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Find the Beating Heart of the Blues in Memphis

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If you want to feel and talk the blues, sit at the feet of the masters and soak in the history, Beale St. is the place.

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star

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MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE—Blind Mississippi Morris is rocking. The beat that **ADVERTISEMENT** 

From the months of April through September, on Wednesday nights, it's Bike Night on Beale St., Memphis. Motorcyclists flock to the street to enjoy blues music and grab a meal. The event adds colour to the already bustling street and it's well organized. booms from the bass drum behind him jolts his body from left to right, Blind

keeping time, back and forth, as if he were a 250-pound, six-foot, denim-clad

metronome. Chipper in his chair onstage at the Blues City Café's Band Box,

he's grinning, ear to ear, the gap where his two front teeth used to be as wide and open as a pair of saloon doors on a Saturday night. One hundred years of Delta blues unwind inside Blind's calibrated mind for music, and when he lifts the harp to his lips, he blows the raw stuff of a hard life into trills that dart in and out of the drums and bass and guitar. His harp sounds soar, over chairs and tables and draft beer in plastic cups and waitresses snaking through dancers and the ball-capped heads of patrons, out and into the thrum and heat of another Beale St., Memphis evening.

> The open-door bars churn blues and soul, feeding the clamor along the street. Look up and neon throbs: a waving fork at Blues City Café (Put Some South in Your Mouth!), a giant guitar at B.B. King's Blues Club, a leering, top-hatted skull at Tater Red's Lucky Mojos and Voodoo Healing. People from around the planet in black leather jackets and khaki shorts and orange head bandanas and polo shirts are here to eat Memphis barbecue, lick their fingers, sip booze and plug into the blues.

> > **ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW**

I came to this city on a pilgrimage, a long-time guitar player with a short list of dream venues, Memphis crowning the list. As Kathmandu and Everest are for climbers who seek to scrub their inner selves as they ascend in rarified air, so Memphis and Beale St. are for lovers of the blues, who can wade into the fertile

and, in my case, spirited. Beale St. is blues heaven, squeezed into a glorious, tawdry, two-block stretch of more than 25 clubs and shops. For some, Memphis is about the food, the golden fried catfish and the fall-off-the-bone ribs and the down south turnip greens and the pitcher of Ghost River Golden Ale for cooling down a hot night. I savored every mouthful, while the music spoon-fed my soul.

lore that lives alongside the Mississippi River and emerge weary, a bit wiser



Not that Blind — aka Morris Cummings, 62, sightless since age four, father of 12 children, ex-husband of 13 wives, cousin of Willie Dixon, survivor of two bankruptcies, listed as one of the top 10 harmonica players in the world,

known simply as "Blind" and "The Real Deal on Beale" — needs encyclopedic

in his 80s. They won't be here forever.

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**SPORTS** 

explaining. Why, it's the blues, son, no need to go on about it, you just gotta listen. You might be interested in **OPINION** Why Israel's denial of innocence to civilians is so deadly for Gaza

Who is Shohei Ohtani? From his Blue Jays connection to his secret lifestyle, here's everything you need to know 3 days ago Beale St. Oh lord, the stories it can tell. "If you weren't workin' on the farm, you were workin' on the river," said Blind in between sets, conjuring all the Delta bluesmen who've come and gone

mm-hmm. And it'd make the hair stand right up on your head."

before him. "And when you got off the river, you would stop by all the little

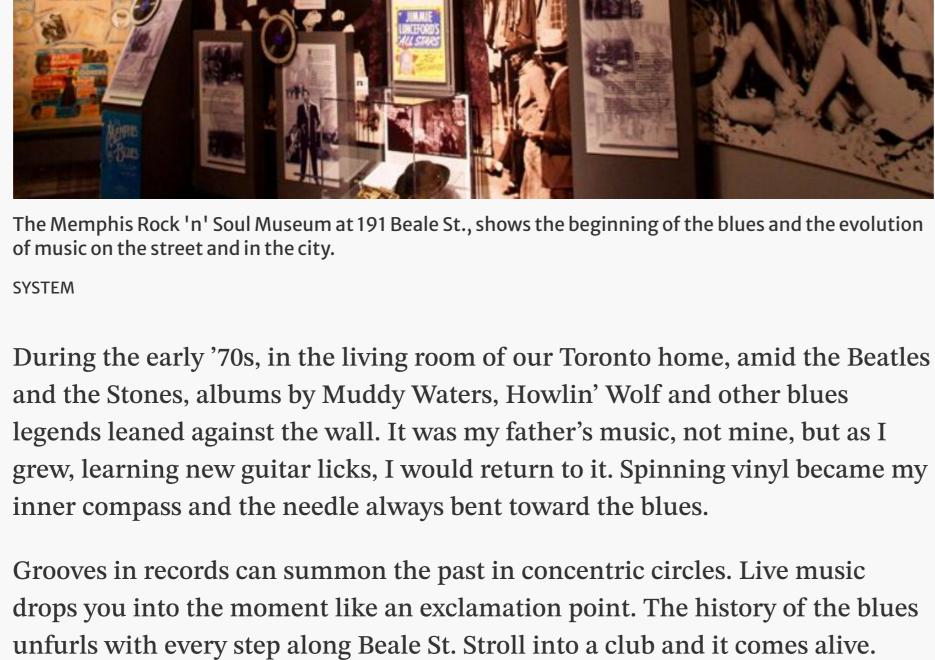
juke joints and gamblin' holes all along there, and you would hear it, the blues,

At the turn of the 20th century, Beale St. was a gateway for African-American

culture and commerce. W.C. Handy, now known as the Father of the Blues,

roamed as a songwriter and musician. In 1909, he wrote what would become "The Memphis Blues." The song transmuted the regional styles he'd absorbed

during his travels along the Mississippi River into sheet music made available to white audiences. It became the DNA for rock and roll, winding through Elvis and finding its way into the bloodstream of music that pulses daily.



Clyde Roulette, who is Blind's guitar player with roots in Manitoba, has been

playing in Memphis for decades. Asked how Beale St. has changed, he said:

The Band Box at the Blues City Cafe on Beale St., Memphis is one of the more than 25 bars and

restaurants where you can see and hear the blues played nightly until the wee hours of the morning.

quickening my blood, ready for the moment when the song would die and I, too, would become one more haunting echo.

Mike Fisher's trip to Memphis and West Tennessee was hosted by the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, which didn't review or approve this story. When you go: Get There: Air Canada, United Airlines and American Airlines are among the carriers with flights from Toronto to Memphis, Tenn. Some flights require a transit point, though Air Canada can get you there on a direct flight in under two-and-a-half hours.

Eat here: The Blues City Café on Beale St. (BluesCityCafe.com) is well known

serving Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, Dave Chapelle and Jerry Seinfeld, to name a

for both its music in the Band Box that adjoins its restaurant, and its food,

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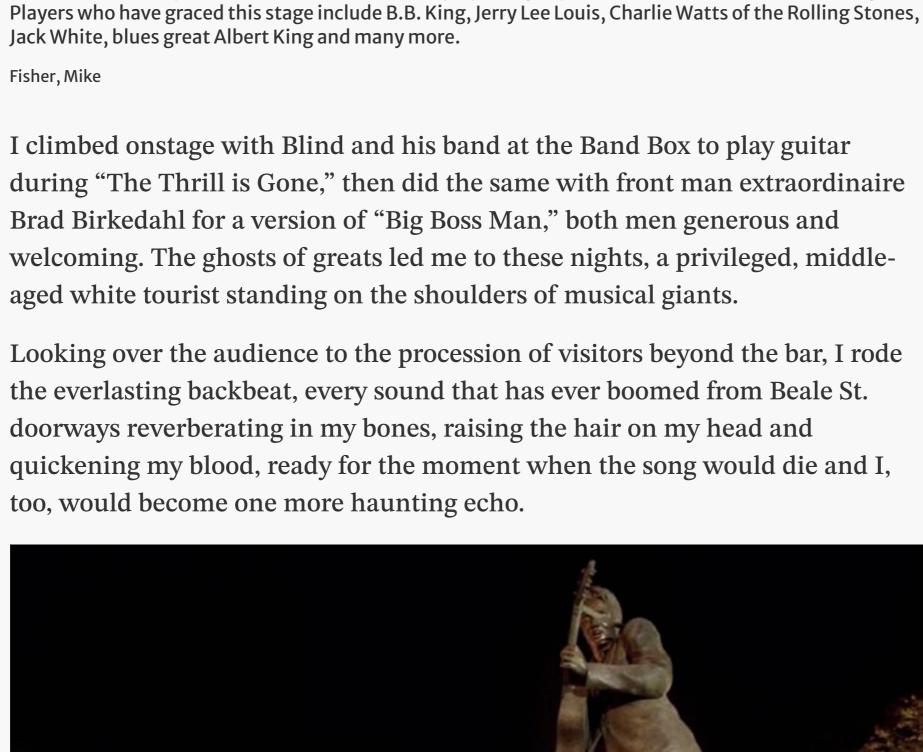
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does not endorse these opinions.

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The statue of Elvis overlooking Beale St., Memphis, is one of many sights that go with the sounds of blues, soul and rock 'n' roll, that you hear booming out of the bars, restaurants and clubs. **VASHA HUNT** 



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