

TIMELESS MELODIES

Joint Venture

More than a century after they first appeared, **JUKE JOINTS** in the South are still offering up a rollicking good time.

“THE BLUES AIN’T GOT NO color,” says Henry Gipson, known as Gip, the 80-something owner of Gip’s Place. This ramshackle juke joint is somewhere down the back roads of Bessemer, Ala., and even with good directions, it’s virtually impossible to find. I’d probably still be looking if I hadn’t almost crashed my rental car into a pickup truck whose driver took pity on me and led me here.

I’ve come to the South in search of the authentic juke joint, a place that always looks like a run-down shack where local musicians play the blues that grew out of the nearby cotton fields, where moonshine is still served because there’s no liquor license, and where the ambience is one big happy family even with people you’ve never met

before. I’ve been told that Gip’s Place and Red’s Lounge in Clarksdale, Miss., are the last two surviving real-deal juke joints in America, both playing live blues, and I want to experience them before they disappear.

Every Saturday night for the past 60 years, Gip, a gravedigger who owns several cemeteries, has hired blues bands to play in a little wooden, tin-roofed shack on his property. Great musicians, from Sam Lay (drummer for Muddy Waters and Bob Dylan) and James “T-Model” Ford to Bobby Rush and Willie King, have played here. I take a seat on a wobbly plastic chair next to the dance floor. Every inch of the garage-size shed is decorated with yellowed performance posters, photos of musicians and bands, and signs that say things like “Beer, Helping White Guys Dance Since 1842.” I look around—the place is a melting pot of men and women of all ages, sizes and races, all of us sweating in the stuffy, humid air.

Juke joints, or jukes (said to be from the Creole word *joog*, which means “rowdy” or “disorderly”), came into existence after emancipation as hangouts where plantation workers could gather on Saturday nights. There was nowhere else for African-Americans to go, so they came to listen to sizzling blues music, dance, eat and forget about their troubles. Friends met, shared their lives and made new friends. And because juke joints were on private property and always on the other side of the tracks, there was little chance the fun would be

FROM LEFT: Robert “Wolfman” Belfour playing at Red’s Lounge; a homemade cigar-box guitar



RED'S LOUNGE: LOU BOPP

disrupted by the local sheriff. People found out about them only through word of mouth.

When workers moved off the plantations and into town, the juke joints followed. They remained important for both blues fans and performers and were a perfect alternative for those who couldn't afford to go out to dinner or a movie. Here, they could bring their own moonshine and relax in peace.

In the early 1930s, coin-operated phonographs known as jukeboxes appeared. Listeners could choose from about eight different songs. Many bars and roadhouses installed the jukeboxes and stopped hiring live bands. But juke joints, distinguished by the fact that they played live blues, remained just as popular.

In 1952, Little Walter, the blues harmonica player in Muddy Waters' band, recorded the song "Juke." It was the first harmonica instrumental, a 12-bar blues shuffle and one of the biggest R&B records that year. Used as a noun, the word *juke* refers to music joints run by African-Americans, but Little Walter may have meant it as a verb, meaning to party.

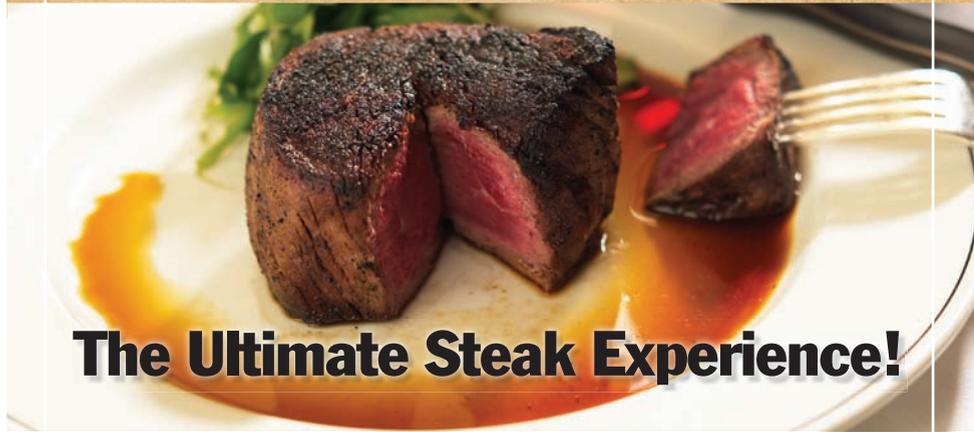
Around this time, European tourists, crazy about American blues, visited the South and discovered the juke joints. Until then, few whites had ever set foot inside. When the juke owners saw that these blues pilgrims would gladly pay cash to drink moonshine and eat Southern barbecue, they welcomed them. These days, anybody can jump the tracks and head to the most rural tumble-down joint — because, just as Gip says, "the blues ain't got no color."

THE MAN SITTING NEXT to me at Gip's taps me on the arm. "Care for a shot of 'shine?" He pours a honey-colored liquid from a mason jar into a tiny Dixie cup and hands it to me. I take a sip. It tastes like sickly sweet ice tea laced with whiskey and cornstarch, but it packs such a wallop that when a musician comes on to the stage with a cigar-box guitar strapped to his torso, I wonder if I'm seeing things. I'm not — that's exactly the instrument he's playing.

The musician speaks into the mic: "If this is your first time here, welcome to Gip's. We're all one here, and if you come back, everyone will remember you because now you're part of our family. There's only two rules here: No cussing, and men, you leave with the woman you brought."

"What if I came with two women?" some one yells.

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“Then you gotta take them both home.”

The drummer counts out the beat on his faux leopard-skin kit and the band breaks into some gritty blues. Gip sits onstage in a rickety chair, playing guitar and singing in a deep gravelly voice. The music is mesmerizing and intoxicating. Soon I’m tapping, clapping and bopping up and down in my chair. The blues may be about loneliness

and heartache, sad times and bad times, but they lift the spirit like a rollicking gospel church choir. Half the room is on the dance floor. A woman pulls me by the arm and says, “Come on, y’all, dance!” I take another shot of moonshine and follow her, feeling an instant camaraderie.

This is like one huge party, and I dance with everybody. A man in a cowboy hat

spins me around; three giggling women dance in a circle around me, and then another man pulls me into his arms. I feel giddy and free, and along with everyone else, I scream my approval at the top of my lungs. I understand exactly what legendary bluesman Willie King meant when he said, “You gotta participate in the blues, shake them off you.”



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Other Jukes and Joints in the South Worth a Visit

Wild Bill’s: This small and intimate joint has authentic blues bands and serves lip-smacking wings, wine and beer. 1580 Vollintine Ave., Memphis, Tenn. (901) 726-5473

Tony’s Lounge: This longtime favorite has a pool table and a dance floor but mostly spins music on CDs. 2412 Congaree Road, Eastover, S.C. (803) 776-8967

Bradfordville Blues Club: Open since the 1930s, this rural hot spot off a dirt road books different touring blues bands each weekend. 7152 Moses Lane, Tallahassee, Fla. (850) 906-0766, www.bradfordvilleblues.com

Riley’s Tavern: From the sagging roof to the tilted dance floor to the outhouse privies out back, this is the real deal with both a jukebox and live bands. 8894 FM 1102, Hunter, Texas. (512) 392-3132, www.rileystavern.com

Po’ Monkey Lounge: Opened almost 50 years ago by Willie “Po’ Monkey” Seaberry, it’s one of America’s oldest juke joints. Open Thursday nights with an R&B DJ. Located on a dirt road in Merigold, Miss., two miles from a cotton field. Ask a local for directions, as there is no phone.

Queen of Hearts: This down-home, 40-year-old venue was a popular hangout for Elmore James and Sonny Boy Williamson II. The music is R&B-oriented. 2243 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Jackson, Miss. (601) 352-5730

Teddy’s Juke Joint: Once the little house where owner Teddy Johnson was born, this club now books live blues bands a few times per week and also spins R&B. 17001 Old Scenic Highway, Zachary, La. (225) 892-0064



FROM LEFT: patrons enjoying the music at Gip's Place, where Little G Weevil sometimes plays



notches, and I lose myself in the music. Once again, I tap, clap and sway from side to side, and soon I'm pulled onto the dance floor with the crowd, where we all hoot and holler, bop up and down, and shake off the blues. 

MARGIE GOLDSMITH is a writer based in New York whose work has appeared in *Robb Report*, *Elite Traveler* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. She is learning blues harmonica, but she isn't ready to play the juke joints just yet.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I'm shaking off the blues again, this time at Red's Lounge in Clarksdale, Miss. From the outside, Red's looks like a junkyard with propane gas tanks, an old refrigerator, trash bins, rusty paint cans and broken furniture stacked by the entrance of the red-brick building. Inside, there's no stage, just the front corner where bands have to squeeze in between mics, cables and giant amplifiers. But that hasn't stopped the great Delta blues players from playing here, including Big Jack Johnson, Frank Frost, Watermelon Slim, James "Super Chikan" Johnson, Robert "Wolfman" Belfour, Terry "Big T" Williams and Ford.

I look for a place to sit, but every mismatched wobbly chair and barstool is taken, and the tiny dance floor near the band is body to body with people, including a man in a glittery silver suit, bright red tie and black derby who moves as if he were possessed. Red Paden, the burly owner who's been running the place for 36 years, stands behind the bar serving icy beers as fast as he can pull them from the cooler. His T-shirt reads: "Red's: Backed by the River, Fronted by the Grave," and I wonder if there's a connection between cemeteries and juke joints — after all, Gip is a gravedigger and cemetery owner. But there's no connection; Red's just happens to be located between a graveyard and the Sunflower River.

Someone gets up off a threadbare couch and I sink into it, spellbound by a haunting harmonica solo played by a man in his 80s dressed in a suit and a straw bowler that's tilted on his head. A vocalist wails into the mic, the guitar and bass kick it up a few

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