Whites Only, Chain Gangs and the Blues

Ming C. Lowe's

"MISSISSIPPI BLACKTOP"

By Les Starks

Ming C. Lowe, Reds

Lowe's work is a tour of notable places and people in tough landscapes of the Mississippi Delta area that recall blues legends and the pre-Civil Rights south. The show of 63 black and white photographs documents the people, pool halls, juke joints, historic places and famous crossroads along Highway 61 in and around the town of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

"Blues Highway" 61 runs through the heart of the Mississippi Delta which has a rich history as an important source of blues music. It has been referred to in many songs and remembered as the "site" of many historic events and places. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot in a motel on Highway 61. Elvis Presley grew up in housing projects along 61, and his father was incarcerated for 3 years at the Mississippi State Penitentiary on 61. Ike Turner took his Delta Cats up Highway 61 to Memphis to record "Rocket 88," one of the first rock 'n'roll records. Bessie Smith died from an auto accident on 61 between Clarksdale and Memphis. Born along a stretch of 61 in Duluth, Minnesota, Bob Dylan commemorated the road in his "Highway 61 Revisited."

An Important landmark in the flat, dreary landscape of the delta, the crossroads is often used as a metaphor for the afterlife or a turning point with an unpredictable outcome. According to legend, the junction of Highway 61 and Highway 49 in Clarksdale, Mississippi is the famous crossroads of "Crossroads Blues" (1936), the place where Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the Devil to become a master of the blues. The song is actually a description of hitchhiking at a road crossing and the singer's fear of finding himself, a young African American man in the 1920s deep south, alone after dark, at the mercy of passing white motorists.

"I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.
Asked the Lord above, have mercy, save poor Bob if you please" From "Crossroads Blues" recorded by Robert Johnson in 1936

Lowe's "Crossroads" shows an intersection of Dr. Martin Luther King and Tallahatche st. photographed at midnight in a flat landscape strewn with telephone lines, and road signs. Its famous status, like many other delta landmarks, would go unnoticed by those unaware of its legendary story.

"Where the Southern Crosses the Dog"

In 1903, while waiting for a train at Tutwiler, Mississippi, minstrel and music historian WC Handy observed a strange and ragged "travelin' man," an itinerant roving street minstrel, playing a slide guitar and pressing the strings with a knife,"the weirdest music I ever heard," singing words that meant nothing to Handy; "Goin' where the Southern crosses the Dog." This incident is referred to as the "first" blues song. The singer is referring to the point where two railroads, at the time called The Southern Line (which runs east to west) and the Yazoo Delta or Y. D. Railroad, known in local parlance as the "Yellow Dawg" or "Dawg," cross in Moorhead, Mississippi. The song contains local slang clearly unique to a small geographical area. As the blues developed, lyrics referred to obscure phrases and particular places and events, giving the blues an air of mystery that was exploited by its stars to its maximum potential.

In Lowe's photograph, the historic railroad tracks are shown at night at the point where they converge around fallen leaves, near a strangely out of place artificial silver Christmas tree.

Bessie Smith and the Riverside Hotel

"Gimme a pigfoot and a bottle of beer
Gimme a reefer and a gang o' gin" Bessie Smith "Gimme a Pigfoot" recorded in 1933

Both of her parents died before she was 9, leaving Bessie Smith and her siblings destitute and to fend for themselves. She began her singing career as a child performing on the streets of Chattanooga, Tennessee. In 1923, she began a successful touring and recording career and went on to become the highest paid African American entertainer of her day. She is remembered as one of the greatest artists of her era.

Bessie Smith died on Sept. 26, 1937 after being severely injured in a car accident while traveling along US Route 61 between Memphis and Clarksdale, Miss. She was taken to Clarksdale's G. T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital where her right arm was amputated. She did not regain consciousness and died that morning.

Details of her death were fictionalized in a 1937 article that reported that she'd died after being denied admission to a whites only hospital. Edward Albee wrote a play, "The Death of Bessie Smith" in 1960 that told the same story. This led to the widespread misconception that the fabrication was true.

Lowe's photo is of Room 2 of the Riverside Hotel, once the G. T. Thomas Hospital, where its most famous patient died on the morning of Sept. 26, 1937. It's a very simple and modestly furnished room

that belies its legendary story. A large photo of "the Empress of the Blues" adorns a wall above a bed with a dark floral bedspread. Two bedside lamps illuminate the veneer paneling on the walls.
"Riverside Hotel," shows a dark, well worn upper stairwell and the adjoining hall of this hotel/rooming house in deep perspective. The shiny, well worn wooden stairs tell a million stories. Frequented by notable blues artists including Ike Turner and Sonny Boy Williamson, the Riverside Hotel has played an important role in Clarksdale's history.

Clarksdale Juke Joints

Messenger's Pool Hall
One of the most important historic places in Clarksdale, Messenger's Pool Hall and Cafe has been in continuous operation and in the same family since the 1930s. Folklorist and musicologist, Alan Lomax included it in his map of Clarksdale in 1941 and the same year, Fisk University documented the songs on the juke box.
Current proprietor George Messenger's grandfather opened a food stand in 1930 that was expanded into a pool hall. Share croppers who harvested cotton by day took the bus into town to play pool and dominoes at night.
One of the oldest family owned businesses in the area, Messenger's played an important role in the history of the area as a refuge for African American citizens in pre-Civil Rights Clarksdale.
"Messenger's Pool Hall" shows a room untouched by time. Two pool tables wait in the foreground. A single wooden chair rests against an age covered back wall. In "Dominoes" dark hands play dominoes against a black background.

"Red's Lounge," another of Clarksdale's juke joints and blues venues, was once LaVene Music Center, where Ike Turner bought the instruments used to play "Rocket 88." Perhaps that's why the current proprietor never painted over the name. In one photo, the front entrance with its shabby metal awning is indicative of the region's economic strife. Red's is also captured on a swinging Saturday night; two of Red's patrons are dancing in the foreground of what is obviously a small place, a man is playing an electric guitar and a smiling woman in the back of the room raises a liquor bottle in a festive salute.
In "Red's Lounge, Clarksdale Mississippi" a couple share a small round bar table. The diminutive woman is well dressed and wears silver shoes with snake like straps that extend up her legs.

Parchman Farm, The Mississippi State Penitentiary
The Real Song of the South

Between the 1870s and the 1920s Southern states leased convict laborers to privately owned companies.
The cheap labor pool was constantly replenished by local sheriffs who framed innocent citizens or used the infamous Black Codes to make arrests for loitering, "idling," trespassing or other charges that applied only to African Americans.
Healthy, strong defendants were prime candidates for work farms and slave labor camps. But most never served the entirety of their sentence. They were literally worked to death.
The public revulsion at the sight of starving men being worked to death led to calls for reform at the turn of the century. But by the time leased labor was abandoned, the penitentiary system was firmly established.

Built in 1904, it was known as the hardest prison in the western world. Parchman Farm, now the Mississippi State Penitentiary, has a brutal and corrupt legacy. It has been recalled in many blues songs, the most well known, "Parchman Farm," was recorded by Mose Allison in 1957.
In 1970, the Civil Rights lawyer Roy Haber began taking statements from inmates, which eventually ran to fifty pages of details of murders, rapes beatings and other abuses suffered by inmates from 1969 to 1971. In 1972, Federal Judge William C. Keady found that Parchman Farm violated modern standards of decency.
The cruel and inhumane institution was also a historic breeding ground for a particular form of African American expression, the prison song. Essential to the physical and spiritual survival of prisoners, this was music born from human suffering. Prison songs were the very foundation of the blues.

"the roaring choruses of the songs revived flagging spirits, restored energy to failing bodies, brought laughter to silent misery." Alan Lomax

Lowe defied hostile prison guards and was eventually granted permission for one photo. Her telephoto lens captured an unusual scene; inmates dressed in stripes, their shirts identifying them as Property of Mississippi State Penitentiary, are seen putting up Christmas lights on a brick house. In another, the infamous lockup is seen in the distance under a gloomy winter sky.

Lowe uncovers the strange soul of the delta. Some of the images, like "Sonny Boy Williamson's Grave," with admirer's gifts of Jack Daniels, cigarettes, a harmonica, and the facade of the "New Roxy Theater," covered with leafless vines and illuminated by the glare of a single street light, have a poetic, lonely quality. Lowe's manipulation of light and dark gives some of the photos a vague luminescent patina, that subtly enhances the image but never overshadows the gritty reality of the place.

Les Starks

contact info: www.mingclowe.com