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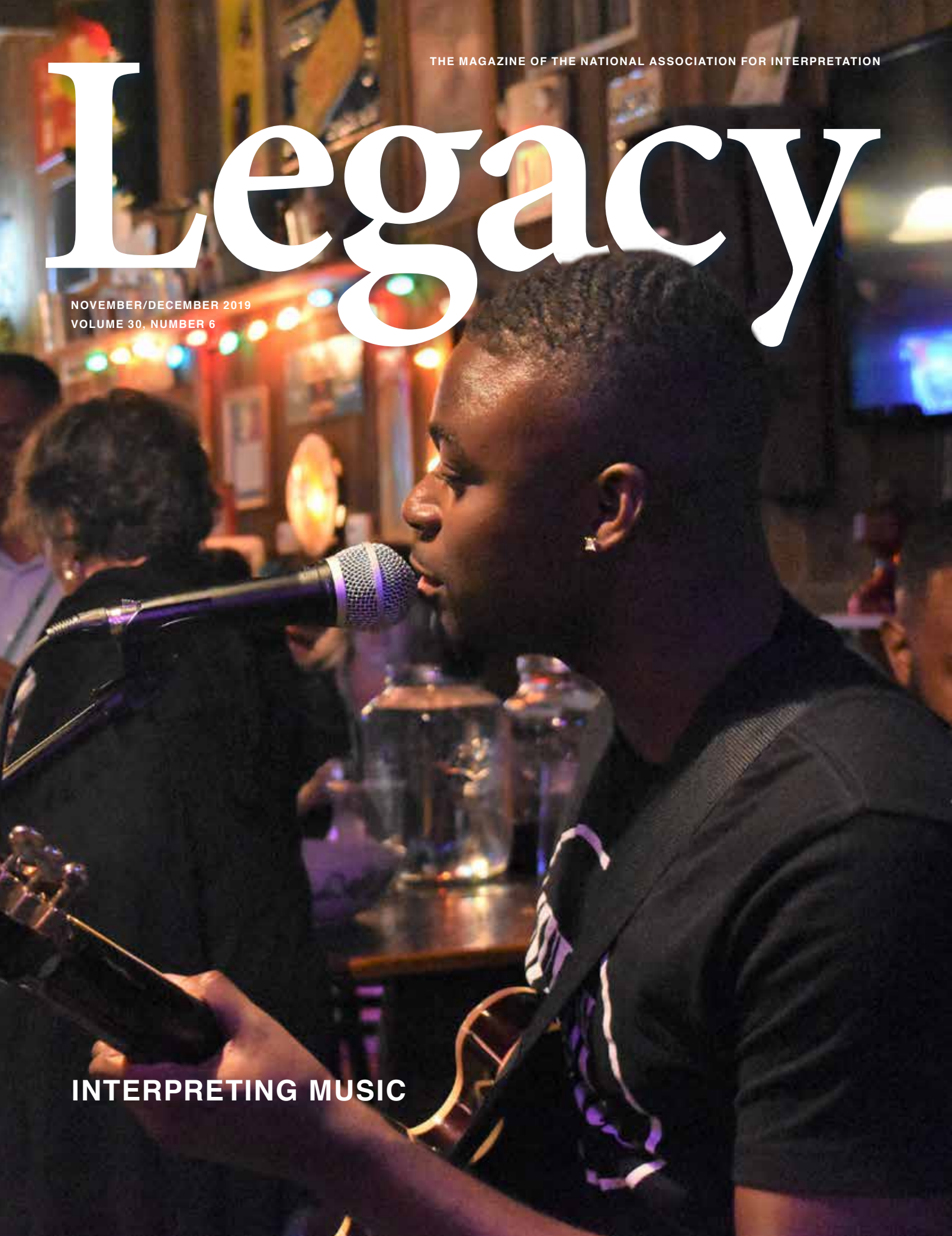

INTERPRETING MUSIC

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Keith Johnson, "Prince of the Delta Blues," performs at a Delta State University event in Cleveland, Mississippi.

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Performance at a Mississippi Delta Blues Bar in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Interpreting an American Soundscape

MISSISSIPPI: "THE BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICA'S MUSIC"

Come to Mississippi
The birthplace of the blues.
Come on
To the birthplace of the blues.
You see, we talkin' about a blues land
Home of that hoochie coochie man!

—"Come to Mississippi"
Keith Johnson,
Prince of the Delta Blues, 2018

ROLANDO HERTS

University-Community-Engaged Soundscape Interpretation

Music heritage in Mississippi carries a legendary mystique that is well suited to interpretive storytelling. In-the-know locals are proud to share how Mississippi has earned its claim to fame as "The Birthplace of America's Music." Invoking their Southern storytelling authority, they will tell you that no other state has produced such a high percentage of internationally known, world-class musicians. They will tell you that Mississippi has produced more Grammy Award-winning artists than any state in the country. They will go on to say that this is why the first Grammy Museum outside of Los Angeles was built at Delta State University in Cleveland, the heart of the Mississippi Delta region, which is known worldwide as the "Birthplace of the Blues."

While this music heritage interpretation may be crafted with a hint of healthy creative license, the stories point to the importance of pride of place and economic opportunity. This is especially so in the Mississippi Delta, proudly known as the "Birthplace of the Blues" and problematically labelled as the poorest region in the poorest state in the United States.

Since 2000, The Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University has forged local, national, and international collaborations to create and facilitate various interpretation programs that tell Mississippi Delta stories. As part

of the university's commitment to address longstanding educational, social, economic, and cultural challenges in the region, The Delta Center's programs create safe spaces for historically marginalized communities to take pride in sharing and interpreting their own stories. This includes blues, a musical art form transplanted from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade to the cotton producing soils of Mississippi. Enslaved Africans forced to chop and pick cotton under cruel, dehumanizing conditions channeled their oppression into musical expression, crying out to be heard, to be liberated—work songs, field hollers, and spirituals that became the blues.

Don't the Delta look lonesome
When that evening sun go down?
Don't this Delta look lonesome
When that evenin' sun goes down?
Well, you been lookin' for your baby
Don't know where she could be found
—"Mississippi Blues"
William Brown, 1942

Blues songs tell the collective story of African Americans' ongoing struggle to live through four centuries of oppression and accrued disadvantage. African Americans have lived through slavery, sharecropping, the Jim Crow era, the Great Migration, mass incarceration, economic terrorism, and other institutionalized conditions driven by racism and white supremacy. Blues music tells this story. It embodies the hopelessness of surviving at the lower physiological and safety levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as well as the hope of attaining higher levels of love, esteem, and self-actualization.

Blues music is the root of all American music genres. These genres—including country, gospel, rock 'n' roll, and soul—are encoded with blues' paradox of hope and hopelessness. As the "Birthplace of America's Music," Mississippi is a collection of regional soundscapes where one can hear, feel, and bear witness to hope and hopelessness and other socio-cultural contradictions that capture the essence of our shared American and human experience.

Through programs like the International Conference on the Blues and the Most Southern Place on Earth workshops for K–12 educators, The Delta Center immerses residents and visitors in experiences that illuminate how Mississippi people, places, and culture crafted the blues and other musical genres. I presented on The Delta Center's place-based experiential learning projects at NAI's 2019 International Conference in Brazil. The conference theme, "Building Interpretive Alliances for Collective Impact," offered an ideal platform for sharing how our university-community-engaged interpretation work fosters conversations about race relations, social justice, cultural representation, and other challenging topics through Mississippi's music heritage.

In doing this work, we invariably are confronted with the challenge of interpreting a host of socio-cultural contradictions that reflect broader American life: wealth and poverty, black and white, urban and rural, power and powerless, and sacred and secular. These contradictions are alarmingly ever present in the Mississippi Delta soundscape. They become even clearer when the Mississippi Delta is contrasted with its geographic neighbor, the Mississippi Hills, another storied music heritage soundscape widely known as the birthplace of Elvis. Given the diverse audiences that visit The Delta Center, interpreting with a universal language clarifies the contradictions and, ultimately, clears pathways to shared understanding. This universal language is music.

Mississippi Delta and Hills Soundscapes in Contrast

The Mississippi Delta and Mississippi Hills regions are two distinct soundscapes: interpretive, narrative-rich destination regions under constant authorship processes that connect music, place, and identity with past and present socio-cultural dynamics. Both regions represent historical and cultural intersections of the various music genres that Mississippians have crafted. They are the places where blues, country, gospel, rock 'n' roll, and soul have been innovated and interpreted by musicians, scholars, and local institutions, collectively telling

A Chicago blues band performs at Mississippi Delta Blues Fest in Brazil.

the complex, multifaceted story of America.

Both the Mississippi Delta and Mississippi Hills are Congressionally designated National Heritage Areas, places recognized by the National Park Service where historic, cultural, and natural resources combine to form nationally important, lived-in landscapes. National Heritage Areas are committed to building regional capacity to provide authentic cultural heritage tourism experiences by engaging local communities in interpreting and telling their stories. These stories are not always easy listening or telling, however, as power struggles based on race, class, gender, and other factors invariably play in the background.

"The Delta" and "the Hills," as they are referred to locally, are contrasting soundscapes not only due to topography—the former: a flat, sea level landscape; the latter: a landscape undulated with rolling hills—but also due to complex socio-cultural relationships that influenced musical styles. These contrasts can and do serve as a provocative interpretation tool for music heritage storytellers.

Mississippi writers like William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Richard Wright have characterized the Delta historically as a morally relaxed cotton kingdom ruled by wealthy white aristocrats who benefited from the free labor of African Americans. The Delta still features vestiges of plantation life connected to music heritage. Dockery Farms is a plantation located a few minutes from Ruleville, Mississippi, home of civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer. Visited by thousands of tourists from around the world, Dockery is the place where Charley Patton, known as the "Father of the Delta Blues," entertained sharecroppers regularly and where he first met his unofficial apprentice Robert Johnson, the "King of the Delta Blues." Though currently no longer in operation, the sharecropper shack that once housed Po' Monkey's Lounge, the world renowned last rural juke joint in the U.S., still stands at the edge of a Delta cotton field.

Such Delta music heritage sites coalesce with raw emotional sounds from souls long gone and resonate with past and present race relations and chronic poverty. The sites and stories often intersect with the Great Migration, which took the blues to Chicago via musicians fleeing the South like Muddy Waters, and the Civil Rights movement, whose activists drew inspiration from gospel and soul musicians like the Staples Singers founded by Roebuck "Pops" Staples who once lived on Dockery plantation. Delta-born Grammy Award-winning country musician Rosanne Cash has said, "If we don't know the Delta, we don't know ourselves as Americans."

July 2018 NEH Most Southern teacher workshop at Po Monkey's Lounge juke joint.

In contrast to the Delta, cultural attitudes in the Hills generally are depicted as plain, practical, pious, and suspicious of Delta extravagance. The Delta and the Hills are literal grounds where American race and class tensions collide. Barry's Rising Tide, about the historic Flood of 1927 in the Delta, offers various examples contrasting the Hills' poor, white, and violently racist yeoman farmer culture with the Delta's elite white planter caste. Country and rock 'n' roll genres generally are associated with the Hills, despite the fact that the Rock 'N' Roll Hall of Fame cites African American Mississippi Delta native Ike Turner as the "Father of Rock 'N' Roll" via his classic song "Rocket 88." His white, ultimately wealthier counterpart Elvis Presley—known as the "King of Rock 'N' Roll"—was born in the Hills. The Elvis Birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi, is a well-preserved, leading tourist attraction in that soundscape. The Elvis Birthplace overshadows the fact that the Hills also birthed African American blues fife and drum progenitor R.L. Burnside and female Country Music Hall of Fame artist Tammy Wynette.

Marking the Delta and Hills Soundscapes for Interpretation

The Delta's regional place identity has gained global meaning over time through blues diasporization, making it possible for anyone, anywhere, at any time to experience the Delta as a living culture. In the 21st century, Mississippi leaders have mapped a statewide soundscape with highway signs and music trails, inviting residents and visitors to travel Mississippi—especially the Delta and the Hills— to discover people, places, and stories that make it the home of America's music heritage.

The internationally recognized significance of the Delta soundscape lends further credibility to Mississippi being promoted as "The Birthplace of America's Music." Former Governor Haley Barbour's administration initiated the statewide installation of highway welcome signs featuring this moniker in 2009. It is no small coincidence that since that time, the Delta has emerged as an international blues tourism mecca, with Clarkdale, Mississippi, as its unofficial seat. Among numerous distinguishing characteristics of great interest to blues tourists and music heritage interpreters, Clarksdale is the birthplace of Ike Turner, Sam Cooke, and Big Jack Johnson. It also has the Delta Blues Museum, the world's first museum devoted to blues.

"The Birthplace of America's Music" highway welcome signs still greet tourists and residents into Delta and Hills soundscapes teeming with music heritage trails. Local cultural and political leaders have influenced the musicalization of everyday life in the Delta and the Hills regions using a variety of physical and symbolic markers, ultimately reifying a sense of collective regional identity, belonging, and a shared past. Together, the Delta and the Hills soundscapes feature approximately 70 percent of the statewide Mississippi Blues Trail and Mississippi Country Music Trail markers, two music heritage interpretation projects supported by state government, tourism, cultural, and economic development stakeholders.

The Mississippi Blues Trail comprises over 200 markers in statewide, national, and international locales, especially blues festivals. Blues festivals are staged annually throughout the U.S., including the 25-year-old-and-counting North Atlantic Blues Festival in Rockland, Maine, over 1,500 miles from the Delta. A number of international blues festivals exist as well, including the Cahors Blues Festival, established in 1982 in France, and the Notodden Blues Festival, founded in 1988 in Norway. Mississippi Blues Trail markers have been dedicated to all three of these festivals in the communities where they occur.

The Mississippi Delta Blues Festival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was inaugurated in May 2019 during the same week that NAI held its international conference. The Rio de Janeiro festival is a northern branch of the now 12-year-old Mississippi Delta Blues Festival in Caxias do Sul in southeastern Brazil. According to festival organizers, it attracts over 10,000 visitors from Brazil and neighboring countries, as well as Europe and the U.S. The Delta's place brand also is firmly anchored in Brazil via two Mississippi Delta blues bars, one in Rio, the other in Caxias do Sul.

Doorman at Mississippi Delta Blues Bar Rio in Brazil holds Delta State's Fighting Okra.

The Brazil blues festival organizers feel a deep kinship with the Delta. Like the blues, samba music is the root music of Brazil, created by enslaved Africans transported to the state of Bahia, which some call the "Mississippi Delta of Brazil." As Brazil is amidst a serious economic recession, the festivals aim to build community and raise awareness of racism, poverty, and wealth inequality through music.

Mississippians and others must ask, can music heritage tourism development address racism, poverty, and other long-standing socio-cultural issues in the state? It is quite possible through audience-centered, culturally sensitive interpretation.

Current Trends and Future Directions

What is audience-centered, culturally sensitive interpretation? According to presenters at the National Park Service Southeast Region's 2019 "Charting the Course" interpretation workshop, audience-centered interpretation consists of four observable elements: (1) tells a great story that engages audiences in the storytelling; (2) invites sharing and questions that foster dialogue; (3) learns from and with others toward building co-created experiences; and (4) grapples with sticky societal problems that encourage reflection and critical thinking.

Developing culturally sensitive interpretation programming is very much aligned with 21st-century, audience-centered interpretation approaches. Culturally sensitive interpretation requires a four-step, inside-out process: (1) understand your own identity, perspective, and biases related to heritage stories; (2) know and understand socio-cultural contexts of heritage stories and how those contexts have shaped present-day conditions; (3) incorporate this critical understanding and current scholarship in interpretive programs as a standard practice; and (4) continually evaluate program effectiveness and impact by listening and responding to audience feedback.

The Delta Center already has incorporated most, if not all, of these interpretation principles in existing partnership programs. For example, the 2018 International Conference on the Blues interpreted the theme "Spirit of the Blues: Celebrating Roots of Delta Music Through Gospel and Spirituals" by creating spaces for performances and discussions that bridge African American musical traditions rooted in Southern slave and sharecropping plantation cultures. Through combined support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Park Service, and the Chisholm Foundation, the conference created a platform for the Morganfield family from Chicago and the Delta to tell stories about how blues legend Muddy Waters, their most famous relative, inspired blues and gospel artistry in their lives and communities. Delta State alumnus and blues artist Keith Johnson, Muddy Waters' great nephew, organized and led the panel discussion featuring Muddy Waters' son Joseph "Mojo" Morganfield, granddaughter Amelia Cooper, and niece Bridgett Morganfield Jones. The panelists shared authentic, first-person blues heritage stories that illuminated for audiences how Muddy Waters and the Great Migration contributed to Mississippi's image as an internationally significant

soundscape. Documentary videos for the 2018 International Conference on the Blues are available at www.internationaldeltabluesproject.com.

In the future, The Delta Center plans to continue forging innovative partnerships and collaborations that enrich and expand audience engagement with Mississippi's music heritage stories. The International Blues Scholars Program is an online, graduate-level blues studies certificate offered by Delta State—the only one of its kind in the United States. Administered by The Delta Center, the program may develop a place-based immersion track that will invite students to travel to the Delta to experience blues music and culture for a week. In addition, there is a burgeoning partnership with Brazil's Mississippi Delta Blues Festival organizers aimed at connecting Delta blues with Bahian samba. This unique intercontinental connection may lead to interpretation-oriented study abroad opportunities for Delta State students majoring in humanities, social science, and business disciplines.

As Cleveland, Mississippi, prepares to host the Alliance of National Heritage Areas conference and the international Music Tourism Convention in 2020, it is an opportune time to develop and expand music heritage interpretation in the "Birthplace of America's Music."

As we say in the Delta: "Y'all come!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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