

# Travelling deep in cotton country

**Nancy Wigstson**  
Special to The CJN

When movie locations were being scouted for *The Help*, Greenwood, Miss., was the obvious choice.

"Greenwood still looks like it did in 1963," says guide Paige Hunt, "whereas Jackson – where the book takes place – has changed. That's Skeeter's place [the writer played by actor Emma Stone]," Hunt announces, pointing out a white-columned house familiar to the fans of the smash-hit film.



**Jimmy "Duck" Holmes plays *Good Morning Blues* in the Blue Front Café in Benton, Miss.**

We're deep in cotton country, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, and by no coincidence, the place where American blues was born. The maids in the film lived over in Baptist Town, an 1848 African-American community, where houses are less than palatial. During the days of segregation, the bosses summoned residents to the cotton fields, where the working day lasted from "cain to cain't" (from the time when you can see the sun, until the time that you can't).

"That's terrible," a woman from Saskatchewan says when told that children regularly "hid out" when the bosses came.

"But that's what made the blues," responds our guide, Sylvester Hoover. "A

fifth of the world's cotton was traded out of Greenwood," continues Hoover, who remembers working beside his mother as a three-year-old. Cotton is still big in these parts – its straight rows surprisingly lovely – but machines do the picking these days.

When he's not running his corner store, Hoover guides tourists on the seven-year-old Mississippi Blues Trail, where markers fill in history about musicians and the places they made famous. Local legends include bluesmen Robert Johnson, Sonnyboy Williamson, Furry Lewis and Pine-top Perkins.

A natural showman, Hoover spins riveting tales about Jim Crow days while showing us around a room-sized museum, a jumble of everything from the long bags used to collect cotton – he dons one for photographers – to a painting of Robert F. Kennedy. The Kennedys are revered by African-Americans in the South. In 1967, RFK visited these parts, shocked by the conditions he saw, and very sympathetic to change.

Today the Delta welcomes a steady stream of visitors who come for the music – with Oscar-winning movie locations as an added bonus. After Hoover shows us the "authentic" grave of Robert Johnson – there are three in total, so vast is the man's legend – we return to town, crossing the Tallahatchie Bridge, the one made famous by Bobbie Gentry, a local girl who sang about a boy named Billy Joe McAllister and his mysterious fate.

The trail attracts an international group, including visitors from England, Holland and Scandinavia, music fans who cross oceans to see the places where their heroes played, the many men and women first inspired by the call-and-response singing of their ancestors toiling in the fields.

The town of Clarksdale is close to the "crossroads" where Highway 49 meets Highway 61. Its near-mythic status is owed to young bluesman Robert Johnson, who wrote and recorded a 1936 song about standing here, hoping in vain for a ride, a song that was covered 30 years after his demise by bands including British



**Nancy Wigstson walks past cotton fields in Greenwood, Miss.**

super-rockers Cream. Somnolent Clarksdale is also home to the actor Morgan Freeman, who owns Ground Zero, a "juke joint" across the street from the Delta Blues Museum.

At our first stop, in Benton, Miss., we pulled up at the Blue Front Café, founded in 1948 by the parents of the genial man seated on the porch. This man turned out to be famous blues guitarist Jimmy "Duck" Holmes. As the morning light streamed in through the window, Holmes casually pulled up a chair and sang *Good Morning Blues* for his northern visitors. "This is Benton-style blues," he explained, a form unique to the area. Last month, Holmes performed in Norway, his second trip there this year.

For some, Delta music becomes a life-defining passion, like the Dutch musician nicknamed "the boogie-woogie man," who runs a private Rock and Blues museum chock-full of all sorts of memorabilia, in downtown Clarksdale. The guest book at the more official-looking Delta Blues Museum records names from Australia to Wales. In the sunny street outside the museum, a tough-looking but friendly group of Louisiana motorcyclists pose for pictures outside Ground Zero, where Morgan Freeman's bodyguard works when the star isn't in town.

Among the biggest names to emerge from this part of the world is Elvis Presley, who began his career as a crossover artist recording blues and gospel numbers as well as a new thing called rock 'n' roll. A poor boy who spent his first 13 years in Tupelo, Miss., Elvis saw the two-room house where he was born repossessed, his sharecropper father sent to jail (for changing the amount on a cheque from \$4 to \$14), and his mother's successful petition to reduce her husband's sentence from three years to eight months. In 1948, the family moved to Memphis, hoping for a fresh start.

All this and more can be gleaned at the splendid El-

vis Presley Birthplace in Tupelo, run by the State of Mississippi. The state moved the original Presley house here, as well as the chapel that Elvis attended as a child. Fans of the Coen brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou?* will recognize the music that influenced Elvis as a child. At the other extreme, a flat-screen TV in the Ladies' Room shows late-period Elvis performing live in Las Vegas.

A statue of the 13-year-old Presley highlights the grounds, and the main building features Elvis memorabilia as well as an auditorium for live performances. Downtown, the hardware store where Mrs. Presley bought her 10-year-old son his first guitar – he had wanted a gun but changed his mind – is still in business.

On spotting a young European visitor sporting the Elvis look, I'm reminded of the terrific 2002 documentary, *Schmelvis*, featuring an Orthodox Elvis impersonator from Montreal, a rabbi and a doggedly funny investigative team on the trail of the King's maternal Jewish roots. They discover warmth rather than prejudice in Elvis fans, rather like the lively inclusiveness we find in Tupelo.

In the words of Mississippi-born blues artist Muddy Waters: "The blues had a baby and they called it rock and roll." And there's nowhere better to visit that baby's birthplace than the Mississippi Delta.

*If you go:* [www.visitmississippi.org](http://www.visitmississippi.org); [www.visitgreenwood.com](http://www.visitgreenwood.com); [www.msblues-trail.org](http://www.msblues-trail.org); [www.elvispresleybirthplace.com](http://www.elvispresleybirthplace.com).

*In Greenwood, The Alluvian Hotel and Spa oozes charm:* [www.thealluvian.com](http://www.thealluvian.com); *Sylvester Hoover's tours:* [deltablueslegend-tours@yahoo.com](mailto:deltablueslegend-tours@yahoo.com), 662-392-5370.



**Downtown Clarksdale, Miss.**

[Nancy Wigstson photos]



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