

# Another Biscuit Miracle

## By Richard Ledbetter

Following a quarter century attending a thirty-four-year old festival, there are certain givens I expect each year. By mid-morning Thursday the week before Columbus Day (Oct. 10 this year), the streets of downtown Helena begin filling with throngs of Blues lovers from across the globe. Folding chairs in tow, each makes his or her way to claim their respective seat for the King Biscuit Blues Festival.

Some come for the duration, camping in tents or trailers while some just come for a day. Some enjoy the local hotels and restaurants while others partake of festival fare or campfire cooking. Some come from the country, more still from the city, young and old, North and South. Some know the history of the Blues while others just know they love it. But they all come for one thing, the music.

The Sterling Billingsly Band kicked off four music filled days and nights with Wednesday's Michael Burke's Memorial Blues Jam. Thursday night's Main Stage headliner Ruby Foster sharing the spotlight with a large Gospel choir, left no one disappointed.

One dependable aspect of the annual event is how you can often count on some degree of rain over the course of the weekend. In years past torrential downpours turned the outdoor event into a "Mud" fest. Gratefully, in 2019, predicted showers arrived after Thursday night's performances and cleared out Friday before most acts began again. The moderate precipitation made campgrounds a little slick but otherwise served to settle the dust and take temps from shorts to long-john conditions.

We awoke in our sleeping bags on the bank of the rolling Mississippi with intermittent raindrops pelting the tent flap. Rather than huddle long inside, we opted for listening to Jessie Cotton Stone play at "Biscuits and Bloody Mary's" in the V.I.P. tent from 10:00 until noon. While the rain kept coming, I thought to get away from Cherry Street for a while and carry my Chicago native friend Mike Caronti on a tour of some great men in history.

We wound our way in the drizzle through puddled Helena streets to historic Magnolia Cemetery, where behind iron gates the resting grounds weave through a narrow, curving valley tucked between steep hills overhung on either side by great trees. On a headstone crested rise, we found the final resting place of Blues legends Robert Nighthawk between Frank Frost on his left and Cedell Davis to his right. Under low, gray clouds and tears from heaven, we touched and read the stones marking their last stop on the Blues highway.

Nighthawk was born Robert Lee McCoy in Helena on Nov. 30, 1909 and died Nov. 5, 1967. Before relocating to St. Louis in the mid '30's, he fathered Blues drummer Sam Carr on April 17, 1926. Over his career, Nighthawk recorded with Victor, Decca, Aristocrat, Chess, United and States Records and was considered amongst the foremost Blues guitarist of his era.

Born Frank Otis Frost in Auvergne, Ar. April 15, 1936, Frost became one of the most renowned harmonica players of his generation. He moved to St. Louis at age 15 where he came to accompany Robert Nighthawk, Sam Carr and Big Jack Johnson before being signed to Sun Records by Sam Phillips. In latter life he played himself in two major motion pictures, "Deep Blues" and "Crossroads." Frost lies interred at Magnolia following his demise Oct. 12, 1999.

Ellis Cedell Davis was born in Helena June 9, 1926. At age ten, he contracted polio, which seriously affected the childhood musician's already well-developed style. The disease made his left hand mostly immobile and his right severely compromised. Determined to continue playing guitar, he developed his trademark butter knife slide method. While performing in a Mississippi nightclub with Robert Nighthawk in 1957, a police raid caused a stampede of patrons who trampled Davis breaking both his legs. The incident left him wheelchair bound for the remainder of his days. His songs and musical style were deeply influenced by associated hardships. He was laid to rest at Magnolia during the 2017 King Biscuit Festival after passing on Sept. 27 of that year. They are gone but their music lives on.

Continuing our pilgrimage of homage, we journeyed to St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery to visit "Sunshine" Sonny Payne, who DJ'd King Biscuit Time on KBBF radio from 1951 until his death Feb. 10, 2018 at age 92. On the flank of a gentle sloping hill near a ten-foot, white granite crucifix, Sonny's smiling face adorns his marker.

2017 Grammy winner and one of Sonny's pallbearers Bobby Rush said of Payne, "I knew him for 64 years. I'm probably one of his last fellow entertainer friends still around. You wouldn't believe how two people could know each other for that long in public and private and never have a cross word. Everyone should have shaken Sonny's hand for all he did for Blues music." On the final stop of our journey through time, we wound further up the hill to the neighboring Confederate Cemetery beneath huge magnolias on the crest of Crowley's Ridge. Six Southern Generals found their final rest on that high ground, including 5'11", black hair, black eyed Irish born Patrick Ronayne Cleburne. He fell just within the Union revetments at the Battle of Franklin, Tn. on Nov. 30, 1864 while leading his Arkansans in a desperate frontal assault ordered by Texan John Bell Hood. Known as the "Stonewall of the Western Theatre," Cleburne rose to the rank of Major General before a promising military career was stunted after high command shunned him due his radical proposal to emancipate and enlist African Americans to the Southern Cause. He is joined at rest on Holly Street by fellow Confederate Generals James Camp Tappan, Thomas Carmichael Hindman, Lucius Eugene Pope, Charles Daniel Govan and Charles W. Adams.

With respectful hearts, a renewed state of mind and glad to be alive, we rejoined the Biscuit while clouds parted and the sun shone brightly through. Friday night's Main Stage lineup featured Reba Russell, Anson Funderburg, Paul Thorne and Delbert McClendon. In a backstage interview prior to his show, McClendon said when asked where the name Delbert came from, "That was my mother's favorite boyfriend. She loved that man until the day she died." Saturday's Main Stage acts began at noon with The Cate Brothers followed by Andy T & Alabama Mike, Kirk Fletcher, and Larry McCray. Beneath a brilliant full moon playing peak-a-

boo behind low, scudding clouds, the Kenney Wayne Shepherd Band wrapped up the weekend with a blistering headliner performance.

The four fun-filled days included every kind of weather except snow and frost while street buskers played on every corner and a myriad of Blues and Rock musicians graced the Lockwood-Stackhouse, Front Porch, Cedell Davis and Bit-o-Blues free stages scattered over six downtown blocks.



Ruby Foster backed by a full Gospel choir headlined Thursday's Main Stage.



Chicago born Mike Caronti visits Blues legends Frank Frost, Robert Nighthawk and Cedell Davis in historic Magnolia Cemetery.





D.J. for King Biscuit Radio Time, "Sunshine" Sonny Paine made his final stop in St Mary's Cemetery on Holly Street in Helena.



Rachel Ammons of Tyrannosaurus Chicken on the Cedell Davis stage.



Kenny Wayne Shepherd's Saturday night Main stage encore, "Voodoo Child."