

Blues and the River

By Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

When doing blues instructional workshops and in-school programs, I am frequently asked what the link is between the blues and the Mississippi River. Many blues songs make reference to the river, and the music has been deeply influenced by the Mississippi.

President Thomas Jefferson acquired the vast unexplored lands of the Louisiana Purchase that constitute the Mississippi River watershed. The Louisiana Purchase was the most important event of President Thomas Jefferson's first administration. In this transaction, the United States bought 827,987 square miles (2,144,476 square kilometers) of land from France for about \$15 million. This vast area lay between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. The purchase of this land greatly increased the economic resources of the United States, and cemented the union of the Middle West and the East. Eventually all or parts of 15 states were formed out of the region.

When Jefferson became President in March 1801, the Mississippi River formed the western boundary of the United States. The southern boundary extended to the 31st parallel north latitude. The Floridas (with West Florida extending to the Mississippi and including New Orleans) lay to the south, and the Louisiana Territory to the west. Spain owned both these territories. In 1800, Spain transferred Louisiana to France in the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso.

Farmers who lived west of the Appalachian Mountains shipped all their surplus produce by boat down rivers that flowed into the Gulf of Mexico, especially the Mississippi. In a treaty of 1795, Spain agreed to give Americans the "right of deposit" at New Orleans. This right allowed Americans to store in New Orleans, duty free, goods shipped for export. Arks and flatboats transported a great variety of products, including flour, tobacco, pork, bacon, lard, feathers, cider, butter, cheese, hemp, potatoes, apples, salt, whisky, beeswax, and bear and deer skins.

The United States purchased these lands for a price of 60 million francs (a total of about \$15 million). The treaty, dated April 30, 1803, was signed May 2, 1803.

Because of the varying depths of the river, from many feet deep to only a few feet in some places, a shallow draft self-powered boat was needed to do exploring, and the steamboat was invented for the specific purpose; to explore and settle these vast lands upriver from New Orleans. Not unlike the Voyager/Spaceship, in our own time, it was created to explore "the final frontier." Remember, these lands were real frontier in the early 1800's, like space is our frontier today. There were no roads to take folks upriver to settle. Flatboats were used by fur traders and others, but a powered boat was needed to carry the great numbers of people and goods to settle this new frontier, and to relocate the Natives to reservations along the Missouri River area regions. That demand resulted in the steamboat. In 1787, John Fitch demonstrated the first workable steamboat in the United States. The first financially successful steamboat was Robert Fulton's "Clermont." In 1807, it steamed the 150 miles up the Hudson from New York City to Albany in about 30 hours. Steamboats carried passengers on the great rivers before the development of railroads and other faster or more efficient means of transportation.

The first role of the Mississippi River was as a highway into the newly acquired wilderness of the Louisiana Purchase. Quite obviously, towns and cities were developed and settled in crucial spots along the river to maintain a logistic link all the way to Minneapolis from New Orleans. First the government built forts along the river to secure the area against the Natives whose land was being co-opted, like in Vicksburg, St. Louis, Ft. Armstrong (in Illinois, near what is now known as the Quad Cities), and towns developed from those fort settlements. The area includes what we now know as the Delta region of N. Mississippi and Arkansas. Early on, slaves were brought into these areas to clear and work the land. Large cotton plantations developed in the Delta, and slave labor was used to keep them running. Dockery's plantation, where Charlie Patton and Willie Brown, two first generation Blues giants, were born, lived and worked, is a good example. The Blues was born out of the oppression and disenfranchisement of African American slaves in this region of the country.

The first settlements, all the way north, were along the river, and African Americans settled in these areas early on as a result of slavery, and, in the free states, because of the work that was available along the river as the result of the steamboats, i.e. deck hands, stevedores, muleskinners (early truckers), etc. The work was hard and long, and the Blues grew out of the combining of worksongs and sacred music.

The Mississippi River, and later on, the railroad, became metaphors in songs for travel and/or escape from oppression, or a new life in a better place. (African Americans who escaped from the South via the underground railroad were known to kiss the ground when they got to Cairo, Illinois, and out of the slave-ridden South. So, it resulted that African Americans settled in numbers all along the river. In these times, if an African American person wanted to travel North it was best to stay close to the River, where you were assured of finding safe haven after dark in African American areas of the river settlements.) Until the development of the railroad, and the demise of the steamboat, this pattern continued. I will say again, the Mississippi River was the major route of settlement early on, the way North to freedom for the runaway slaves, and the route to a better life in the post slavery times.

The previously described situation was still true into the mid-20th Century. In 1930, Son House, Charlie Patton, Willie Brown, and Louise Johnson were given a cash advance and were told by a record company scout to go to Grafton, Wisconsin from their native Delta region to record in a studio "way up north..." Rather than take the most direct route across country, they traveled by automobile along Highway 61 (which runs from New Orleans to Minneapolis) as far as they could. By taking this route they were ensured of safety in the African American communities along the river.

Highway 61 is now known as "The Great River Road," and is marked as such along the entire route from south to north. Initially, in the early 1800's, the river was the highway itself, and later on, roads were built, like Hwy. 61, following the course of the river.

The music of African Americans was first carried North via the river... spread initially as worksongs, then as Blues, and later as Jazz, to all of the communities that inhabit the banks of the muddy river from South to North.

As a native of the Mississippi Valley, I am keenly aware of these factors, and the first song on my latest CD is an instrumental called, "The Great River Road," and is a tribute to the river, what it represents, and to Highways 61 and 67, which run from Minneapolis to New Orleans following the rivers shore all the way.

Recommended books:

Blues From The Delta by William Ferris, Da Capo Press

Big Road Blues, Tradition & Creativity in the Folk Blues, by David Evans, Da Capo Press

Aint Nothin' But The Blues by Lawrence Cohn, Abbeville Press

A few songs that exemplify the River as a metaphor and/or topic:

"Back Water Blues" by Bessie Smith or Big Bill Broonzy (also called Backwater Blues)

"St. Louis Blues" by Bessie Smith

"Born in the Delta" by Muddy Waters

"High Water Everywhere" by Charley Patton

"Mississippi Blues" by Willie Brown

"Mississippi River Blues" by Big Bill Broonzy

"Mississippi Bottom Blues" by Kid Bailey

"Rising High Water Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson

"Divin' Duck Blues" by Sleepy John Estes or Taj Mahal

"Traveling Riverside Blues" by Robert Johnson

"61 Highway" by Big Joe Williams

"Highway 61" by Bob Dylan

"Mississippi Kid" by Dave Ray and Tony Glover

"The Great Flood of '93" by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

"The Great River Road" by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman