

Backtracking — Where We Found the Blues

Way back in the 1980s, my partner and I were driving along I-10 out of Baton Rouge. As we often did, we decided to leave the Interstate and take a detour through a small town in search of somewhere to have lunch.

It always seemed to us that, in the nicest possible meaning of the word, being British we were something of a novelty. On this particular occasion, we were on our way to New Orleans to immerse ourselves in the jazz we already knew and loved. The blues, however, was something we had never really thought about.

That was about to change.

We stopped at a small café, and before long the familiar conversation began. People wanted to tell us about their fathers and grandfathers who had served with the US Air Force in Britain during the Second World War. Then the inevitable questions about our Royal Family.

Somewhere during that conversation, the blues came up, along with jazz and another mysterious genre we had never heard of: Zydeco. Not wanting to appear completely ignorant, I remembered something my cousin, whom we'd been visiting in Houston, had said: it depended very much on where in the United States you were as to just how foolish a question might sound.

The advice we received was simple enough:

“Drive down this two-lane back road until you come to a small town. I don't remember the name. You'll see a bar on your right. You'll get the blues there.”



And so we did. My partner's reaction to the suggestion that we should actually go inside was. *‘If you think I'm going in there, you've got another think coming’* — this picture isn't of the joint, but perhaps gives you some idea of what the place looked like. ...'Low' doesn't really begin to describe it.

After a discussion in the car, we decided we'd go in, have a quick drink, and then drive on. Four hours later, we left with the blues firmly embedded in our DNA.

I only wish we'd taken a photograph. There were wooden tables and chairs, dusty and, if I'm being honest, probably dirty. The man behind the bar looked as though he'd just got out of bed. There were perhaps twenty patrons, and not one of them was Caucasian.

As we stepped through the door, the conversation stopped. The silence was so complete you could almost have cut it with a saw.

Then a voice: ‘Hi, you guys. Come on in’

And from that moment, we were welcomed as though we'd been expected.

We sat with our drinks, talking to people and simply enjoying the atmosphere. Even my partner began to relax.

About half an hour after we arrived, a large lady and a man carrying what looked like a homemade guitar climbed onto a tiny platform.

He began to play.

She began to sing ... In that short space of time something happened.

Years later, my dear friend Graham — ‘The Doc’ — put it into words for me: ‘You either feel the blues, or you don't. If you don't, you're just listening to music.

At the time, I had no idea who we might be hearing, or what was meant by ‘Feeling the blues’. Looking back, I sometimes wonder whether that extraordinary woman could have been singing in the tradition of Bessie Smith.

What I do know is that she sang the blues. - Not blues as an academic definition or a musical category, but blues that spoke of misery, deprivation, hardship and poverty — things we could never have understood in the way those who lived them did, the authenticity of the blues.

Yet somehow, through her voice, we could feel them - This was authentic blues. Four hours after walking through that door, we finally realised all those years later what The Doc meant.

We had been listening to the **real blues**.

We left that afternoon carrying something we hadn't arrived with: the blues in our souls, and a growing determination to understand it — and, somehow, to share the privilege of presenting the authentic blues from its roots to audiences across the world.

That unexpected detour from I-10 became the beginning of a journey we could never have planned. It was the beginning of our **Backtracking** journey.

Thank you for joining us.