

The Memphis Blues

by Andria K. Brown

I don't much care for the blues. I want to, because I respect its contribution to American culture and, more importantly, its elevation of people with names like Gatemouth Brown and Pinetop Perkins, but I can only make it to about the second verse of a blues song before agitatedly thinking, "Just get on with it already." As an English major with limited musical talent of my own, I'm drawn first and foremost to lyrics, and I feel like the blues wastes a lot of verse space with repetition.

Still, I hold it as a point of pride that Memphis fostered the roots of this musical form, and I feel the ongoing connection between the two. Perhaps no style of music represents Memphis better than the blues. It's low-slung, self-deprecating, heart-broke, funny, sly and sexy. And yes, it can be damn repetitive. Remember that one about the boxer-turned superintendent-turned mayor that went on about two terms too long? Or the cover of that one big Ford hit that keeps getting re-released every few years?

Having just the blues as a musical legacy would be more than enough for any town, but we're ridiculously blessed in that department. Memphis' influence on soul and rock'n'roll is so pronounced it's practically tacky. For outsiders who may not be aware: Memphis launched the careers of Al Green, Johnny Cash, Isaac Hayes, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Jerry Lee Lewis, and of course, The King.

I don't think there's another city in the world that can top that list when it comes to commercial success and lasting influence, but even more tellingly, could have drawn that caliber of regional talent. These weren't roving artists traveling cross-country to seek their fortune; every one of those men was born in a state bordering Tennessee.

Interestingly, however, none of them was born *in* Memphis, nor was W.C. Handy, the man dubbed "father of the blues." Memphis housed the producers and songwriters, but when it comes to chart-topping talent, we've always been better at lifting others than our own. That low-down blues mentality pervades the Memphis music scene still, and keeps many of our best artists in a seemingly self-defeating, repetitive refrain.

Within a year of moving to Memphis I noticed a pattern: a small, critically-acclaimed group of local musicians circled the city and periphery, but despite gobs of talent, never seemed to expand their notoriety past Oxford or Little Rock. It troubled me, and I spent a few years doing what I could to break this pattern, working part-part-time as a booking agent, webslinger, and PR contact for a few troubadours looking to venture beyond the Mason-Dixon.

But despite my floundering efforts and their own notable successes, no one in that group has Made It Big. Many of the younger ones have since married and had babies; the veterans have settled into productive schedules of touring and commercial gigs. All but one still calls Memphis home. And from what I can tell, they're all happy. If The Business were that important to them, they could hop on I-40 and be in Nashville in three hours. Luckily for all of us, they aren't.

The epitome of a blues verse is the same line repeated three times, and then a revealing turn in the fourth. I used to be impatient with Memphians, and Memphis artists in particular, to just get on with it, but I wasn't truly appreciating their style. The blues don't seem the least little bit joyful in theory, but then how to explain how much happiness they can bring? It's a slow build to a quiet payoff around here, but it works.

I'd always felt that Memphians were afraid of success, or didn't feel worthy of it. After twelve years, though, I'm starting to think that maybe we just don't buy into it. In Memphis, success isn't a platinum record on your wall; success is creating, loving, living, and sharing the music that connects us, and sticking around to enjoy it. I'd thought it was a curse, but it may be our biggest blessing. I've long appreciated the distinctive artistic spirit of Memphis, but only recently realized that keeping our own artists around is a big part of that.

Or as a young man from Millington once sang, "Don't be so quick to walk away. I wanna rock your body. Please stay."