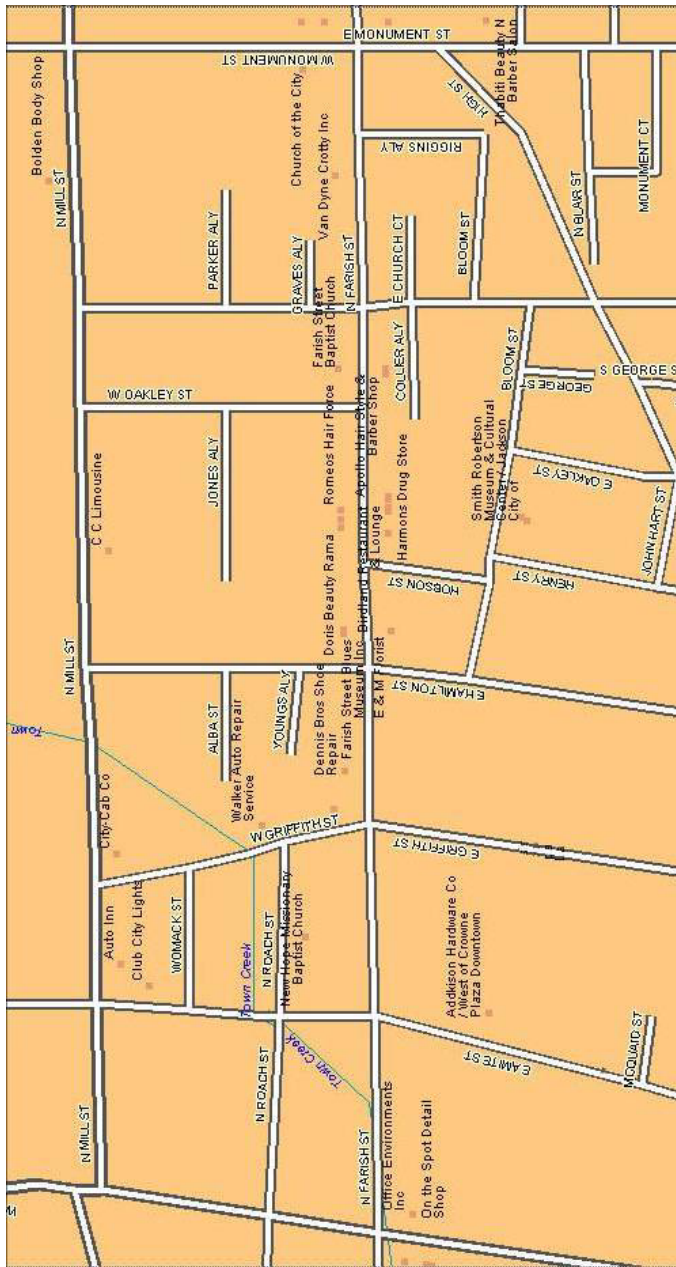
various forms of urban renewal along Farish Street. The residents and business owners along Farish Street have (for the most part) blocked those attempts (*Jackson Advocate* – 3/30/89).

Occasionally the city has offered “olive branches” to the residents. Twice in the 1980s the city lined up funding to build new housing along the northern half of Farish Street. From these efforts, thirty-eight shotgun-style houses were built in 1998, however over half remain empty (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 11/3/05). The Reverend Robert Green has been quoted as stating that “(Lack of) ownership and upkeep has hindered the establishment of a stable population” (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 5/12/94). So the city, seeing that residential construction was not successful, has decided to pursue commercial businesses for the Farish Street neighborhood instead.

As where the previous chapter analyzed a completed rehabilitation project and how it is perceived, this chapter discusses what the future may hold. As I write this, the Performa Corporation, starting back in the fall of 2005 (*Jackson Free Press* – 11/15/06), started a large restoration job with the unused commercial buildings along Farish Street with the financial backing of the city of Jackson and (by proxy) the state of Mississippi. This chapter details the history of this neighborhood and why the two competing factions, the city and commercial interests compared to the residents and small-business owners along Farish Street both feel their view of this neighborhood is the “correct” view. While in the end, those who support the large-scale commercialization of Farish Street appear to have prevailed, those against this change should not be ignored either.

The commercial district along Farish Street extends from Amite Street to Church Street, on both sides of Farish Street, and further along the westside of Farish Street to beyond Monument Street. Heading north from Amite Street, the first block along of the district contained

several furniture shops; the second block held several meeting halls, auditoriums, and diners, the third block was the home to some stores, more diners, and several churches. By the fourth block (between Church and Monument Streets), the eastside of the street changes over to residential while there are several commercial properties. Once north of Monument Street, beyond a



supermarket at the northwest corner, the rest of Farish Street, up to its northern terminus, is lined with housing stock of various styles and quality.

The efforts of the developers and the city have been focused on the section of Farish Street from Amite Street to Hamilton Street. Originally, the commercial strip for Farish Street extended south to Capital Street (the main economic corridor for “white” Jackson (Barretta, 2004: 48)), but that first block was cleared out for the A.H. McCoy Federal Building and parking garage back in the late 1960s (Hambrick, 1983). Those first three blocks of North Farish Street have been primarily commercial in nature since the beginning of the 20th century.

Figure 15: Map of Farish St. Delormes Map 2001

Significant Personalities of Farish Street

There is a strong sense of pride in the older generation of blacks who still call Farish Street home. Local educator, Alferdteen Harrison started off her compilation on the Farish Street Historic District by stating, “Farish Street structures were built by blacks for blacks” (1984: 1). Prior to the Civil War the (modern) northwest quadrant of Jackson was in the hands several plantation estates. The development of a black urban district for Jackson started after the Civil War (Winter 2000: 9). Dividing and plotting those plantations did not occur till the 1870s and it was not until the 1890s that the Farish Street corridor was considered a neighborhood for African Americans (Winter 2000: 9). The culture of Farish Street came into existence as the result of restrictions placed on acts of blacks by Southern American traditions, sanctioned by Jim Crow laws (Young 1984: 10).

When blacks started to make a community around Farish Street, the first businesses were located in the first block, north of Capital Street, and then six blocks north near the intersection of Monument and Farish Streets where a Cotton Oil Manufacturing plant was located at (Winter 2000: 29). From the start of the twentieth century until World War I, Farish Street filled in between these two points with lawyers, doctors, bankers focused towards the south end (Baretta 2004: 49), as where churches and several schools were located towards the north. In between those two nodes various stores, restaurants and clubs filled in over time.

Situated amongst the professional offices based on the south end of North Farish Street was a music shop, ran by Henry C. Speir. Henry Speir was a white man who decided to sell records, guitars, and victrolas to blacks (Knight 2001: 100). Speir’s first store was located at 225 North Farish Street from 1925 to 1927 (or 28). He then moved south a block to 111 North Farish Street and operated his store there till 1942 after which he left Farish Street and the music

business¹⁰. While Speir's music store is the physical place to remind people of him, that business was not the cause of Henry Speir's significance. The reason for his significance was the side job that Henry Speir did for fifteen years, for he was, as he described himself, a talent scout (Wardlow 1998; Knight 2001; Cheseborough 2001). In that Speir found musicians, mostly in Mississippi, but throughout the Southeast United States as well, and arranged for them to be recorded. Several of the musicians he "discovered" included Charley Patton, Skip James, and Tommy Johnson¹¹. When Henry Speir first started, he went out looking for musicians and if he heard something he liked, he would tell them to come by his store in Jackson and he would record them (with recording equipment he kept in the second story of his store) and then send copies to the record labels of the day (Paramount, American Recording Company [ARC], Victor, Okeh, Gennett, and later Decca)(Wardlow 1998: 127). If the labels liked what Speir sent them, Speir would track down the musicians and send them (usually in groups of three or four) up north to be recorded by the label.

After several years Henry Speir developed a reputation in and around Jackson as someone to see if you wanted to be recorded, so musicians from the neighboring communities around Jackson would come to Farish Street looking for Henry Speir instead of him going out looking for them. Case in point, in 1935, a young musician by the name of Robert Johnson came by Speir's store and cut a demo record there. Henry thought enough of Robert Johnson's song (Robert did a version of "Kindhearted Woman" for Speir (Wardlow 1998: 140)) that he forwarded Robert Johnson's contact information to an ARC salesman. This led to Robert

¹⁰ When H.C. Speir "left" Farish St. in 1942 it was due to his business having caught fire and a recording ban due to dispute between the musicians union and the record labels (Wardlow 1998:134).

¹¹ Charley Patton and Skip James were Delta Country Blues musicians; Tommy Johnson was from near Jackson and had a forty year recording career performing many styles of blues and Jazz.

Johnson's first recording session in San Antonio, Texas in November 1936 (Wardlow 1998: 141). Henry even set up several recording sessions in Jackson during the depression (1930 for Okeh Records at the King Edwards Hotel in Jackson and in 1935 for ARC at the Crystal Palace on Farish Street¹²).

There are two different stories as to why Henry Speirs stopped working in the music business, ironically both attributed to the same man. Gayle Dean Wardlow, in an article for the magazine *Blues Unlimited*, wrote that a 1942 fire in Henry's Farish Street store was a mitigating factor for him leaving Farish Street and the music business. Twenty-eight years later, during an interview by Patrick Howse and Jimmy Phillips for *Monitor* magazine (published by Peavey Electronics), Gayle recalls Speir operating a store along Farish Street from 1925 to 1937, then moving to a building along West Capital till 1944¹³. In both cases a recording ban due to a dispute between the musicians union and the record labels during World War II was mentioned as the main culprit in driving Speir out of the music business. Speir would go on to open a furniture store in North Jackson as the war ended and never returned to blues music before he passed away in 1972. (Wardlow 1998: 127)

Less than a decade after Henry Speir left Farish Street, another music store came to be on Farish Street. In 1949 Willard McMurry bought a hardware store, which the previous owners had given up on, located at 309 North Farish Street (O'Neil 1985: 19). Willard had the express interest in remodeling the building into a furniture store. Willard hired two laborers to salvage

¹² Speir also organized a recording session for ARC Records in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 1936 (Wardlow 1998:133)

¹³ Both articles are compiled in the book *Chasin' That Devil Music* (1998) by Gayle Dean Wardlow and Edward Komara

and clean up the building, while he gave his wife, Lillian, the responsibility to oversee the laborers work (Ryan 2004: 8).

The story goes that one of the laborers found a stack of unsold 78 records and a record player. So to break up the monotony of the work, the record player was plugged in and the first 78 they put on was “All She Wants to Do Is Rock” by Wynonie Harris. Somehow Lillian McMurry became spellbound by the song and has been quoted as saying about that moment, “It was the most unusual, sincere, and solid sound I’d ever heard” (O’Neil 1985: 16, Ryan 2004: 8). That chance moment was the impetuous for the formation of Trumpet Records, at 309 North Farish Street.

Trumpet Records had only a short history. It only lasted six years, from their first recording in 1950 with the gospel group the St. Andrews Gospelairens (Baretta 2004: 52) until their last release in 1956 (Ryan 2004: 154). Trumpet’s main notoriety came from being the first record label that Aleck “Rice” Miller, better known to the world as Sonny Boy Williamson, recorded for. Along the way Trumpet Records also released singles from blues musicians Elmore James, Big Joe Williams, Arthur Crudup, Bobo Thomas, and Luther and Percy Huff (Baretta 2004:52).

After hearing that record in 1949, Lillian convinced her husband to give one wall of his furniture store to her so she could sell records (Ryan 2004: 9) and after giving the exterior a coat of bright yellow paint they agreed to call the new business, The Record Mart (Ryan 2004: 8). Business concerning record sales was brisk. Lillian had loudspeakers installed outside the store to play music (and entice customers to come in), and then purchased advertising on WRBC, sponsoring the *Ole Hep Cat* program (Ryan 2004: 9). All this helped to increase record sales and Lillian started a mail-order business to further sell records beyond Jackson (Ryan 2004: 8).

When Lillian decided to get into producing records (thus starting Trumpet Records), she went through several sites where there would be marathon recording sessions of multiple bands lasting several days. However complications from segregation forced Lillian to find other locations (Ryan 2004: 39) and she finally settled on Scott Radio Service on 128 North Gallatin Street, several blocks away from The Record Shop. What Scott had in location, it lacked in technical applications. Constant re-recording of material and an inferior sound caused Lillian to be disenchanted with them thus causing her to move recording session out of Mississippi for a year till she decided to remake The Record Mart into a recording studio instead, by 1953 (Ryan 2004: 45).

What led to the demise of Trumpet Records was a combination of several events. Shortly after the first singles released by Sunny Boy Williamson (II) and then Elmore James, the Bihari Brothers, with Modern Records from Los Angeles, showed up in Mississippi offering thousands in cash advances for any musician, no matter what their contract situation was (Ryan 2004: 65). Several performers under contract with Trumpet Records fell for the Bihari Brothers' siren song and Lillian would not only disavow their contract with Trumpet Records, but stop all promotion and sales of their material (Ryan 2004: 66). The most notable example of this would be with Elmore James, who only recorded one song with Trumpet before jumping labels. Lillian did file suit against the Biharis in 1952 but it took two years for the case to go to trial and from it she only won two thousand dollars (Ryan 2004: 67). Not enough, even then, to discourage artist and repertoire agents from pursuing illegal and questionable methods to obtain talent for their labels.

Lillian's other downfall with Trumpet Records was not being able to find enough musicians that were producing records that would sell. By the time Trumpet Records closed their door in 1956 musical tastes had changed from the Delta Blues style to Rock n'Roll

(ironically similar to Wynonie Harris, the first “black” artist that Lillian had heard) and Lillian McMurry did not come upon that someone who could record a song that “everyone” would want.

The money that the McMurrays spent on changing their store into a recording studio ended up being money not well spent. To help pay off debts incurred by building the studio, Lillian ended up selling off the contracts of Sonny Boy Williamson (II), Tiny Kennedy, and Jerry McCain (Ryan 2004: 150). With hardly anyone under contract to Trumpet Records to use her new studio, Lillian leased out Diamond Studio to Johnny Vincent and Ace Records (more about him next page) as well. After one more attempt, this time pursuing a more “pop” based sound, as Globe Records, Lillian gave up on the music industry in 1956 and concentrated on her husband’s business and being a mother (Ryan 2004: 154).

Another music personality based on Farish Street was John Vincent Imbragulo, who went by the name Johnny Vincent. Johnny is best known for starting and running Ace Records from 1954 till his death in 2000. Before Johnny started Ace Records, he bought into Griffin Distributing Company in 1949 (Benicewicz 2001: 3) which was located at 241 North Farish Street. Shortly after there he started the short-lived record label called Champion. Champion Records only released about a dozen singles with the most noted musician of the bunch being Arthur Crudup (Baretta 2004: 53). Johnny was talked out of doing his own label in 1950 by Art Rupe, who ran Specialty Records in New Orleans. Johnny Vincent was brought on to be the A&R man (along with distributor and promotions) for Speciality Records with the promise of a penny for (literally) every record he would produce for the label. This relationship lasted for the first half of the 1950s till Vincent was let go due to financial issues.

In spite of his dismissal, Vincent decided he was ready to run his own label once more and returned to Jackson, Mississippi. From there, he started Ace Records in 1955, this time using

New Orleans based musicians such as Eddie Bo, Huey “Piano” Smith, Lightnin’ Slim, and Mac Rebennack (more commonly known today as Dr. John) among others. Ace Record’s first “hit” was with Earl King’s *Lonely, Lonely Nights* (Baretta 2004: 53).

At the height of his success with Ace Records, Johnny moved his operation off of Farish Street to a nine story building several blocks away on 203 West Capital Street. However, a distribution deal with Vee-Jay Records (based in Chicago) brought on the demise of Ace Records in the mid 60s. This was due more to Vee-Jay’s financial insolvency than any act that Johnny Vincent did. Afterwards Vincent kept the Ace Records name in circulation as a specialty mail-order music business, with the occasional attempt producing new material, until the 1990s.

Along with the record labels and talent scouts based on Farish Street there stood several music venues and one political office as well. Up beyond Hamilton Street on the 500 block of Farish Street stands a two-story brick building that housed at one time the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People field office of Medger Evers (Chesseborough 2001: 164). With Farish Street being the focal point for black’s commercial life, it should be no surprise that the community would also stand as the communication center for blacks as well. Newspaper stands with black-owned newspapers and churches for community meetings were important links to the outside world (Classen 2004: 153). However, in conducting interviews for his book, *Watching Jim Crow*, Steve Classen was told by his informants, “not to romanticize such cultural spaces and practices [near Farish Street]. That there was always a pervasive sense of suspicion that existed, cultivated by violent state-sanctioned racism” (Classen 2004: 153).

Development of Farish Street

The state-sponsored racism of Mississippi eventually faded out and many of the residents and businesses that lined Farish Street moved out to other parts of Jackson and Hinds County,

Mississippi. Thus while Beale Street in Memphis was being allowed to fall apart during the 1960s, it was not for another decade (due in part to the delay in ridding of the racist policies of the state) that Farish Street and Jackson faced the same dilemma. The city of Jackson created the Jackson Redevelopment Authority in 1968 (city.jackson.ms.us/cityhall/redev.htm last accessed on March 8, 2007) for the purpose of designating blighted properties and acquiring federal and state funding to improve them. Yet, faced the same federal economic difficulties as Memphis did (see discussion back on pages 32 and 33).

In 1976, the Jackson Redevelopment Authority designated much of Farish Street blighted and a slum. Furthermore, when the Redevelopment Authority proposed “section 8” housing¹⁴ along Farish Street that same year, residents and business owners opposed this invasion and kept the low-rent housing at bay for another two years (*Jackson Advocate* – 9/28/1980). It was the activism from this ordeal that laid the plans for the creation of the Farish Street Historical District in 1980 (*Capital Reporter* - 6/25/81).

With the creation of the Farish Street Historical District, the Jackson Redevelopment Authority drew up their first Farish Street Revitalization Plan in 1981 (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 10/9/93). Along with that, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a consortium of the YWCA, the Mississippi State Archives, and Jackson State University a one hundred thousand dollar grant to assist residents along Farish Street in discovering their historic and aesthetic value (*Yazoo Daily Herald* – 9/30/81). Their concentration was towards locating the various architectural styles in the neighborhood instead of directing their attention towards the commercial district along Farish Street (*Jackson Advocate* – 7/17/86). In their 1981 plan for

¹⁴ “Section 8” housing is technically the Housing Choice Voucher Program, a Federal housing program which provides housing assistance to low-income renters and homeowners. “Section 8” refers back to the portion of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 under which the original subsidy program was authorized (Apartment Smart brochure 2007 and www.hud.gov/progdsc/voucher.cfm last accessed on January 15, 2008).

Farish Street, it was proposed that businesses along the thoroughfare be encouraged to dress up their property voluntarily (with their local history in mind). The city of Jackson would create some economic packages for property owners interested in rehabbing their property as an incentive for them to change their property fronts (*Jackson Daily News* – 5/21/81).

The 1981 proposal ended up getting no cooperation from the property owners along Farish Street so the city of Jackson drew up the Farish Street Area Development Program: A Five Year Implementation in 1984 (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 10/9/93). There was even two million dollars for its implementation (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 4/2/01) of which one million was to have been used for housing and infrastructure during that span (*Jackson Clarion Ledger* 12/20/02). Still, the decade of the 80s ended with less of the Farish Street neighborhood standing than there was at the start.

In 1979, when the Farish Street Historical District was declared, there were nine hundred buildings still standing in the neighborhood. Sixteen years later, there would be only seven hundred buildings standing (*Atlanta Journal Constitution* – 6/11/95). At one time there were twenty furniture stores along Farish Street. That number had dropped to five by 1989 (*Jackson Advocate* – 3/30/89). So as the 1990s started, the city of Jackson commissioned two more proposals concerning Farish Street. There was the Downtown Urban Design Plan in 1992, that evidently included part of Farish Street and in 1994 the city hired Mary Means and Associates for fifty thousand dollars to do a study on Farish Street (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 10/9/93; *Mississippi Link* – 4/22/98)¹⁵. Around that same time, Farish Street was officially designated as a city [of Jackson] Historic District.

¹⁵ The contract with the Mary Means Planning firm must have never gone through as both the city and Mary Means and Associates have no record of any documents concerning Farish Street written up.

With all these proposals floating around, the city of Jackson needed a conduit to help direct money to Farish Street. Thus in 1992, the city helped start the Farish Street Historic District Neighborhood Foundation (or FSHDNF) as the non-profit wing for Farish Street development (*Mississippi Link* – 3/26/98). The first director for the FSHDNF was Okolo Rashid. The FSHDNF led in obtaining a demolition moratorium for the Farish Street neighborhood from middle of 1992 through the first half of 1993 (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 12/30/92; 12/29/93). They also acquired from the Department of Housing and Urban Development a grant for eight hundred seventy-five thousand dollars that was matched by local sources for new housing in a development to be called Medgar Evers Heights (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 12/20/92) and acquired ten thousand dollars to place a sculpture on the Hamilton Street Green (*Jackson Clarion Ledger* – 12/20/92). All this goodwill bought Okolo Rashid nothing, for her contract was not renewed by the city of Jackson in 1995 (*Jackson Advocate* – 9/7/95). She was replaced with Michael Hervey as Executive Director and Vern Garin as Chair of the FSHDNF.

During the 1990s, the city of Jackson made their biggest push for the redevelopment of the Farish Street neighborhood. Back in 1993, the city thought it would cost twenty million dollars to rebuild and revitalize Farish Street (*Jackson Advocate* – 10/30/93). Okolo Rashid was quoted in a 1995 article for the Atlanta Journal Constitution as saying rehabbing Farish Street would cost twenty-two million. By 1999, the Mississippi legislature approved six million dollars to turn Farish Street into a historic entertainment district. This after then governor Fordice had vetoed the original bill because he felt that there was too much crime along Farish Street at that time to warrant spending that amount of money on the community there (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 4/27/99).

After seeing the National Trust for Historic Preservation designate the Farish Street district as one of the eleven “most endangered historic places” in America in 1995 (*Washington Post* – 6/8/95). The Jackson city council “invited” John Elkington (of Beale Street redevelopment fame) into the Farish Street redevelopment process the following year (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* - 6/20/96). With John Elkington’s suggestions, the local politicians’ thought process for the revitalization of Farish Street changed from that of black history and housing to that of entertainment history. In 1997, there was an “entertainment proposal” from the city (*Jackson Advocate* – 9/15/97) with Farish Street between Amite and Hamilton Streets being designated as an Entertainment District. It should be noted that six years later Elkington and his company, Performa Real Estate, would officially sign on as the redevelopers of Farish Street (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 6/7/02).

With the attention being drawn to Blues culture tourism (Rotenstein 1992, *Living Blues Magazine* 1997, and Titan 1998) and the Farish Street neighborhood by the end of the decade, there was finally some work being done towards fixing it up. With the six million dollars pledged from the state, “Fannie Mae” granted another 6 million dollars towards the Farish Street neighborhood. However, the Fannie Mae money was to be used almost exclusively for rebuilding the housing stock in the area (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 4/27/99). Both Fannie Mae and the Farish Street Management Corporation thought that building new “historic” shotgun houses along the eastside of Farish Street between Church and Monument Streets (*Mississippi Link* – 3/26/98) would improve the historical character of the neighborhood. Further south in the “entertainment district” of Farish Street, the city commissioned for boarded up buildings to be painted with murals by high-school students (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 11/19/1999). The city

of Jackson hired yet another planning firm, this time Winter & Co., to write up design guidelines for the Farish Street neighborhood. (*Northside Sun* – 11/2/2000).

With that work going on in the neighborhood, several small museums, pertaining to the Farish Street community, opened up. There was the Scott-Ford house, located on Cohea Street and the Farish Street Blues Museum, located on Farish Street (just north of Hamilton Street). In the case of the Scott-Ford house, money from the National Trust for Historic Preservation had been appropriated to rehab the structure and as a museum showing the history of black residential life in Jackson (Mississippi Heritage Trust 2005). On the other hand, the Farish Street Blues Museum was privately run by two individuals Greg Woodcox and Gayle Dean Wardlow and focused on the musical history of Farish Street. As Greg Woodcox put it when interviewed by Richard Knight of the *London Independent* in 2001, “I wanted local kids to know Elmo' James came from their neighborhood and I wanted them to know what that means.” The museum featured the three record producers I mentioned earlier in this chapter, and the musicians that recorded in Jackson. Alas, the Farish Street Blues Museum failed to find its niche, in spite of the assistance in promoting it given by the city, state, and several publications, and closed up before I started my fieldwork on this subject in 2005. In comparison the Scott-Ford house is still operating as a museum and receives financial assistance from local churches as well as federal funding (*Southern Register* [Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi] 1997).

Farish Street Today

The last five years or so, the biggest changes to the Farish Street neighborhood, since the height of the civil rights movement, have occurred. After months of deliberation, the city of Jackson came to agreement with John Elkington and Performa Real Estate to manage the Farish

Street Historic Entertainment District in 2002. Performa signed a contract to manage the district for 46 years (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 3/4/2002) while the city would own the properties in the district, just like Beale Street in Memphis. The city of Jackson has started the process of taking over the properties along Farish Street and seventy percent of the deeds along Farish Street between Amite and Hamilton Streets have been acquired (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 4/2/2001). In response to neighborhood demands about crime on Farish Street, construction on a new police substation along Farish Street started in March of 2002 (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 3/4/2002). At the same time the city was awarded a million five hundred thousand dollar loan to proceed with a streetscape program for Farish Street (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger*-3/22/01). All the utilities were buried, the sidewalks were rebuilt and widened, and trees were planted.

Yet the city would keep fumbling away chances to acquire funding for the revitalization of Farish Street. The city of Jackson had to postpone the construction of new housing in the district in October of 2001 because the federal tax credits for the project had expired (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* – 2/4/2002). In April of 2001, the Clarion Ledger reported that there was eleven million dollars available from federal sources, but the city was not using those funds.

In spite of the financial difficulties, cultural differences, political power plays, and mistrust between the races, there is progress on Farish Street. It is not moving as fast as all involved want. The openings of several clubs and restaurants have been pushed back several times since I started on this thesis, but there is progress. In this next section I will be showing photographs of several historically significant buildings along Farish Street that show this neighborhood's importance concerning music. I should note that several of these buildings have started to be renovated since I took these following photos. They were taken during two trips to Jackson; one in June, 2005, the other in March of 2006.

Farish Street Buildings

Hinds Furniture (photo on the following page) was the last business at 309 North Farish Street, but it is far from being the most famous. This location was the physical home for Trumpet Records during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The bricked in doorway on the far right of the photo had been covered up for many years. It had only been exposed in the last several years. During the years between the demise of Trumpet Records and the present, this building has taken different fronts from recording studio to furniture store. Photographs taken of this site just five years ago for a book on the history of Trumpet Records show this building with a complete brick facing (Ryan 2004: 4), compared to stucco look prior to its current deconstruction.

The most interesting feature is the former doorway that was filled in on the far-right side of the photo with bricks. Its purpose is unknown at the time of this writing.



Figure 16: Hinds Furniture, formerly Trumpet Records

The Alamo Theatre is one of the few success stories that Farish Street had during their attempts (so far) at revitalization in the last two decades. It was rehabbed during the middle of the 1990s, even surviving a minor fire in 1991. Scott Barretta wrote a thumbnail sketch of the Alamo Theatre for *Living Blues* magazine in 2004. In that article he wrote that “The Alamo Theatre was first constructed on the first block of North Farish Street, across the street from where the McCoy Federal Building now stands” (2004: 154).

It moved to a location on Amite Street during the 1930s and 40s” (2004: 53). The old Alamo Theatre is best remembered for talent contests held there. Among those who gained their first public exposure there were Otis Spann and Dorothy Moore (Cheseborough 2001, Knight 2001). The Alamo Theatre has since stood at 333 North Farish Street since 1948 (though it was closed from 1984 to 1996). The design is cubist with plenty of neon, aluminum, and porcelain, so its appearance is more Art Deco than modern



Figure 17: Entrance to the Alamo Theatre, 2005



Figure 18: 507-509 Farish Street. Home to the Big Apple Inn and former home to musicians and politicians. From 2006

There is a non-descript two story brick building at 507-509 North Farish Street that is important culturally due to several people who stayed here, along with the restaurant in the corner. The second story of this building contained two apartments. Among those who stayed

Figure 18: 507-509 Farish St. Former home to musicians and politicians, 2006

up there were Alick Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II) and Elmore James when both were recording for Trumpet Records in the 1950s (Cheseborough 2001: 164). During the early 1960s, Medger Evers used one of the second story rooms as the field headquarters for the Mississippi NAACP (Farish Street Historic District pamphlet 1982, 1985, 1989). The Big Apple Inn, over in the lower right hand corner of the building, has been with Farish Street since 1940 (*San Antonio Express-News* 8-22-04). Owned by one family, this restaurant is best known for two delicacies, Pig Ear Sandwiches and Hot tamales. Both are rather small and inexpensive, as each is under a

dollar.¹⁶ However, they are a favorite of blues musicians and the Big Apple Inn does get mentioned in both state and local cultural promotional websites and pamphlets.

The history of this building at 538 Farish Street has yet to be completely hidden by the various owners that have occupied this building. What is now a dance hall for hip-hop and rap artists originally housed a ballroom for jazz and big band greats, then became a United Service Organizations (USO) center during World War II, and housed the area's pharmacy for fifty years (Barretta 2004: 51).

This location first came to prominence during the 1930s as the Crystal Palace Ballroom. Located in the second story of the building, the Crystal Palace was built by Claude Hodges in the



Figure 19: Birdland/Crystal Palace at 538 Farish Street. Twice used as a dancehall, from 2006.

¹⁶ When I last visited the Big Apple Inn, in June 2008 both food items were now a dollar each

early 1930s, gaining its name from the spaced mirrors and chandeliers (Farish St. Walking tour pamphlet 1982; Edward Lee oral history 1983). From there shows by performers such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Fats Waller, among others were held (Barretta 2004: 51). The Crystal Palace also was where H.C. Speir conducted his next-to-last recording session of blues performers in 1935 with Robert Wilkins, Will Shade, and Minnie Wallace (Barretta 2004: 51). It was transformed into an USO center during World War II for black soldiers (the Jackson train station only being five blocks south), but after the war the address never became an entertainment destination again. Instead it was changed into an office building (Young 1984: 12) housing Harman's Drug Store for fifty years (1951-2003) on the first floor while the law office of Carsie Hall, the Security Life Insurance Company, and a bookstore took up the once grand dance hall (Farish St tour pamphlet 1982).

The building was renovated in the mid 1980s (Alexander 1988: 37). The second story was once again made a dance hall while the ground floor kept its original clients. The second story ballroom took on the name Birdland, which was the name of a bar two doors down from this address. While all the overhead lights and bars over the doors and windows are a modern necessity for doing business, you can still notice the etchings left from canopies over the three doorways on the first floor after the restoration. The faded white square on the south wall (above the Birdland sign) is reportedly left from the Crystal Palace era of this building (Chesebrough 2001: 165, Knight 2001: 102).

The building shown below is named Hill Hall. It was constructed in 1911¹⁷ by Thomas Hill (Farish Street Historic District Pamphlet 1985) and restored in 1986 by Thomas's Great-Grandchildren (Alexander 1988). Located on the 300 block of North Farish Street, this two story building was used both as a store front and as a meeting place (on the second floor) by the Black and Tan Republican Party (Farish Street Historic District Pamphlet 1985), black Fraternity orders and labor unions (Farish Street Historic District Pamphlet 1982).

When comparing Hill Hall now to what it looked like prior to its restoration (photo from the 1985 Farish Street Historic District Walking Tour pamphlet), the majority of the changes have been done to the first story. The large empty wall space on the right side (facing Griffen Street) previously held a large Coca-Cola ad. The canopies over the ground level windows and



Figure 20: Hill Hall, 2006

¹⁷ Also stated to have been built in 1903 by Mike Alexander (1988) for *American Visions Magazine*.

entrances were lower and not as deep. In fact the second level windows along the first story that currently exist were previously filled in and recessed.

In comparison, there have been minimal changes to the second story. The windows are the same shape and size and there was no previous signage to remove. Even the etching at each corner of the building has stayed through the years. What the restoration of Hill Hall has done was clean up the building and while it hold no stores like it previously did, the quiet and stoic appearance fits its current use as office space for several local firms.

Conclusion

We have completed our trips down both Beale and Farish Streets. In doing this research I have become fascinated in the dichotomy between tourists' apparent perception of authenticity and the apparent perception of authenticity by the stakeholders of these communities. Not so long ago there would have been no overlap between these two groups. In the last decade there has been more questioning as to what is being presented as authentic.

Bruner (1994) wrote that, "...authenticity today is becoming a matter of the politics of connoisseurship, of the political economy of taste, and of status discrimination; beyond that, I would claim, it is a matter of power, of who has the right to authenticate (1994: 408)." It is not necessarily Performa Real Estate, nor the civic leaders of both Memphis and Jackson that have declared Beale and Farish Street, authentic. Both communities have achieved that label through writers and musicians that have repeated the tales (both real and exaggerated) about both streets to the public numerous times. MacCannell (1976) claimed that tourists are dissatisfied with their own culture, so they seek authentic experiences elsewhere. But what is the experience visitors are exposed to on Beale Street?

In the case of Beale Street in Memphis, part of the problem is not the authenticity of the landscape, but of the authenticity of the human (re: music) component inside. Fans of blues music from Memphis, or current residents there lament the lack of blues music performed in the clubs along Beale Street today on informal internet discussion groups such as the Blindman's forum and Blues-L (email) listserve. Their complaints include that it has become a party destination that disregards its roots. Proponents of Beale Street lament what they perceive to be a money grab by the landlords of Beale Street over the preservation of the "real" history of Beale Street (Sitton 1999). But what is the "real" history of Beale Street?

The landscape of Beale Street was always in flux. Calculating the tenants along Beale Street from Raichelson's book on Beale Street, I found that beyond A. Shawbs, there were no businesses that stayed on Beale Street for more than twenty years before the urban renewal era. The saloons and taverns gave way to professional services, which gave way to entertainment venues, which gave way to pawn shops, which gave way to restaurants and music clubs of the modern era (after urban renewal). Which part of Beale Street, and by extension Memphis, history do we wish to preserve? It is apparent that those buildings on Beale Street, which were preserved through Memphis's urban reconstruction, harken back to the first two decades of the twentieth century through design and landmark dates (Raichelson 1999). Yet, just how has Beale Street changed from the focal point of black pride, to derision, to now just being displaced?

While Memphis and Performa Real Estate (the "landlords" of Beale Street) preach the musical heritage of Beale Street, what my photos and research showed was not the same. What do New Orleans (themed) bars have to do with Memphis heritage? Nothing. What do national chain restaurants have to do with Memphis heritage? Nothing. What does a gated amphitheater instead of open space have to do with Memphis heritage? It continues a tradition of displacing street musicians to preserve the club owners' monopoly over music choices (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 2004; 1999). It also does nothing for continuing Memphis's musical heritage. Having a B.B. King Restaurant, a Rum Boogie Café, an Alfred's Hamburgers, and A. Shwabs on Beale Street, that will not be found anywhere else, helps promote Memphis's cultural heritage. However, make no mistake this generation's version of Beale Street is a replication of previous generations.' It is not a continuation of those generations.'

The situation on Farish Street, in Jackson, is more tenuous. By all appearances the core of the Farish Street neighborhood is in the midst of gentrification. Earlier buildings that were

restored still stand proud. Several of the buildings that were abandoned when I started my field work, are now in the process of being rehabbed. Yet the work there is tedious and mistrust between local politicians and Performa Real Estate spills out into the public sphere several times per year. In the last verbal sparring match between the two parties, the mayor lamented that no visible work was going on along Farish Street (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 11/3/2005; *Jackson Free Press* – 11/15/06). John Elkington, president of Performa Real Estate detailed the work going on as being mostly hands-on, labor intensive interior work that precluded the use of exterior mechanisms that would make work look obvious to the general public (*Jackson Free Press* – 11/15/06).

There is still another group that neither trusts the politicians, nor the current developers of Farish Street. That would be the residents, workers, and users of Farish Street. These are the people who fought against previous proposals from politicians who did not represent the neighborhood (*Jackson Advocate* - 5/12/94). These are the people who have manipulated previous proposals so they would help their neighborhood. These people are not happy with this current redevelopment, but have become resigned to it (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 11/3/2005). Those who work and live along Farish Street take any and every opportunity to voice their displeasure with the redevelopment. Hindrance of traffic, rising property values, and lack of communications (from both the politicians and Performa) give the stakeholders of this community their “I told you so” moments (Barretta 2004, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 11/3/2005, *Jackson Free Press* - 11/15/2006).

Back in chapter two I quoted Ashworth saying, “that most cities (in regards to urban tourism policies) have neither consciously developed such policies nor felt any particular need to do so. Indeed the cynic could argue from historical cases that the success stories of urban tourism

have occurred in the absence of policy, while policy has only been devised in the face of looming failure and thus the existence of a comprehensive local tourism policy is a good indicator of trouble” (2003: 153). In regards to Memphis they have had a convention and visitors bureau since 1925 (www.memphistravel.com last accessed June 2008) to promote Memphis all these years.

However, John Elkington, when questioned by politicians, or the media, said that it took him a decade (from 1983-1993) before “Beale Street” made a profit (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* - 6/20/1996). According to the Memphis Tourist and Convention Bureau, over five million people visit Beale Street today (Memphis Tourist and Convention Bureau 2007: 3). If one was to base success from numbers such as those, then Beale Street has become a “success” financially over the course of the last fifteen years. However, Judith Johnson, executive director for Memphis Heritage stated that if Beale Street were to be registered with the National Register today, compared to the 1960s, Beale Street would fail their test because too many of the historic buildings were wiped out during the urban renewal era (1968-1983) (Freeman 1998). So in terms of preservation, Beale Street has not become a success.

The collection of buildings along Farish Street may not contain the same density of significant properties as Beale Street, nor hold the same (perceived) historical significance. Yet the city of Jackson has decided that restoring Farish Street as an entertainment destination would be the best way to preserve that neighborhood. Fortunately, fewer buildings have been lost along Farish Street than were lost along Beale Street during the 1970s. Yet those sites removed from Farish Street would have added much to the neighborhood’s cultural significance. Sites such as the Star Market, formerly at the intersection of Griffin and Farish Streets, and the former home to H.P. Speir’s music store, formerly at 217 Farish Street, would have added more to Farish Street

district than exists now. Those locations will have new buildings on them, but there is no time set for their restoration. How the community chooses to memorialize their significance has yet to be decided.

It has taken Jackson almost thirty years to start the restoration of Farish Street. It will be four years since the work actually started for the first clubs/bars to open under the direction of Performa Entertainment (*Jackson Clarion-Ledger* - 11/3/2005). No one involved has given a definite date for the completion of the restoration of the Farish Street neighborhood. Who knows when those involved will turn their first profit on Farish Street, or if they will ever attain the same amount of tourists visiting Farish Street as there are on Beale Street. In blues music philosophy, reusing abandoned buildings for music venues are considered authentic for the performance (*Washington Post* 2005, Muggge 2003). So by that extension, restoring several city blocks of abandoned buildings for entertainment use, as long as the facades are the same, is still considered an authentic experience.

For the restoration of Farish Street to work for all involved there are many parts to be completed that do not necessarily involve actual construction along the way. The first obstacle Jackson has to overcome is the lack of name recognition. When I was compiling resources for this thesis I discovered that Jackson falls behind Memphis, Chicago, New Orleans, and Clarksdale when it comes to articles, books, and documentaries produced. Tourists to the region are more aware of the various grave sites, the “crossroads,” and rural juke joints in the Delta than they are of the recording studios, performing venues, and eateries of Jackson. Promotion and publicity of the heritage of Farish Street is needed. More articles and books should be written about the history of Farish Street. Documentaries about the personalities that stayed along Farish

Street should be produced. The more potential tourists know about Jackson, the greater the likelihood that they would be interested in visiting Jackson and Farish Street.

However, (cultural) tourism is not a silver bullet for the problems of Farish Street. The citizens of Jackson also need to feel welcome on Farish Street. Of all the press Beale Street has garnered, it has never attracted many “tourists” from within Memphis. Jackson can not allow this to happen to Farish Street. Citizens of Jackson need to feel welcome (and safe) before they decide to visit Farish Street. They will be mostly likely to visit in the weeks after the development is “opened” while it is still new and be of interest to the population. Beyond that, visitors need to feel a connection to the area before they return. Encouraging return visitors from within the Jackson metro area will be the best way to achieve success for the Farish Street rehabilitation project.

There is no irony that Performa Entertainment is handling the redevelopment of Beale Street and Farish Street. Performa’s land development specialty is entertainment districts. Since they started in Memphis, Performa has completed land development projects in Petersburg, Virginia; Shreveport, Louisiana; Wichita, Kansas; (Freeman 1998) and as of this writing is starting on a land development project in Birmingham, Alabama (*Birmingham News* – 2/24/2007). All of these locations (except for Kansas) are located in the Southeast region of the United States. That does not mean entertainment district redevelopment is limited to the southeast region. There have been completed music-related entertainment redevelopment projects done by other firms in Chicago and Kansas City as well (Freeman 1998).

It is difficult to get a read as to the viability of Performa’s work. While Beale Street is their benchmark, they have faced difficulties with projects in Shreveport, Cincinnati, and Wichita, along with Jackson. Problems encountered include occupancy issues, financing, local

involvement, and rehabilitation of buildings. Shreveport's and Petersburg's developments got off to noteworthy starts, but now both are saddled with empty buildings and the respective local governments are left paying for empty projects. Cincinnati, contemplated having Performa being involved in their entertainment district, but decided against using them after Elkington used an ethnic slur towards Chinese-Americans at a meeting for the project (*Wichita Eagle* – 3/6/2008).

The state of Mississippi has appeared to have taken a reversal in policy for the better. Gone are the (not-to-distant) days of ignoring and belittling their black population and culture and the city now attempts at promoting and preserving their black musical culture. State funding now exists for blues festivals, tourist guides and promotion, and urban development (Gussaw 2006). Pertaining to urban development, some of the smaller communities lack a comprehensive plan with one firm or leader tying all the developments together due to the financial requirements of these firms. On the other hand, I have shown Jackson and Memphis using big grandiose plans for developing multiple city blocks as one feature. However, these attempts at preserving culture may not produce any sizable economic boom. Jobs created are of minimum-wage restaurant and retail-employment options. Just because there more options for entertainment does not mean they will generate more income (both for the performers and the land owners).

It is yet to be determined what the result will be for Farish Street in Jackson, Mississippi. In the end, more information will be attainable for those who are interested in blues music through the preservation of buildings and more writing about this district. For others to follow this (figurative) blues highway that started in Memphis and runs through Jackson, Clarksdale, Cleveland, and other Mississippi towns they will need the following: an urban neighborhood with a sizable amount of buildings with ties to blues music (past or present), a sizable local population that can visit the establishments, and proper promotion and support by various local

media outlets. The most important part in these future developments is to keep their authenticity which will set them apart from other outlets for our entertainment dollars. Otherwise, to paraphrase B.B. King, the thrill will be gone.

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Vita

Sandor Gulyas was born the morning of November 25, 1974, at Hillcrest Hospital, outside Cleveland, Ohio. Before he was relocated to a farm pasture in-between the communities of Ashley, Kilbourne, and Marengo, Ohio in 1983, Sandor developed an interest in music. First in playing the drums and then later an interest in the genre of blues music. After Sandor graduated from Buckeye Valley Local in 1993, he joined the Columbus Blues Alliance, a loose-knit organization of blues musicians and fans in Central Ohio. While part of that organization for ten years, Sandor took turns as Volunteer Coordinator and later Membership Coordinator. During that time Sandor enrolled and graduated from Ohio State University with a Bachelor of Arts in Geography in 2002. While at Ohio State, Sandor was selected to the Griffen Society for academic excellence, presented two papers at academic conferences, and served two terms as the president of the (undergraduate) Geography Club.

After his time at Ohio State, Sandor sought out other challenges and discovered that he had to leave his home state to find that. This led to Sandor coming to Louisiana State University in 2004. In his time here at Louisiana State, Sandor has gone to become Vice-President for the Baton Rouge Blues Society for which he has written two grants totaling \$3600 and in 2008 having the honor of having an article, based on the research in this thesis, published in the 2008 Blues Festival Guide.

Sandor's future plans include working in urban planning and cultural preservation hopefully concerning blues music.