

MISSISSIPPI: BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICA'S MUSIC

Leland Speed glanced at a brochure given to him recently by the Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame founder and executive director, Jim Brewer. He noticed the catchphrase across the front: "Mississippi, Birthplace of America's Music."

"I thought it was rather daring to suggest such a thing," recalls Speed, the former executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority. "But it was a phrase that stuck with me, and I began to wonder 'Is this really true?' "

Speed phoned longtime friend Luther Brown, director of Delta State University's Delta Center for Culture and Learning. Speed repeated the phrase to Brown and asked, "What do you think of that?"

"It's true," Brown answered.

"Luther, are you kidding me?"

"Not at all."

"Would you stake your PhD and stand before God and defend that statement?" Speed asked.

"Absolutely," Brown said.

Still wanting more proof, Speed began reading books about the history of music. One of them was *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music* by Ted Gioia, a music historian.

“That book just lays out the case for Mississippi. It spells it out that Mississippi is not only the birthplace of the Blues, but has every right to claim its place as the birthplace of American music,” Speed says.

And so it does, because of such legends as bluesman Robert Johnson of Hazlehurst, country artist Jimmie Rodgers of Meridian and rock and roll king Elvis Presley of Tupelo.

Members of the Beatles, considered by many to be the greatest rock and roll band of all time, point toward Mississippi when discussing their early inspirations.

“When I first heard Elvis,” Paul McCartney stated on the Beatles’ *Anthology* DVD, “I said ‘That’s the guru we’ve been waiting for.’ ”

Said George Harrison: “The first guitar-oriented music I can remember hearing was Jimmie Rodgers — ‘The Singing Brakeman.’ ”

Gioia, who was born in Los Angeles, traveled to Mississippi on numerous occasions researching the state’s music history.

“Mississippi plays a very central role in American music that no one else can top,” Gioia says. “Now if I were looking at other candidates, I could say jazz clearly came out of New Orleans. And there is a lot of traditional music, such as cowboy songs, that came out of Texas. But if Mississippi started putting up signs as you entered the state saying ‘Welcome to the Birthplace of American Music’ I wouldn’t dispute that. “

In fact, Mississippi has done just that.

“Music is such a resource for our state,” says Speed, noting that Mississippi has produced more Grammy Award winners per capita than any other state. “Everybody loves music. We’re all suckers for it. We have really got an asset here that we have been blind to.

“First thing we have to do as Mississippians is understand it. When I talk to different business groups, lots of times I’ll start out by saying ‘OK, pop quiz: Who is Robert Johnson?’ I’ve had people ask, ‘Wasn’t he chief of police in Jackson?’ So many people from our own state don’t even know who Robert Johnson is. It’s strange how oblivious people have been to our music history.”

Brewer formed the Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame to help educate and promote the state’s musical geniuses. He first got the idea in 1995.

“I had attended a concert at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg where Dee Barton was guest conductor and working with the USM jazz ensemble,” Brewer recalls. “Dee Barton grew up in Starkville, played drums and trombone for Stan Kenton’s big band, and also wrote the scores for several Clint Eastwood films. I started thinking about possibly starting a Hall of Fame to honor people such as Dee Barton. At that point, the tiger was sort of caught by the tail and away we went.

“I want people to know that American music was born right here in Mississippi. I’m determined that people know it. I guess that is why I wasn’t bashful about putting the phrase ‘Mississippi: Birthplace of American Music’ on our pamphlets. I know it to be so.”