

Singing Rocks

I first heard it when I was walking across campus at 7:05am. Strident guitars, tapping feet, and a swirling baritone voice. Strumming and howling. The blues, no doubt. And a loud iteration thereof. Puzzling. It seemed clear that the sound was coming from the building just ahead, but the sound was loud enough that it could only be coming from a speaker turned outward. And who would do that at this time of day?

Then, passing a manicured row of trees and still a good thirty feet from the suspected facade, the song suddenly dropped in volume. I continued on for a few steps, but, realizing my dissatisfaction, backtracked. The music picked back up again as I crossed the trees. I studied the brush for answers, and eventually found it: a small directional speaker disguised as a shabby beige rock, betrayed by a series of slits on its quad-facing side. A closer examination confirmed my hypothesis. I tarried there for a few minutes, listening and wondering at what the decision-making process could have been to lead to the installation of a permanent singing rock in a public space. As I considered it, the baritone swirled and swirled, ducking weirdly around the unnatural acoustic environment.

Was I annoyed? I felt the tranquility of my morning walk (and its often critical mental processes) tread upon to be sure, and the agitated strumming and howling felt displaced in that bright, fresh Delta morning. I had nothing to feel blue about anyhow. So I settled on annoyance and set off on the remainder of my walk to Ewing Hall for orientation.

A few days later, now on a late-night stroll around campus, I heard the sudden blare of horns, drums, guitar, and bass. I scoffed at the open sky. Now more seasoned, I located the singing rock in a mere moment and discovered, to the fulfillment of my assumption, that it was the same design as my morning interloper. What's more, placed as it was between a campus building and a parking lot, the sound it projected sliced across a relatively peopled vein (though, to your average passerby its song would be audible for a handful of seconds at most). My curiosity and annoyance fusing, I speed-walked back to the quad and, catching the end of the same song, confirmed that these singing rocks were co-conspirators. Following that, I made it my mission to track down the whole cohort. My survey turned up four such singing rocks, placed strategically around campus, all bellowing strangely from the same Delta songbook. (There may be more.)

The issue of the singing rocks bemused me, but it became clear over my short stay in the Mississippi Delta that they spoke to a larger, pernicious phenomenon in the region. For the Delta ("The Most Southern Place on Earth" according to author James Cobb) carries an intense, short, and complex history. In that history are an endless array of political, economic, and social threads, but the two that I see combined in Delta State University's singing rocks are the twin legacies of racism and the blues.

In the case of the singing rocks, the history of Delta State requires a cursory description of the school's history. Founded as a white teacher's college on the white side of Cleveland, MS in 1924, Delta State suffered the pains of integration in the 1960s common throughout the South. That said, DSU did have its peculiarities. A 1969 sit-in by over 50 Black students had been largely forgotten until a (very) recent documentary produced by DSU professor Ted Fisher. That sit-in was quashed with little in the way of concessions by then-president Dr. James Ewing, whose name now graces a building in the College of Education. The University removed its confederate flag from campus in 2016: it was the last public university in Mississippi to do so.

Before I argue the connection, allow me to provide a brief enumeration of similar phenomena that graced my stay. Listings will proceed from least to most strange.

Airport Grocery. Though nowadays far from anything we would consider an airport or a grocery, this bar and restaurant is something of a community center in Cleveland, MS. My meal there consisted of such Delta staples as fried catfish, hush puppies, and sweet tea. Dinner was accompanied by a full set by the legendary blues guitarist Keith Johnson and a bassist of his; and yet despite the high pedigree of our entertainment and an average decibellage of ~90, in quiet moments between songs another blues song would wash in in full volume over the restaurant's speakers. No silence was permitted.

Dockery Farms (Plantation?). If the Delta is the most Southern place on Earth, Dockery Farms (Plantation?) may be in turn the most Southern place in the Delta. Once a ~30,000 acre hardwood swamp, it was converted by Black blood and sweat into vast and unthinkable lucrative cotton fields, and went on to employ an estimated 4,000 Black sharecroppers. Payment for a while was made in 50 cents of the farm's (plantation's?) own currency per day of labor, sunup to sundown. Along with the exploitation of labor came a handful of blues players now considered icons of the genre: Charley Patton, Howlin' Wolf, and even Robert Johnson—the modern Faust—himself. The old center of the plantation (now a historic site) allows the public to walk around a few of its buildings. In the old gin, a set of speakers played blues at an ambient level while I gazed at a dizzying system of belts, valves, tubes, tins, and levers. Even in the old cotton seed house, a building that in 2023 is naught but a pile of driftwood, a cable still ran to a speaker nestled in the shingles so that the blues could spill out of the roof.

The Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center (E.T.H.I.C.). A scrappy “living museum” in Glendora, MS, built near one of the locations of Till's torture, E.T.H.I.C. offers a strange and brief array of exhibits. The most prominent among the exhibits are a grim and replica-laden recreation of Till's abduction, torture, and murder, and the celebration of the birthplace of blues harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson II. As one glares at a recreated hatchet, knife, and hammer, ostensibly

similar to the ones that plunged into Till's body, one can hear the bright and rhythmic sparkling of Sonny Boy's harmonica. The intro video punches nauseatingly between Till and Williamson.

Indeed it seems like no matter where I went in the Delta, the sonic footprint of its second most famous export greeted me at some point. So why this blue perfume? Who has cast its cloying vapors across the Delta, and what is it for? In light of my experience, I propose that the blue perfume is an extension of the conscious and constant celebration of the blues that the Delta has embraced in the last forty or so years. It is a thrusting of the Delta's most widely loved cultural practice into all available public spaces, an attempt to craft a positive identity for the region. Its audience is clear: visitors, tourists, and passers-through. I would stress that most of all, its audience is *white* visitors, tourists, and passers-through.

Because as deserving as the Delta is of its soulful, dulcet heritage, the projection of the blues into these public crannies, particularly those that deal with the legacy of slavery and racism, seem aimed to cover, gloss, and whitewash rather than simply exalt. It seems to spring from an anxiety around that issue of regional identity. The omnipresence of the blues mollifies and keeps in constant attention the greatness that came out of this troubled land, and in that way it softens the proverbial blow. We are asked time and time and time again to think of the South as the site of Black artistry and twisting bodies rather than the site of Black agony and twisted bodies.

The danger of using the blues this way is precisely its soothing effect and broad appeal. That is to say, it is easier to think about the most Southern place on Earth when we can think about the blues; it's easier to talk about Dockery Farms (Plantation?) when we can focus on the artistic genius that graced the place; it's easier to like Delta State as a white Northerner when B.B. King greets you instead of the stars and bars; it's easier to stomach Emmett Till's abduction and murder with Sonny Boy's harmonica in our ear. And perhaps these are not things that should be softened for the people who pass through. Perhaps we must ask ourselves now and again: if you strip the Delta of the blues, what then is its heritage?

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