

Blues Alley EP 2
"Mister Crump Don' Low It"

by
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The corner of Main Street and
Madison Avenue in Memphis,
Tennessee is like every other
downtown street corner in America,
except this one is where American
music as we know it today began.

Find out what happened - this time
on Blues Alley!

Episode 2 - Mr Crump Don't Low It

If you know anything at all about
blues music - you know that tales
of mysterious goings on - down at
the crossroad - abound.

You can't swing a dead guitar
without hittin' one of those
mystical intersections where
supernatural deals are struck - in
exchange for exceptional musical
prohess.

In almost all of theses legends -
though - the crossroad is a
rustic, isolated place - two
narrow ribbons of highway - dirt
road - or railroad - intersecting
in the middle of a delta cotton
field.

So - what does that have to do
with the corner of Main and
Madison in Memphis - I mean - who
ever heard of an urban crossroad?

Well, in Memphis it's like the
entire city is herself a
crossroad.

In fact - she's several - all
layered - one on top of the other -
to make a - cultural super
highway/interstate cloverleaf
junction crossroad.

After all this is the city that
gave rise to both - blues and rock
and roll.

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The city of Memphis sits on Chickasaw Bluff, and there have been people living on the bluff for centuries.

The area named after the Chickasaw Indians - the Spartans of the Mississippi Delta, had a well established government/city-state there in 1540 when Hernando DeSoto first arrived from Spain.

The Chickasaw Nation was a highly developed society based on law, religion, agriculture and commerce, using the Big Muddy River as a primary trade route.

The bluff itself is a natural defensive position rising as much as 200 feet above the river on the west side and the delta to the north, east and south.

The city we know today was established by John Overton, James Winchester and Andrew Jackson in 1819, shortly before the Chickasaw were removed to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.

Within a generation, Memphis had become the largest cotton exchange in the world - bigger than Cairo in Egypt, which had a few thousand years head start.

And, though Memphis was the largest city in the state of Tennessee - she's effectively - the largest city in Mississippi and Arkansas as well. It's at least two hundred miles, in any direction, before you hit another urban area anywhere close to the size of Memphis.

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In the 18 and 1900's farmers from the Mississippi delta came to Memphis every harvest - sold their crops to the cotton traders on Front Street - who in turn - loaded them onto riverboats, which served as both a means of luxury transport, and distribution of goods to the wider world.

And the convergence of all these disparate cultures- made the city of Memphis - herself - a unique kind of crossroad.

Think about it -

A stock exchange is a fast paced, energetic, urban entity - born of high finance and capitalism.

The farmers - that grew and harvested the cotton sold at that exchange - belonged to a slower - genteel, agrarian society.

Both, the plantation owners and stock traders amassed enormous wealth.

Wealth of course, created a worker class of slaves - and later sharecroppers - who actually worked the fields. They remained impoverished - with little hope of ever breaking free.

Then there were the in-betweens the musicians, riverboat crews, and roustabouts... people flush with cash, who were just passing through and looking for a good time.

The presence of the in-between class, led to a burgeoning business in booze, gambling and prostitution.

One of the worst kept secrets in Memphis is that the tax base - was for decades - largely centered on fines earned from vice.

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A Memphis Judge named Pappy Hadden had invented "Hadden's Horn," a leather funnel aimed at keeping the dice honest in back room crap games on Beale.

Vice was big business for both - the hustlers, and the city.

The Public Ledger - a Memphis newspaper at the time - recounts a booming business at the police court in 1888.

"Pappy" Hadden, now City Manager, as well as judge would routinely have police raid the brothels and bring the ladies - along with their Johns to court to collect fines.

On May 7th, 1888 - Hadden declared, from the bench - with the press in the room --- "When you violate the rules, you must suffer the penalty of iniquity and divide the wages of sin with the city. Ten apiece. Thank's call again."

Divide the wages of sin with the city, it perfectly sums up Memphis at the time. In the south side tenderloin, law, order, and morality were turned upside down.

And that overturning of mores applied to white, black, rich, poor, city, country - as Handy would later write - honest men and pickpockets skilled.

In Memphis - none of these entities could survive without the other. There was an inter-dependance - almost a codependence - among these polar - socio-economic groups.

And the attraction to vice, allowed them to get cosy.

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The lower class - got to observe the wealthy elite - close enough to taste that dream deferred - that remained just beyond their fingertips.

Country folk visiting the city - took to metropolitan customs - taking the latest fashions and products - like the phonograph and washing machine, back home to the delta.

And while black and white fraternization was frowned on in society at large - on Beale those rules were just ignored and as a result the upper crust - that wealthiest one percent - who would never deign to mingle with the great unwashed... discovered an affinity for black culture - especially music.

Out of necessity - vice - and commerce - Memphis had become a crossroad - of rich and poor - city and country - black and white - righteous and sinner.

And everybody had a foot in everybody else's camp.

It was in this environment - a little over a century ago - that the next event in the progression of blues music occurred.

But, to get there we've gotta delve into southern-twentieth century politics.

In 1909 - a generation after Pappy Hadden, a wealthy Memphis businessman - named Edwin H. Crump - decided to run for mayor.

In those days candidates for office, often hired a band to drum up interest - even write a song about their issues.

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It was kind of - a great grand father to today's Rock the Vote campaign.

Of course in 1909 Jim Crow was the law of the land - so they used "white" bands in white communities and "black" bands in black communities.

Ed Crump had gotten into the race at the last minute, and the other popular black bands in Memphis were already engaged by competing candidates.

There was one band available however, and it was led by a composer/musician named W.C. Handy - who had a few years earlier become enamored with a unique style of music, he'd heard in the delta - specifically at a dance in Cleveland, Mississippi, where a group of rough and raw musicians out earned his own professional players.

Handy had already begun to marry that rustic delta music with his polished conservatory style, by the time the Ed Crump campaign came knocking.

And as part of the deal, Jim Mulcahy, the Crump political operative who hired the band, also commissioned an original song.

Seeing an opportunity to further his musical goals, Handy wrote a blues tune.

The song - he called Mister Crump - was written leaning against the cigar stand at P Wee's Saloon, at 317 Beale.

Today there's a Hard Rock Cafe on the spot, but the original P Wee's Saloon was a unique place.

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Owned by John Persica, a mafia crime boss, and brothel proprietor, the saloon, was named for Virgilio Maffei an Italian immigrant who had ridden the rails under a train car from New York to Memphis with only a dime in his pocket.

No one could pronounce Virgilio - so everyone just called him P Wee.

P Wee was a tough character. He loved gambling, once swimming the Mississippi River to win a bet. He also coined the saloon's legendary slogan - "We never close - til somebody get killed," a phrase that like "honest men and pickpockets skilled," would one day become a song lyric.

In addition to the fabled cigar stand, there were side rooms for billiards, cards, crap games and a back room where musicians could store their instruments.

P Wee's also had a phone.

Musicians were welcome to give out the four digit number - 2893, and potential clients were welcome to call - as long as the players bought a couple drinks, while they waited for calls about gigs.

It was the perfect place to write blues music.

Handy wrote out note for note arrangements of Mister Crump, for his nine piece band, and as usual, he meticulously - some said obsessively - rehearsed.

When the band wagon arrived at the corner of Main and Madison - for the first performance of Mister Crump - Handy was accompanied by clarinetist Robert Young,

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the Wyer brothers and Jim Turner on violin, guitarist George Higgins, Archie Wall on bass, and James Osborne and George Williams on sax and trombone respectively. Handy - of course - played trumpet.

While there's no recording of that first performance of Mister Crump, James Reese Europe's Hellfighter's band, recorded this version for Pathe' in 1919, giving us an idea of how the song might have sounded on the day.

(INSERT AUDIO)

As the band began to play, things began to happen. People from all stations of life stopped to listen. This curious and appealing music was really different from the marches and lite opera fare bands usually played at the time.

Then at the end of the third stanza, something even more remarkable happened.

One of the fiddlers, Paul Wyer, began to play things that weren't written on the score.

This wasn't normal.

Musicians were meant to play only what was on the page, especially in a Handy band.

But Wyer, as Handy's friend and later co-author Abbe Niles wrote - "went wild."

In doing so - Paul Wyer - a violinist - became the first person to play an improvised blues turnaround.

The crowd loved it - business men - that wealthy elite - began to dance in the street with their wives and secretaries.

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And Handy, just as he had with the rustic musical genre in Cleveland, immediately saw the value in improvisation. From that moment on - his players had total freedom in the breaks and turnarounds.

But what about the song itself?

At Handy's later admission Mister Crump was based on an existing song called "Mamma Don Low."

While the original version of Handy's tune was instrumental - a lyric quickly emerged.

Now the song would be published with a completely different lyric a few years later, but the 1909 lyric went like this.

LYRIC

"Mister Crump don't 'low no easyriders round here..."

"Mister Crump don't 'low no easyriders round here..."

"I don't care what Mister Crump don't 'low - We gonna barrelhouse anyhow - Mister Crump can go and get hisself some air."

"Mister Crump can go and get hisself some air." Not the most flattering of campaign sentiments.

The song - which had been commissioned to support Ed Crump - had taken on a satirical twist, considering that the candidate, was running on a reform platform, aimed at curbing vice in the Memphis tenderloin.

The 1909 lyric however, was the denizens of Beale Street announcing - in verse, that they were gonna do what they wanted, Mr. Crump be damned.

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And a lot has been made over the years about whether Crump knew people were singing the lyric telling him to get his self some air - or possibly didn't understand the vernacular.

Knowing what we do about Crump today, it could have even been - a wink and a nod - Candidate Crump - publicly cracking down on vice - to appease the conservative upper class, while privately conceding that he didn't care - as long as the party - stayed on Beale.

Either way - it worked!

Crump was elected Mayor - and soon became known as Boss Crump - head of a powerful political machine that would control Tennessee politics for the next half century.

Though the Tennessee Legislature would remove him from office after five years for, ironically, refusing to enforce a state prohibition law, the Crump political machine simply moved underground, operating behind the scenes.

Ed Crump would serve in the US House of Representatives during the great depression, he was a regent of the Smithsonian Institute, and was appointed to the Democratic National Committee.

Most importantly however, he would influence every gubernatorial race in Tennessee until his death in 1954.

It's said that no Democrat appeared on any ballot in the state without his approval.

Crump has often been credited as a supporter of black voting rights in Memphis.

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But there's evidence to suggest that his support only extended to those who voted the way he preferred. If you disagreed with the Boss, he'd raise your taxes.

Even though Crump would later claim that Handy's song had nothing to do with his electoral victory in 1909, the campaign changed politics in Tennessee, and the song Mister Crump changed music all over the world.

It somehow - seems appropriate that a political song - would kick off the first uniquely American musical genre.

But in 1909 - it wasn't quite a genre yet. It would take a few more years and a name change - for the song called Mister Crump - to realize commercial success - but that's a legend in and of itself - and that's where we'll pick up next time in Blues Alley.

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