

Chapter 3

Experiencing Intangible Heritage on the Byway: The Mississippi Blues Trail and the Virginia Crooked Road

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Introduction

At the intersection of Interstates 74 and 57 in Champaign, Illinois, a large way-finding sign presents us with two corresponding, interrelated, and yet, incongruent American cities to visit and explore. Heading north on Interstate 57, we arrive in Chicago, Illinois and heading south, on the same interstate highway, we will eventually reach Memphis, Tennessee (Fig. 3.1). At first glance, these two cities share little in common. They are separated by over 500 miles of the American heartland and at least two climatic zones. Located along the shores of Lake Michigan, Chicago is the third largest city in the USA and the pivotal railroad hub that links the American east to the west. It is generally considered the more important economic city of the two. Memphis, along with Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis, is one of the several vital and important port cities along the Mississippi River. Memphis is the southern city, where cotton, river-based commerce, and transportation converge. Moreover, it is the quintessential American city where rural culture meets urban culture. Chicago is the northern city and the leading industrial city in the Midwest.

These two cities, Memphis—the departure point and the cultural terminus of the Mississippi Delta, and Chicago—the culmination point and the historical gateway for new opportunity for southern African-Americans, are intrinsically interwoven in the diasporic American. The cultural meaning of these two cities not only inspired the original diasporic peoples, African-Americans, but also the white and cultural diasporic, who is inspired by the music and wishes to reconnect the place and the music in his or hers consciousness. It is through this diaspora that a musical idiom was developed and with it an intangible reality of culture and memory that enabled these diasporic peoples to remember their homeland, return to it in both imagination

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Fig. 3.1 Chicago and Memphis roadside sign on Interstate 74 in Champaign, Illinois



and reality, and share with others. Through the last 2 decades of the twentieth century, the shared diaspora was capitalized and marketed throughout the world. Suddenly, Chicago and Memphis did not seem so far apart from each other.

In Memphis and Chicago, there are sites and landscapes, which are both real and imagined. Landmark buildings can be found in the downtowns of both cities but we can also find incidental spaces and historic places—a juke joint, a recording studio, and a church. In these cities we experience buildings and spaces that allow us to experience in them a double-consciousness of perception in sight, sound, imagination, and memory. Chicago and Memphis share a uniquely American common bond with each other; they are both homes to the American blues and their places of blues musical heritage present a double-consciousness of meaning to African-American diasporists.

This chapter is an exploration of intangible cultural heritage along the musical heritage byways of American popular culture. Two case studies that feature the marketing of diaspora and intangible heritage will be examined. The Mississippi Blues Trail is a rambling heritage corridor that runs across the entire state of Mississippi; it uses both actual landmarks, conventional way-finding and digital media to tell the story of Mississippi Blues (Fig. 3.2). Located in the Appalachian mountains of Southwestern Virginia, the Crooked Road is a similar heritage corridor that begins in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia, “the Birthplace of Country Music” and ends in Rocky Mount, Virginia (Fig. 3.3). Both experiences attempt to meld the set boundaries of the tangible place with the borderless landscape of the mind through the common experience of music presented today with the memory (both actual and perceived) of the inhabitants of the place, archival photography, and historical sites in order to satisfy the collected desire to experience diaspora. But are these corridors successful? Can they be sustained? And finally, is there a real there there? This chapter considers how intangible heritage is experienced on the historic American byway through the diasporic lens.

Fig. 3.2 The Mississippi Blues Trail roadside marker



Fig. 3.3 Virginia's Crooked Road sign



A Heritage of Blues and Diaspora

Not only have African-Americans, throughout the twentieth century, bestowed intense diasporic meanings to these cities, others have as well. Both Chicago and Memphis captured the imagination of not only African-Americans but of white Americans and Europeans as well. To many African-Americans, Chicago was the gateway to better economic opportunities, while Memphis was the gateway to the Mississippi Delta. African-Americans, who lived in these cities, expressed their sentiments through a powerful artistic medium now known as American blues music. First created and played in the Delta region south of Memphis, this music was imported to Chicago during the African-American migration in the first half of the twentieth century. In Chicago, the music evolved as it was performed in nightclubs and recorded for a commercial audience that eventually became global. The lyrics of the blues music spoke of love lost and lust yearned; hard times and exhilaration, but most importantly, it spoke of lost homes left far behind in the Mississippi Delta.

The music was poignant and it caught the imagination of other people as well, most notably, whites in the Northeast and in Europe. Popular musical artists adopted musical ideas in the 1950s and 60s and as it evolved this music genre eventually became Rock and Roll. Blues became mythic and part of its mythology was a diaspora felt by Mississippi-born African-Americans. As more whites were moved by the meaning and message of the music, they also began to seek out the places where the actual music was created. Each group had their own motives for seeking out the actual blues landscape. For African-Americans, reconnecting with family and family history and lore were the primary motives. Whites sought out the inspiration that blues music sites may embody. Today, compelled by a common but separate diaspora, both Black and white cultural tourists set out to find meaning and learn the history of the Mississippi blues along the byways of Mississippi and the backstreets of Memphis and Chicago.

In learning and experiencing the double-consciousness of places, for blues cultural tourists the journey is more important than the destination. They travel the Mississippi roads, rail lines, and the trains in order to make the connections to the real places found on a map and designated by a historic plaque or marker with the imagined spaces that they construct in their minds through music and imaginary. Some places resonate as the music comes alive or provides a more profound meaning, while at other places, the tourist experiences the disconnection of the place. The conflict between the real and perceived lies at the heart of the diaspora. Pilgrimages back to the homeland can bring about emotions that are joyful, sad, empty, and conflicted. Through these feelings, diaspora is reaffirmed. For most of the twentieth century that was what African-Americans did: they traveled back to Mississippi, first along Highway 61 and later Interstate 57/55. They reconnected with their families they had left behind and they also reconnected to the places they remembered. It was a personal emotion between families and a common bond found in the African-American community. For the most part this diasporic ritual was overlooked by the outside world.

Seven hundred miles east of Chicago, along the Blue Ridge mountains in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia, another American musical genre emerged, American bluegrass and old-time music. Rooted in Scotch-Irish folk music dating back to the eighteenth century, bluegrass was created by Appalachian whites. As was the case with African-Americans, the music became popularized when Appalachian whites migrated north to Cleveland, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois. Moreover, songs, sung by bluegrass singers, such as, Kentucky's Bill Monroe, spoke of lost homes, family that was left behind, and the simple mountain life. These songs reflected the diaspora that was being felt by relocated Appalachian whites who came to the northern cities to work in automobile plants and steel mills. The music was a common bond between Appalachian whites. These relocated Appalachian whites played their music in parlors and in parks. They played their music with their kinfolk and old friends when they had opportunities to travel back to the mountains and to their families and to their old homesteads. It is through their travels back to their home places that their diaspora was reaffirmed. As was the case of the diaspora felt by displaced Mississippi blacks, the Appalachian whites' diaspora

was hardly noticed by the rest of American culture. It was not until the folk movement of the 1960s, when bluegrass music was rediscovered, that the Appalachian diaspora was recognized by popular culture—but it was experienced mainly by Appalachians.

In the 1990s all of this began to change. Diaspora now became a broader and commonly held emotion—a feeling an individual who is part of a displaced community only experienced—at least that is how it was, and currently is presented, commercially today. Diaspora is now a codified and capitalized commodity in the popular culture economy and an integral component of the cultural tourism industry. State governmental agencies—not necessarily the peoples who created both the music and the myths of the places—are deliberately developing this new tourism market. By interweaving historic roadways, historic buildings, and places with the intangible heritage of music, narrative, and memory (either real or mythic), governmental agencies and cultural advocacy groups have begun to develop tourism industries centered on diaspora. Whether it is deliberately recognized or not, diaspora plays a key role in marketing and capitalizing intangible heritage of place in the tourism industry, especially in the economically depressed rural areas in the deep south and the southern Appalachians.

In her recent book, *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place*, Shelly Hornstein (2011) defines diaspora as both a double consciousness and a double geography for a people who live in a perceived or actual exile. She states that the diaspora is “best charted as a palimpsest, with multiple centers and capitals and overlapping porous border zones. One layer of the map corresponds to the nation-state and its citizenry, the other layer marks the experimental space of diasporic community.” Diaspora is commonly known as a distinctly Jewish experience. Webster’s dictionary defines it as “The settling of scattering colonies of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile” or “the experience of Jews living outside Palestine or modern Israel.” Hornstein broadens this idea in order to address how the layering of imagery, specifically photographs and postcards, changes and complicates the meaning of a specific place by not only the diasporists but others as well. Labels and perceptions of place demonstrate the elaborate, imaginary, and real constructions of a particular place and diaspora is not, in fact, a uniquely Jewish experience. It is something felt by all ethnic groups who believe they have been exiled from their homeland. Hornstein redefines the concept of diaspora by stating that diasporic people emphasize the pleasure qualities and productive character of a place, while at the same time, coming to terms with personal feelings of ambivalence and tension in the same place. This conflict produces a “double consciousness” of the place that may still exist or has been destroyed long ago (Hornstein 2011, p. 62).

As immigrant-based and transient peoples, Americans have been diasporic since the early days of the republic. In 1847, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his epic poem, *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*, and to this day it defines the diaspora of the Cajuns of Louisiana. Cherokee Indians define their diaspora through remembrance and use of the tragic “Trail of Tears,” when the federal government removed them from their native lands in Georgia and relocated them to the

reservations in Oklahoma. Although these diasporic events have been woven into the American story, they have not had the same impact on popular music as the twentieth century migration of African-Americans from Mississippi to Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City or the migration of Appalachian whites from western Virginia and east Tennessee to Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. Unlike the eighteenth century French who were exiled from Nova Scotia or the Cherokees, both the African-Americans and Appalachian whites freely left their home to seek better opportunities in the more industrial northern states. Often, they traveled seasonally back to either the Mississippi Delta or the Blue Ridge Mountains to reconnect with the families they left behind and the places that they held dear in their memories. Both Mississippi blacks and Virginia mountain whites used music to memorialize the place. In the 1940s bluesman “Mississippi” Fred McDowell sang about “Goin Down to the River” and the Virginia Mountain Boys from Grayson County, Virginia sang, “Fire on the Mountain.” McDowell recorded his songs in Chicago and the Virginia Mountain Boys recorded in Baltimore (Smithsonian Folkways 2013). Roadways such as Highway 61 (made famous by Bob Dylan) and the old Lee Highway in Virginia were celebrated in the diaspora. Even trains such as the “City of New Orleans” that stops in Clarksdale and Greenwood, Mississippi, Blytheville, Arkansas, Centralia and Champaign, Illinois, and the “Old 97” in Virginia were placed through songs into the double consciousness as well.

Commercial recordings of blues and bluegrass music occurred in the 1920s in Chicago, Washington, and other northern cities. Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax made field recordings in both the Mississippi Delta and throughout Appalachia for the Archive of the Folk Song in the Library of Congress during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Both of these musical genres became nationally popular after the Second World War. In post-War Mississippi, blues music was suppressed by the ruling racist white society. Both the blues and bluegrass was regarded by the white-dominated society as backward and not progressive. Both musical genres were rediscovered through the advent of “rock ‘n’ roll” music in the 1950s and the Folk Music Movement in the 1960s. During this time, British rock musicians, most notably the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, discovered the blues and rockabilly. All the while, Mississippi blacks and Appalachian whites continued their migratory patterns from the industrial north to their family home places and continued to contribute to the musical idiom and their diaspora. By the 1980s blues and bluegrass was celebrated by all groups of people not just African-Americans and Appalachian whites. Music festivals patronized by diverse populations flourished in both the Mississippi Delta and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Fans of these music genres rediscovered historic photography taken by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression. Live recordings became popular and tourists from across the world began to seek out the places that were memorialized in both song and imagery.

Blues Tourism

In the last decade of the twentieth century, state departments of tourism began to see the value of the heritage that helped culturally define them. The states of Mississippi and Virginia were no exception. In 2003, the Mississippi Blues Trail Foundation and the Mississippi Blues Commission were established by the Mississippi State Department of Development and Tourism. The Blues Trail is a network of roadside markers and historic sites that tells the story of the blues, the early musicians that created this music genre, and the places that they lived. In 2006, the commission dedicated its first marker at bluesman Charley Patton's gravesite in Holly Springs. Currently, there are now over 150 markers. Interestingly, not all of the markers are in Mississippi. There are also nine markers placed in cities such as Chicago, Memphis, Los Angeles, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, Ferriday, Louisiana, Helena, Arkansas, Rockland, Maine, Grafton, Wisconsin, and Tallahassee, Florida (Mississippi Department of Development and Tourism 2012). The trail uses both traditional highway way-finding and digital media to educate the tourist. It has no set path and encourages the tourist to travel at his or her own leisure and manner. The plaques are similar in appearance to the large roadside plaque fabricated for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, but they are also distinctly different. These plaques have created an overlay historical narrative of the state that complements the state's public history program. The trail also uses digital media that is intended to support the highway markers. The website features Google maps and satellite photographs and historic photographs, such as the Library of Congress' Walker Evans Collection, to depict the historic environment of the Blues Trail. More importantly, you can download an Apple "app" for your iPhone. The network also includes historic sites and repositories of blues music. The Center for Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford and the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale are the two primary museums and repositories that feature both musical recordings and artifact collections on the Blues Trail (Mississippi Blues Trail 2013). Elvis Presley's Graceland and his birthplace are also part of the trail network. But unlike other heritage corridors, the trail also includes nightclubs, beer joints, juke joints, churches, and performing halls where the blues was and is still played and where now-famous blues singers, such as B.B. King, got their start (Deep South USA 2013) (Fig. 3.4).

Through a grant from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Blues Commission developed an online curriculum intended for fourth graders. The curriculum is divided into six core areas: music, meaning, cotton, transportation, civil rights and media. The curriculum consists of 18 lessons for a 6-week module. Although the intent is to teach the blues in a cumulative manner, lessons can be taught individually and teachers can teach it to the students using electronic tablets or smartphones; partnering with music specialists is not required but it is encouraged (Mississippi Blues Trail 2013). The commission seeks to do more than create an attractive tourism venue; it also strives to educate the public about Mississippi's troubled racist past. The trail has been recognized for many

Fig. 3.4 The first Mississippi Blues Trail plaque is near the burial plot of bluesman Charley Patton. (Courtesy of the Mississippi Blues Trail)



successes but it has also been criticized for not alleviating the primary motivator for the existence of the blues and the immigration of Mississippi blacks out of the state—abject poverty.

The same year that Mississippi began marketing its musical traditions, 2006, Virginia began marketing their bluegrass musical tradition with the Crooked Road. Similar to the Blues Trail, the Crooked Road was intended to generate tourism and economic development in the Appalachian region of Southwestern Virginia by focusing on the region’s musical heritage. Unlike the Blues Trail, it is set on only two byways, Highway 58 and Highway 23; the 370-mile road goes from the Kentucky/Virginia border to Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee, and ends at Rocky Mount, Virginia (Wildman 2011). It includes ten counties, three cities, and ten towns. There are similar features between the Crooked Road and the Blues Trail but there are some distinct differences. The road does not use traditional permanent plaques; instead, roadside exhibits consisting of vinyl panels set in pressure-treated wood-framed stands inform the tourist. The road attempts to merge historic museums with musical clubs and performance halls in order to immerse the tourist in mountain music culture. The Carter Fold, the home of the A.P. Carter family, is both a museum and a performance venue along with the Ralph Stanley homestead and is an example of how the Crooked Road tries to strike a balance between history and entertainment. It should be noted that state historic preservation offices did not implement this initiative; instead, state offices for tourism and economic development developed both the Mississippi Blues Trail and Virginia’s Crooked Road. The primary mission of these venues is not to be a historical museum or repository but an entertainment venue. As is the case with the Blues Museum, the Crooked Road uses digital technology to feature historic photography in order to convey the people who produce mountain music and their historic settings. Tourists can use electronic tablets to access WPA era photography of towns and landscapes of the Blue Ridge region. The Crooked Road is also public information tourism tool that informs tourists of music festivals and events in towns and counties that are part of the tourism system (Virginia’s Crooked Road 2013) (Fig. 3.5).



Fig. 3.5 Virginia's Crooked Road. (Courtesy of the Virginia's Crooked Road Association). See a clearer image of the sign on this website: <http://damascusinn.com/attractions/the-crooked-road/>

The Mississippi Blues Trail and Virginia's Crooked Road attempt to promote economic development by curating between the double consciousness of real and imaginary place using music as the bridge the two realities. These two tourist experiences are based on diaspora (as described by Hornstein 2011) but their shortcomings come from a disconnection of the real and intangible. When driving through Mississippi, it is unlikely that you will encounter the Mississippi of Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters. Sharecropper housing, large cotton gins, and Jim Crow facilities have given way to Wal-Mart shopping centers, riverboat gambling, and heavy industry such as automobile plants and high-end appliance manufacturing such as Viking Range in Greenwood, Mississippi. Highway 61 immortalized by Bob Dylan in the 1960s is no longer a real roadway; similar to Route 66, it is now a series of fragments encountered in a disjointed manner. The Crooked Road is, in fact, not that crooked anymore. Decades of highway projects have made the mountain two-lane roads, which were made famous not only for music but also by daring fast-driving moonshiners who would eventually establish NASCAR stock racing, into a modern four-lane highway. Will the cultural tourist be disappointed in experiencing the real landscape after experiencing the imagined landscape of the music and photographic imagery? Most likely.

And what about the photographic imagery used to paint an image for diaspora for both the diasporist and the tourist? In his keynote talk, called "Concrete Modernity," given at the Eighth Savannah Symposium on Historic Preservation, Dell Upton (2013) questioned how historic photography of the American South was being interpreted. He argued that artists have invented an African-American culture that is not true and through a loose interpretation of historic photography they have conjured up customs and practices for their own benefit. He demonstrated his point with Subrossa, architect Samuel Mockbee's last creation in New Bern, Alabama. This meditation structure was based on a black custom of using bottles to catch the essence of one's spirit as it goes to heaven, which in fact is not true. As we interpret heritage based on photography, we should be careful with how we use photography to build a plausible narrative.

Conclusion

Narrative through music is what makes these diasporic tourist experiences compelling. In *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, David Lowenthal flatly states that heritage in all its forms relies more on a contrived narrative formed by continual invention and revision, often in defiance of known fact. He points out that narrative is not contrived out of desire to be misleading but in order to “simply make a good story” (Lowenthal 1996, p. 143). With the Blues Trail and the Crooked Road, the narrative is the music that was partly driven by diaspora. By not having a set path of travel but instead allowing the tourist to arbitrarily encounter blues music and roadside markers, the Blues Trail loses a coherent narrative that the Crooked Road retains through its linear progression. Music and geography can help structure the narrative and provide a rational understanding of the real and intangible heritage that defines Hornstein’s (2011) idea of a double consciousness of diaspora. But in order for this narrative to be successful, the real and imagined must be curated.

So how can we use diaspora as a tool for interpretation of intangible heritage on byways such as the Blues Trail and the Crooked Road? The challenge is to find ways to calibrate the double geography of place, the real that is bounded and the imaginary, which is without borders. Digital media, using satellite mapping, and historic photographs can not only be used in this process but also in preservation and interpretation of the actual place in at least part of the heritage corridor. Recreation or reconstruction is not the answer and will only make the history more conjectural and the narrative less compelling. In order for the intangible heritage to be experienced in a meaningful manner, a mental datum of calibrated real places and digital images should be constructed in order to rectify the diasporic double geography of heritage and place. By doing this in distinct heritage corridors such as the Blues Trail and the Crooked Road, music and images can be used to provide a compelling and interesting narrative of the place.

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