

Blues Alley EP 1
"Tutwiler"

by
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Nashville, TN

Tutwiler, Mississippi is a tiny -
now mostly abandoned town - in the
central Mississippi delta.

Arguably she played a significant
role in the cultural and economic
development of the American
century.

Tutwiler Mississippi is where
blues music was born.

So why is it today - the town
America forgot?

Stay tuned and we'll explain on
Blues Alley.

Episode 1 - Tutwiler

If you ever get the chance - go to
Tutwiler, Mississippi. The
birthplace of the blues has a
gravity all it's own. It's a Mecca
for American music.

It's not well known, yet there's
almost always someone there, a
lone figure, treading the
footsteps of music history. Based
on stories from residents,
occasionally that figure, will be
and international rock star trying
to soak up some of the Tutwiler
mojo for themselves.

In Tutwiler it makes sense.

Standing at the corner of Hancock
Street and what is now Blues
Alley, you'll get a very real
sense of the town's past -
followed by a sinking - ennui -
for the - temporary nature of the
American character.

Tutwiler's proof that Americans
treat everything that's not, at
the moment, generating a visible
profit as disposable.

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Because today, the town that gave America it's first authentic form of music, is a fossil of it's former self.

Like all fossils you can still see the impression of what the place was like a seventy-five or hundred years ago, when business was *booming*.

Still there today - among signs warning that the brick building facades could collapse onto the sidewalk at any moment - are the remains of a diner, a bank, a barber shop, a funeral home, a nite spot... and, like most small towns of a century ago - there was a railroad station.

All that's left of Tutwiler station today is a concrete platform. The wooden structure burned in the seventies, and the station masters house was torn down soon after.

But in it's heyday, the depot would've been the daily link between this modest delta town - and Memphis - the nearest big city 90 miles to the north.

Everybody in the region went to Memphis. You had to.

In those days, if you wanted to see the latest fashions, customs, or products - or hear the latest music, you couldn't download it - or even go to a store and buy a copy you had to go - where it was.

A century ago, people viewed the railroad much the way we view the internet today. It was a life line to the outside world. There were no cars - no internet - no TV - not even radio - until the mid twenties.

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Without the railroad - the size of the accessible world - and access to innovation and culture - diminished exponentially.

It's hard to fathom today, in our world of 24-7 movies, music and TV, but at the dawn of the twentieth century no one had yet gotten around to making American culture a commodity.

Today the export of U.S. Culture, including music, movies, TV, books even video games... is big business. Second only to our export of Aerospace in revenue generated, and food stuffs in units sold.

Revenue from copyrighted material contributes more than a trillion dollars a year to the US economy, accounting for more than 6.5% of the national GDP.

But none of that was true in 1903, when events unfolded in Tutwiler.

If you think about it, it makes sense. We'd spent the eighteenth century fighting a revolution, the nineteenth century building industry, and a nation - then fighting a civil war to hold that union together in an attempt to guarantee that our founding principles were available to everyone.

Art and culture took a necessary back seat to basic survival.

After the Civil War, though the nation began to settle into a routine, as flawed it was, riddled with Jim Crow segregation, reconstruction, corporate monopolies and abuses of power.

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But there was an ironic silver lining to the damage inflicted by, those original sins, a gift from the dark side if you will - that led to the birth of the first truly original form of American music and culture.

Nature has a way of doing that. You push someone down over here - they rise up over there. And that appears to be exactly what happened with blues music.

African American oppression led to a unique form of American expression. In this case - Music.

There's evidence to back this up.

In 1893, the National Conservatory of Music in New York, hired the legendary Czech composer Antonin Dvorak to help establish a new school of American composition.

In one of his early press outings, Dvorak told Harpers Magazine that - in his opinion - a truly original American music, could only emerge from the melodies of the African American or Native American communities.

Dvorak was an expert on the topic. The works that had made him world famous, up to that point anyway, were based on his native Czechoslovakian folk music.

By the dawn of the twentieth century however, conditions for the rise of this authentic American music were ripening. The nation suddenly had time and money for more than just the basic necessities.

And it wasn't limited to just white communities. NAACP founder W.E.B.

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Du Bois, with financial support from the likes of John D Rockefeller, promoted the "Talented tenth," concept, encouraging what he called the one in ten black men and women who had nurtured the ability to lead, through education, and cultural development.

The idea was that those leaders would lift up the entire community and thus enact social change.

And it was in this environment that - a chance encounter changed the face of American music and culture forever.

Because - the train station that once stood near the intersection of Hancock Street and Tallahatchie Ave in Tutwiler Mississippi - is where a young composer named William Christopher Handy first heard the music that would lift him into that talented tenth and make him world famous - music that would inspire everyone from George Gershwin and Irving Berlin - to Elvis, the Beatles, Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner - you can still hear it today in the music of Beyonce, Drake, Three Six Mafia, John Legend... and there's no end in sight.

It's a musical foundation that would help spawn jazz - R&B - rock - rap - even some of the best the symphonic music ever written, and the orchestral underscores for hundreds of movies.

It's a music known worldwide today - as the blues.

Nobody knows exactly where the blues came from - nor when.

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Some historians date it to the late 1800s.

There are press accounts of Ma Rainey singing blues as early as 1902 or 3.

There were at least 5 songs that called themselves blues - published between 1901 and 1912.

A white Memphis school teacher named Geraldine Dobyms - published a 12 bar rag in 1905.

Yet early twentieth century civil rights leader George W. Lee unequivocally stated that - "Beale Street is where the blues began."

At the time Beale was known across the nation as "Main street of Black America." It was a mash up of black and white, city and country, righteous and sinner, all located in Memphis, the city with the largest black population in the South.

And Beale Street is certainly where the blues first began to come into it own as an art form. So G.W. Lee has a point, but it's not that simple.

Because there's a difference between the blues, and blues music.

The blues is an emotional response, a feeling of existential angst.

Thomas Jefferson wrote of having a deep melancholy he called the blue devils. A phrase dating back to Elizabethan England.

Author Washington Irving may have been the first to call the feeling simply "the blues," in 1807.

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The blues as an emotion, comes from everywhere, and everyone.

Blues music, on the other hand, is solely born of African American culture, as a response to centuries of exploitation.

And it's important to understand, that blues music is more than just a creative expression, also a form of therapy, used to help overcome the emotional distress of feeling the blues.

It's a way to release the sadness, a means of cleansing of the soul.

As a musical genre blues is a grass roots coping mechanism.

From a music theory perspective, the roots of blues can be traced to African call and response - European folk and gospel. You can even hear hints of ancient Hebrew scales.

And in the era leading up to what we now think of as the blues, there was minstrelsy - music - performed often by whites in black face as a parody of slave culture.

Ironically Minstrelsy and it's ubiquitous dance the Cakewalk - began as blacks pretending to behave as they saw southern whites.

Then there's Ragtime - another original form of black music - that predates blues by at least a decade. In fact many early blues tunes were first published as rags. But it seems that Ragtime like the rest of 19th century American music was based in the European major and minor scales.

The use of blue notes in ragtime - that signature sound of the blues - didn't appear until after the first blues tunes became popular.

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So what actually did happen?

Well, as with all great art - there has to be a genesis. A confluence of events that - sets things in motion, and for blues - that happened at Tutwiler Station.

But, dubbing Tutwiler "the" birthplace of the blues is a bit of a misnomer.

It's is more like the place where a guy - going about his business sees a pretty girl across a crowded room - and knows instantly - she's the one.

And - like everything else involved with the blues - there are legendary accounts of how this first meeting happened.

In his autobiography "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy tells the story of being stranded at Tutwiler Station, waiting for a train that was nine hours late. He was trying to sleep - but kept being awakened by what he later called the "weirdest music he ever heard."

He looked up to find what he described as "A lean loose-jointed Negro" with ragged clothes, his toes poking out of his shoes, and a sadness of the ages on his face, banging out a tune on an old beater of a guitar

Intrigued, Handy approached the man and asked about the song he was playing.

The guitarist explained that it was about the intersection of the east and westbound Southern Railroad, and the north and southbound Yellow Dog Railroad, in nearby Moorhead, Mississippi.

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A place most people simply called the Crossroad.

The song - your listening to Handy's arrangement now - was called "Goin' Where the Southern Cross the Dog," and though Handy had spent his much of time roaming the Mississippi delta as a professional musician, nothing he'd ever encountered struck him like this.

As they waited for the train - the guitarist demonstrated how he got that moaning sound - by sliding a knife across the strings, flattening and bending notes.

"The effect," as Handy later said, "was unforgettable."

Though he was intrigued by the tune. As a trained musician, Handy really didn't see the value in a song that repeated the same lyrics, and melody over and over again.

Eventually the train arrived and the two men parted company.

This meeting - took place sometime around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

An historic marker in Tutwiler places the meeting in 1895. In his Autobiography, "Father of The Blues" however, Handy claims it happened in 1903.

And it's in "Father of The Blues," that Handy tells another story, one that helped him see the value of delta music.

The Handy band - made up entirely of trained "conservatory style" musicians - was playing a gig at the courthouse in Cleveland, Mississippi, and it wasn't going well.

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The delta crowd really wasn't into the Sousa marches and Gilbert and Sullivan fare played by the popular bands at the time.

At one point - the host asked if some of the locals could play a few songs. So while the legit musicians took a smoke break - a three piece band - led by "long legged" man named Prince McCoy - straggled onto the bandstand - and proceeded to make it rain.

The crowd - which had been yawning all evening - began to shout and holler - they got up and danced - and more importantly - they began throwing money.

When Handy saw the deluge of coins - he had an epiphany - a bunch of sharecroppers - had just earned more in fifteen minutes than his group of "professionals" had made the entire night.

At that moment - as he would later claim - "An American composer was born," deciding on the spot - if he could marry this undomesticated music with his professional musicians he'd have something really big - something with mass appeal.

And mass appeal would turn out to be the understatement of the twentieth century.

Whether or not Handy was aware of Dvorak's prediction, within a few days of that dance at the Cleveland courthouse - he had orchestrated several of these 'local' tunes, as he called them, for his nine piece ensemble - and began playing them at gigs.

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Back country, African American music was suddenly being requested at city gigs and "respectable" country club dances.

And with that - a completely unique genre of American music was born.

The Handy genius wasn't in inventing the music, it was in seeing the potential of marrying the rough hewn, emotionally raw music of the Mississippi delta, to the performance, skill, and musicianship of his professional musicians.

Whether he meant to or not...

William Christopher Handy had become the first to capitalize on the commercial potential of selling polished delta music to white audiences, the first to truly implement Dvorack's prediction from 1893, the first to establish African American folk music as a national brand.

Even so, it's doubtful that anyone at the time - could've predicted the effect this extraordinary music would have on a nation - and that nation on the world.

How could anyone have anticipated that the blues would soon provide the sound track for the First World War, migrating to Europe - and in the process, becoming a global phenomenon. Or that it would commingle with Ragtime, Vaudeville, Creole and other popular music to spawn the Jazz age, permanently changing American morals, political convictions - even fashion.

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How along side another new art form - the motion picture - blues would provide a musical score - and help give rise to the entertainment industry - at last turning US culture into a global commodity, allowing the still young nation, to break free from it's British, and Victorian era heritage, and become an artistic force in it's own right.

It was a moment of destiny - in the right people - in the right place at the right time - waiting on a train in Tutwiler.

I've always wondered - What would we have missed if Handy wasn't listening that day - had continued to sleep - or - rushing to his destination - had taken an earlier train?

What if the guitarist had wanted to be left alone?

Would their conversation have happened at all if they had crossed paths in a big city train station? Or was it the intimacy of a small town that fostered - that comfort of strangers - familiarity?

The question - of course - is rhetorical, because it did happen at Tutwiler Station.

And more than a century removed we can clearly see the impact of this chance meeting in a tiny delta town.

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While the last century may have left Tutwiler behind - it's far past time we pay homage to the train station that once stood on a few hundred square feet of Mississippi delta - and it's time we recognize the contribution of Handy - for sparking a romance with that metaphoric "girl across the room," creating a courtship that's still blossoming today.

Now - if Tutwiler Station is where the romance started - the relationship kicked off in earnest with a political campaign song - on the corner of Main St. and Madison Avenue - in Memphis, Tennessee - in 1909 - and that's the story we'll explore next time on Blues Alley.

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