

# Voices of the Mississippi Blues

WILLIAM FERRIS (UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL, UNITED STATES)



Highway 61, 1967

My career as a folklorist has focused on African American oral tradition with a special interest in music and the blues. This work is inspired by my childhood on our family farm in Warren County, Mississippi. Our family was the only white family on the farm. As a young child, Mary Gordon took me each first Sunday to Rose Hill Church, a black church on the farm, where I learned to sing the spirituals and heard powerful sermons delivered by Reverend Isaac Thomas.



Rose Hill Church, Warren County, MS, 1975.

As I grew older, I realized that there were no hymnals in the church and that when the families were gone, the music would disappear. With that in mind, I recorded, photographed, and filmed the church services and interviewed the families who worshipped at Rose Hill Church.



Rose Hill Church Congregation, Warren County, MS, 1975.

I also recorded local blues singers like Lovey Williams, who lived nearby in Morning Star, Mississippi. Williams accompanied himself of the guitar and sang blues in a powerful, deep voice. His wife and children accompanied him when he sang gospel music.



Lovey Williams, Morning Star, Mississippi, 1965.

While an undergraduate student at Davidson College from 1960-64, I discovered the Library of Congress recordings of John and Alan Lomax. Many of these recordings were made in Mississippi, and they inspired me to continue my own work.

At Davidson, the Civil Rights Movement increasingly inspired and defined my world, and I worked with other students to desegregate the college. I increasingly saw my recordings as a political act through which I gave a voice to people whose lives were invisible.

The work did not go without notice at the college. Students threw pepper on the pillow of my bed, and exploded firecrackers in my dormitory room to frighten me. They also sent my parents an anonymous post card that read "You will be proud to know your son is dating a N...." These acts reinforced my determination to record and share the music and stories of people with whom I worked in Mississippi.

My love for music led me to the University of Pennsylvania's Folklore doctoral program in the fall of 1966. When I met my advisor Kenneth Goldstein, I brought of box of my recordings

and photographs, placed them on his desk, and asked, “Dr. Goldstein, can I do this work as part of my study?” He smiled and replied, “That, My Boy, will be your dissertation!”

It was the happiest day of my life. Kenneth Goldstein endorsed my deepest love and assured that my work would be blessed by the academy. In short, I could do what I loved and be paid for it. My parents and their friends in Mississippi were sure the interviews I had done with blues musicians, prison inmates, and quiltmakers would never lead to a paying job.

As a graduate student, my field work led me to the Mississippi Delta, where I discovered James “Son Ford” Thomas in the Black Dog section of Leland in 1967. I knocked on Mr. Thomas’s door, and his wife Christine asked me what I wanted. I told her I was looking for James Thomas, and she replied, “He doesn’t live here.”

I turned to leave, and she asked, “What do you want him for?”

I replied, “I am writing a book on the blues, and I want to put him in the book.”

She answered, “He will be back in twenty minutes. You can sit on the porch and wait for him.”

That conversation marked the beginning of a friendship that would last over the next 26 years, until Mr. Thomas’s death on June 26, 1993. James Thomas visited and performed for my students at Jackson State University, at Yale University, and at the University of Mississippi, and he spoke and performed at venues that included the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (1974) and the Modern Language Association (1980).

Christine Thomas’s greeting reminded me of the danger black families faced in dealing with the white world. My acceptance into her home was a special privilege that led to my discovery of James Thomas’s “blues family,” a family who were bound together by their shared love of the blues. They gathered each Saturday night in the back room of Shelby Brown’s home in Kent’s Alley for a blues house party, where James Thomas played his guitar and sang with Gussie Tobe (vocal) and “Little Son” Jefferson (harmonica), and Shelby Brown sold corn liquor and sandwiches to his guests.

I recorded, photographed, and filmed these parties as guests danced, sang, and enjoyed the evening. The house party was the epicenter of my blues experience in Leland. James Thomas taught me that the blues are a “deep study” and to perform and understand the music requires many years of training. He became my teacher, and I continue to learn from him each time I listen to our taped conversations.

I also explored the roots of blues with Louis Dotson who played the one-strand-on-the-wall. Dotson stretched a broom wire along his porch wall, and as he plucked the wire, he changed the instrument’s pitch by sliding a bottle up and down the wire. The one-strand is an important link between African one-strand instruments and the bottle-neck guitar style of open tuning used by artists like Elmore James. Virtually every blues musician—including B.B. King—played on a one-strand as a child because the instrument was free and easily accessible.





Louis Dotson, Lorman, MS, 1968.

Dotson also performed bottle blowing using a bottle partially filled with water. The haunting sound of his bottle blowing is similar to Ba-Benzele pygmy yodeling in the Central African rain forests. It also is an important connection to African American jug bands.



Louis Dotson, Lorman, MS, 1968.

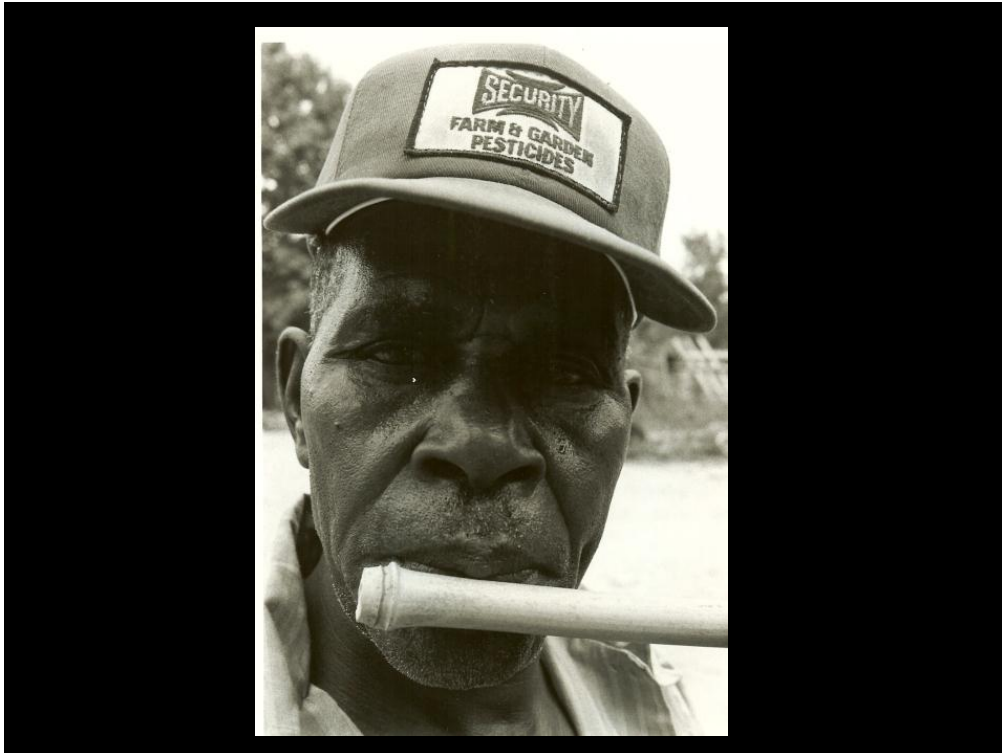


Parchman Penitentiary, Parchman, MS, 1968.

At Davidson, I had listened to the recordings of prison work chants that John and Alan Lomax made at Parchman Penitentiary in 1933 and wondered whether they might still be sung. They were, and in 1968, and later in 1974, I recorded and filmed work chants in Camp B, Parchman's satellite in Lambert, Mississippi. Sergeant Webb, the warden in Camp B remembered the Lomaxes and told me about how they recorded work chants during their visits.



Parchman Penitentiary, Camp B, Lambert, MS, 1968.

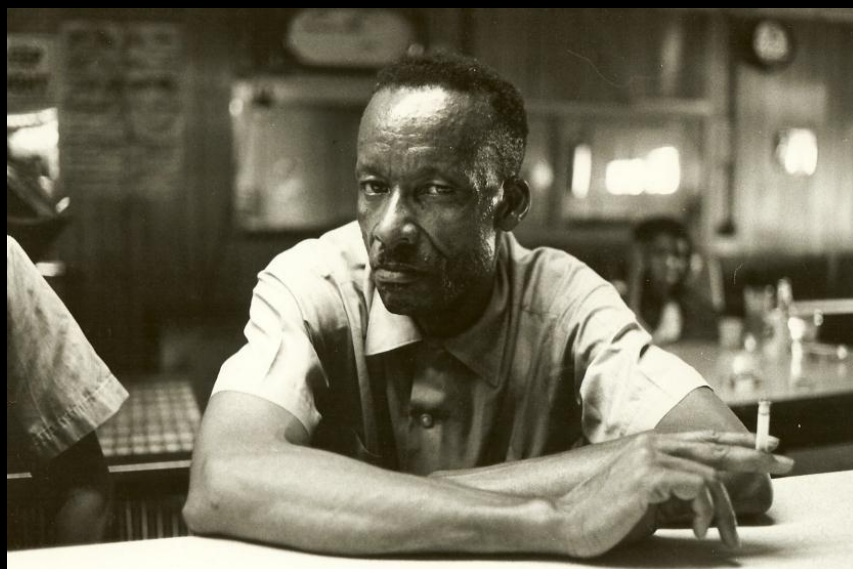


Otha Turner, Gravel Springs, MS, 1971.

In 1970, I visited Gravel Springs, Mississippi, and recorded fife and drum music performed by Otha Turner and Napoleon Strickland at a community picnic. Their music is considered a foundational sound for blues, and festivals like the Delta Blues Festival often open with fife and drum music. Today, Otha Turner's granddaughter Sharde Thomas and her Rising Star Fife and Drum Band perform the music in this country and overseas.

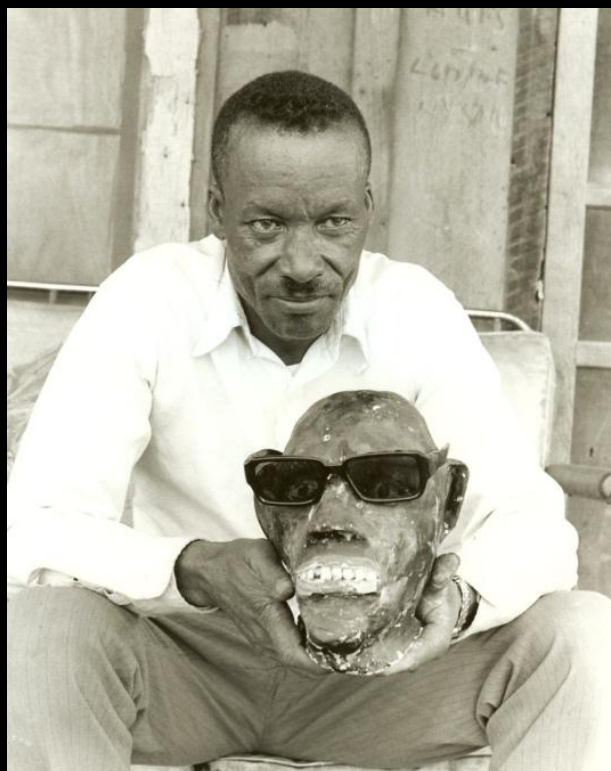


Napoleon Strickland (fife), Gravel Springs, MS, 1971.



James Thomas, Leland, MS, 1974.

From 1972-79, I taught at as a joint appointment in the Afro-American and American Studies Programs at Yale University. Each year, James Thomas visited my classes and performed for my students. Mr. Thomas also demonstrated his clay sculpture by molding clay faces, skulls, and birds for Yale students.



James Thomas, Leland, MS, 1973.

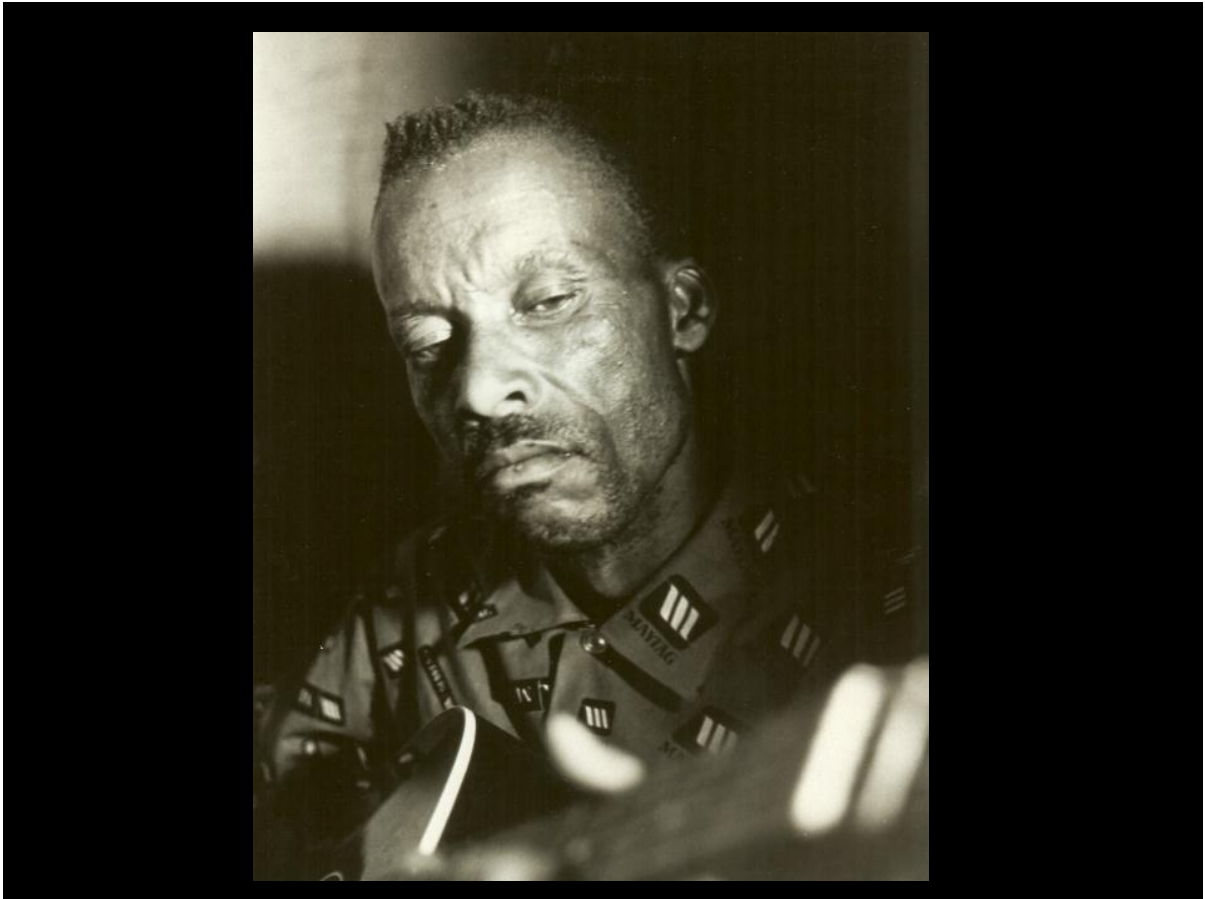




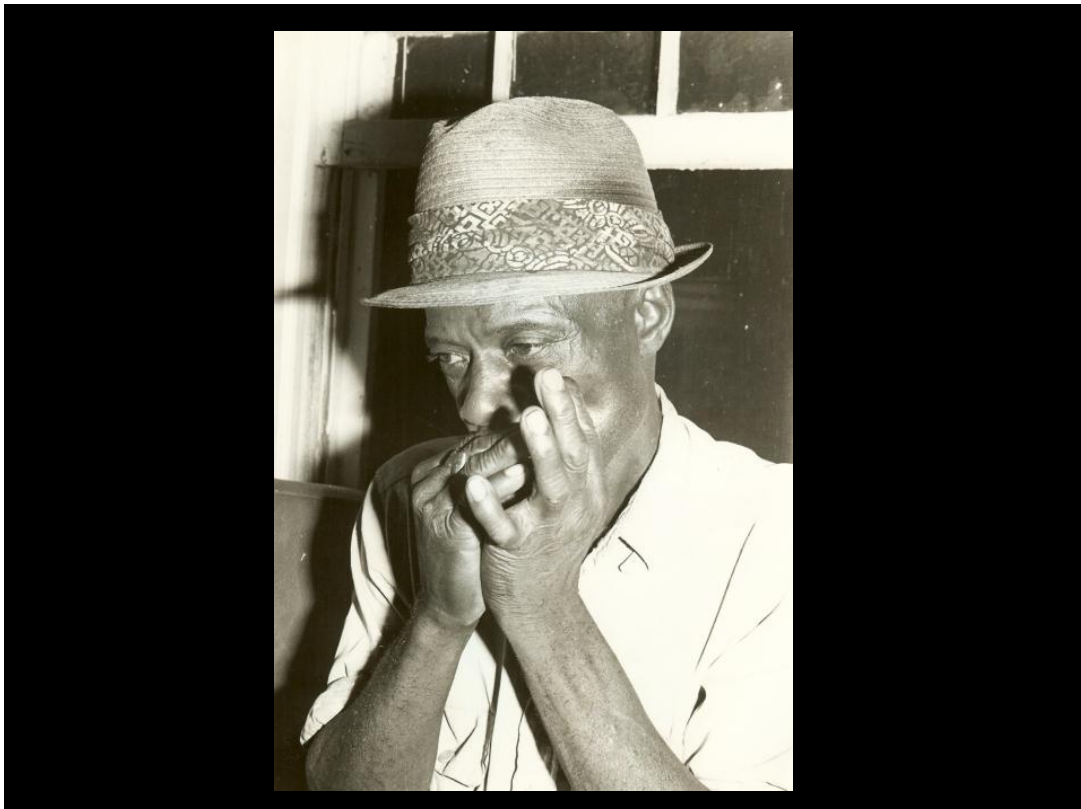
Shelby "Poppa Jazz" Brown, Leland, MS, 1974.



James Thomas, Leland, MS, 1974.



James Thomas, Leland, MS, 1968.



"Little Son" Jefferson, Leland, MS, 1968.



Johnny Brown and Shelby "Poppa Jazz" Brown, Leland, MS, 1968.



James Thomas, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1976.





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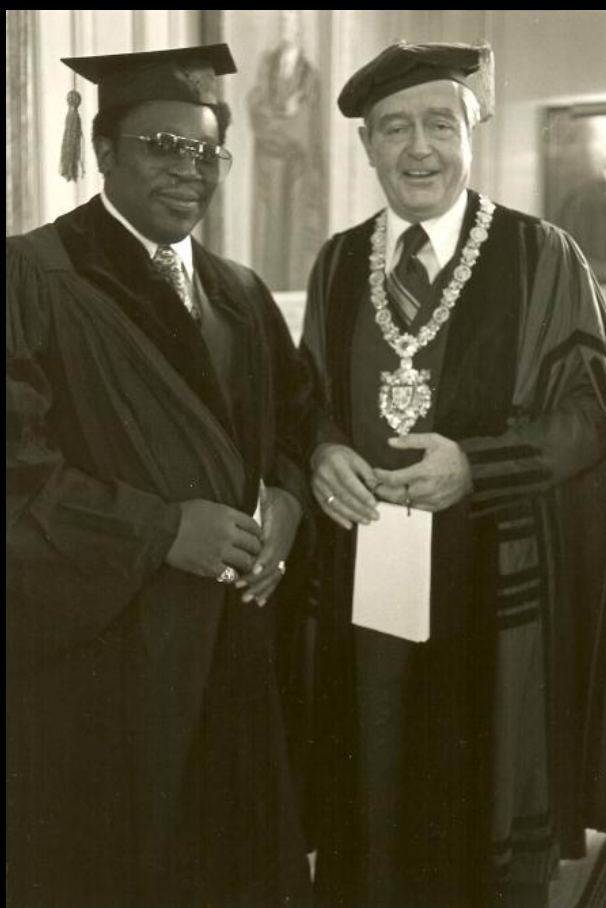


B.B. King, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1974.

B.B. King also visited my classes at Yale and performed in the School of Music's Sprague Hall. I helped arrange an honorary Doctorate of Music that King received in 1977 from Yale President Kingman Brewster. King and his guitar Lucille delivered the Baccalaureate address to the senior class at Yale the day before he received his doctorate.



B.B. King, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1974.



B.B. King and Kingman Brewster, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1974.

King believed deeply that blues should be taught as a part of American music, and in 1987 he gave his music library of 7,000 records to the University of Mississippi to help create the school's Blues Archive ([https://olemiss.edu/depts/general\\_library/archives/blues/](https://olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/archives/blues/)). The work of the archive is significantly enhanced by Living Blues (<http://www.livingblues.com/>) which is published by the University's Center for Study of Southern Culture (<https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/>).



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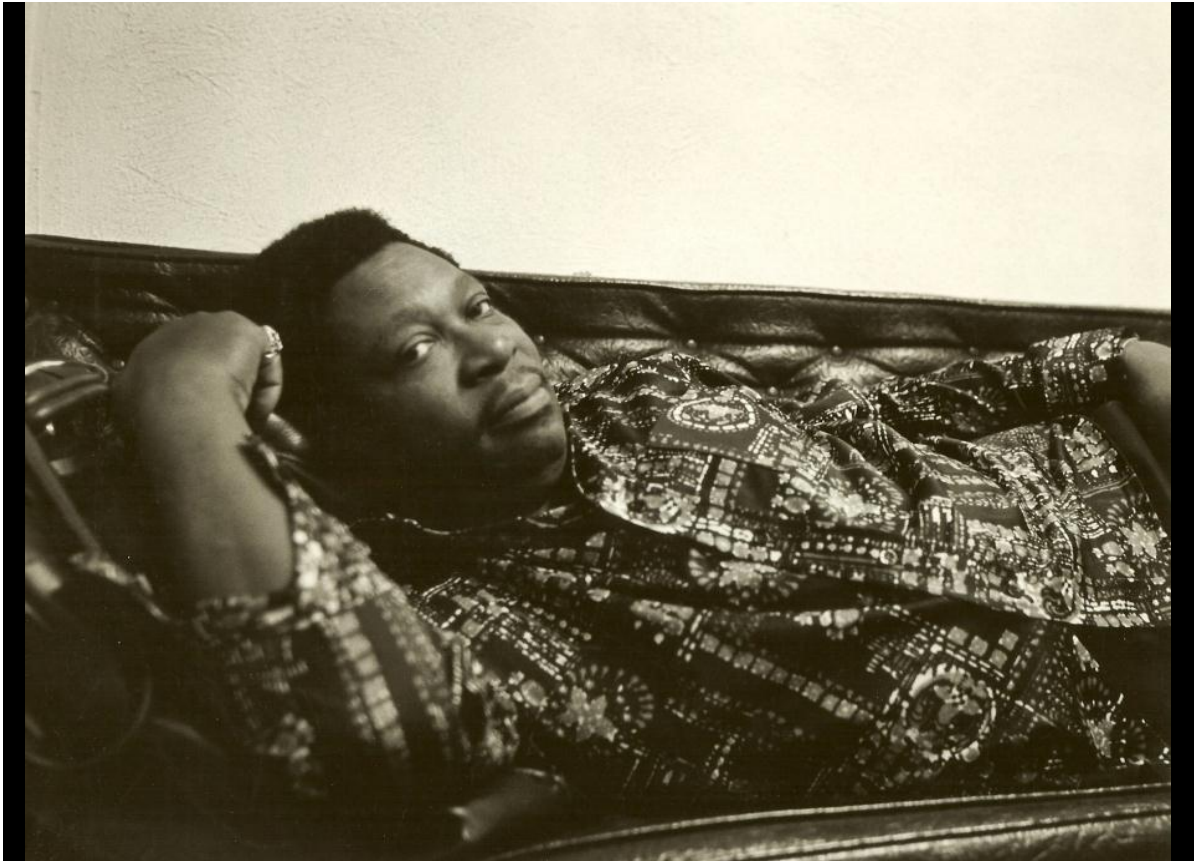




B.B. King, New York, NY, 1974.



B.B. King, Lucifer's Club, Boston, MA, 1976.



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B.B. King, Lucifer's Club, Boston, MA, 1976.



Moon Lake, MS, 1968.

Since I did my field work in the Mississippi Delta in the late sixties, Mississippi has significantly deepened its blues resources. Today, over 200 blues markers identify historic blues locations in the state (<https://www.mississippimarkers.com/blues-trail.html>). Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum (<https://www.deltabluesmuseum.org/>), Indianola's B.B. King Museum (<https://bbkingmuseum.org/>), Cleveland's Grammy Museum Mississippi (<https://www.grammymuseumms.org/>) and Dockery's Dockery Farms (<http://dockeryfarms.org/>) welcome visitors from around the nation and overseas who travel in growing numbers to learn about the blues.

Today, blues is recognized as America's most important music. Its influence on other music forms like country music, gospel, rock and roll, jazz, as well as on classical music is profound. It has also inspired literary forms like poetry, short stories, and novels, as well as painting. The flourishing, diverse impact of blues on our nation and its culture is clear.

Many of the voices whom I recorded, photographed, and filmed throughout my career as a folklorist are featured in *Voices of Mississippi* (<http://www.dust-digital.com/ferris/>). The box set received two Grammy Awards, a recognition that assures that the artists whom it features will always be remembered with respect and honor.

## Author's Biography

William R. Ferris is Joel R. Williamson Eminent Professor of History, Emeritus at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an adjunct professor in the Curriculum in Folklore. He is associate director of the Center for the Study of the American South, and is widely recognized as a leader in Southern studies, African-American music and folklore. He is the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Prior to his role at NEH, Ferris served as the founding director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, where he was a faculty