

## Embracing The Legacy Of The Blues / From the South To The North

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### Part 1. West Point, MS and Howlin' Wolf

Large urban communities across the nation have long embraced their cultural heritage and the legacy of blues music and even honor the memory those who helped create it. Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Detroit, Atlanta, Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Francisco/Oakland, and others are proud of and have capitalized on their long history and association with the blues via well publicized annual blues festivals, concerts, museum exhibits, and educational events. I'm happy to report that smaller communities across the nation are also beginning to get aboard the "blues train."

West Point, Mississippi, with a population of approximately 12,000, is in Clay County, about an hour south of Tupelo on U.S. Highway 45 at Miss. Hwy 50. The most famous person to hail from Clay County is Chester Burnett, also know as "Howlin' Wolf." Until recently, few locals knew, took notice, or cared, that one of the most prominent, powerful, and influential blues artists of all time was originally from their town on the edge of the "Black Prairie" region of Eastern Mississippi. But all that has changed now. A new blues awareness has enlightened and enhanced the community. There is a sense of pride that a bona fide music legend was born in White Station out in the countryside, just three miles from West Point.

Richard Ramsey is the Program Director for the local Howlin' Wolf Blues Society and is the curator for the Howlin' Wolf Blues Museum. Richard's dad owned the local tire and appliance store. As a young boy growing up in West Point, Richard worked in his dad's store. Howlin' Wolf would return to the area several times a year to hunt, fish, visit friends and family, and to perform his haunting and infectious blues. On these visits home, Wolf would come in to Ramsey's Tire & Appliance Store on Main Street in his overalls to secure his hunting license and buy ammunition and such. Richard remembers selling Wolf his hunting license and putting tires on Wolf's station wagon. He also remembers sneaking out to White Station at age 13 to see and hear Wolf play in a local juke joint called Roxy's. He was in awe as Wolf stuck one harp under his nose and another harp to his lips and blew them both at the same time! Wolf sang and wailed, his eyes rolled back, and he crawled on the floor as the music rocked the juke joint and the people danced and swayed to the hypnotic sounds. Little did young Richard know as he watched Wolf work his musical magic, that years later he would play a role in bringing local recognition, pride, and appreciation to this legend of the

blues.

In 1995 a blues fan made a phone call to West Point asking what the town was doing to honor the memory of Howlin' Wolf. Inspired by the long distance call, Dr. Joe K. Stephens and then mayor, Kenny Dill, founded the Howlin' Wolf Blues Society to preserve the legacy and history of Howlin' Wolf for future generations, and Richard Ramsey was more than happy to get involved as an active member. The blues society initiated the Howlin' Wolf Memorial Blues Festival that same year. Held on Labor Day Weekend, the festival is now in its 11th year.

In 1997, the blues society unveiled an eight foot laser-etched black granite statue of the mighty Howlin' Wolf in the Kitty Dill Memorial Parkway in the town's center. They also placed a memorial bench and marker at the statue in honor of Wolf's wife, "Ms. Wolf," Lillie Handley Burnett. Sam Phillips, legendary Sun Records owner and producer, attended the unveiling ceremony and spoke glowingly of Wolf's greatness and contribution to the world of music, "Howlin' Wolf was the most powerful man I ever recorded."

This past year the Howlin' Wolf Blues Society opened the Howlin' Wolf Blues Museum in the historic 1860's Friday House, at 307 W. Westbrook St. in West Point. The museum houses Wolf memorabilia donated by family and friends, unpublished photos, recordings, festival programs, Wolf's passport, his hunting rifle, artwork honoring Wolf, as well as guitars donated by Humbert Sumlin and Pete Townsend.

The Howlin' Wolf Blues Society hopes to expand their annual blues festival to a larger venue and audience. The blues society hosts community blues music nights, blues in the schools programs, and they are active in supporting the Blues Foundation in Memphis. It is their hope, through grants and private contributions, that they can expand the Wolf Museum as the exhibits grow. They are considering relocating the museum to the Sam Wilhite Transportation Museum in the old West Point railroad depot. Richard Ramsey and the Howlin' Wolf Blues Society envision great things. "I can see it now. A big mural of "Smokestack Lightnin'" on the side of the depot. It just fits! The Howlin' Wolf Blues Society and West Point are proud and honored to have the likes of such a powerful and influential bluesman from our area."

So, like many much bigger cities across the nation, the town of West Point has found an identity and focus for their cultural heritage, history, sense of pride, and potential for a tourist industry through the blues and Howlin' Wolf, their "favorite native son." Be assured, The Howlin' Wolf Blues Society will continue to preserve, promote, educate, and celebrate Mississippi's great musical heritage that is known as the blues.

For information on the Howlin' Wolf Blues Society, Museum, and Blues Festival:

[http://www.wpms.net/About\\_HWblues.htm](http://www.wpms.net/About_HWblues.htm)



**Howlin' Wolf statue in West Point, MS.  
photo by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman ©2006**





**Roxy's. Juke joint in White Station, MS. where Howlin' Wolf performed.  
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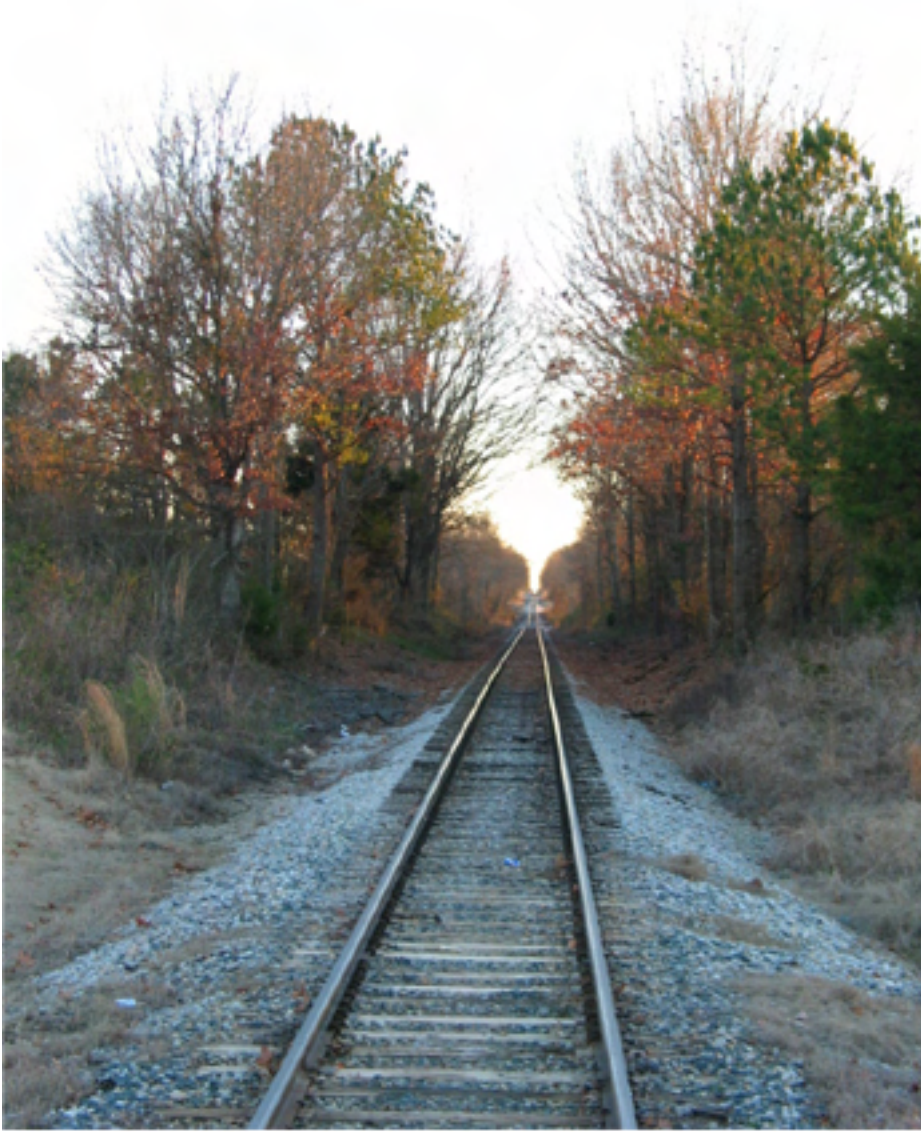


**photo by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman ©2006**



**Howlin' Wolf Blues Museum display in West Point, MS.  
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**White Station, MS railroad tracks where Howlin' Wolf liked to hunt.  
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