



THE unsung STATE

Think American music and you picture places such as Memphis and Nashville. But South Carolina's where it all began, writes PETER ELLEGARD,



Listen to the blues and your mind conjures up images of smoky bars in Chicago or maybe somewhere deep in the Mississippi Delta.

New Orleans epitomises jazz. For rock 'n' roll, there's Memphis or Cleveland. Nashville is the home of country, Seattle spawned grunge rock, Philadelphia had its own sound and Motown's soul came from motor town Detroit. It seems as though music is associated with almost everywhere in the US. Except South Carolina.

However, this is the state that produced legends such as jazz maestro Dizzy Gillespie, the late, great James Brown, Eartha Kitt and rockers Hootie and the Blowfish.

I've been to South Carolina many times and love its landscapes, history, golf and people. Yet it remains the unsung state for its music. So when I heard the annual Lowcountry Blues Bash was taking place, I headed for Charleston to check it out and trace South Carolina's musical heritage.

The city is the genteel face of the South. Horse-drawn carriages take visitors past elegant 17th- and 18th-century homes and public buildings, and the whole place exudes an air of gracious living and prosperous times past. Yet the city was built on slavery. Many thousands of enslaved people were brought in to work on the rice plantations that spread along the marshy banks of rivers near the coast. Opulent mansions and vast estates with ornate gardens were a testament to the riches brought by the rice harvest, known as Carolina Gold. Several of them line the Ashley River Road, a beautiful corridor of live oaks dripping with Spanish moss.

GETTING THE BLUES

My first stop was stately Charleston County Library. Not for research but to take in a lunchtime gig by Shrimp City Slim – a four-piece combo headed by keyboard player Gary Erwin, aka Slim. The Blues Bash was conceived by him 17 years ago. Since then it has grown to a 10-day celebration of music, much of it from the Lowcountry coastal plains and islands around Charleston.

The soulful music soon had the audience going. Gary's self-penned songs evoked the spirit of the area with titles such as Lowcountry Mama and Highway 17 Blues, helped by guest harmonica player Juke Joint Johnny and the wailing guitar of Silent Eddie Phillips. I wondered if the music was filtering through to the hushed reading room next door and had those people tapping their feet too.



as he tunes into the rhythm of the state.

Top: Columbia, South Carolina's state capital.

Left: Gary Erwin of Shrimp City Slim performs at Charleston County Library.

Opposite: Drew Baldwin at Fiery Ron's Home Team BBQ, Charleston.



Over the following days I dropped in on various venues. For Lowcountry read low key. Most gigs were in restaurants and bars.

Guitar/harmonica duo Baltimore Red Jones – sporting plaited ponytails – and Wayne Werner, a jeweller by trade, had driven down from snowy Baltimore in a battered old van. I saw them at the Med Bistro, and Mimi’s Creekside, on James Island, where they teamed up with Juke Joint Johnny.

Later, at Fiery Ron’s Home Team BBQ, they all joined Drew Baldwin, playing a 90-year-old harp guitar, for a Lowcountry jam with a South Carolina highway sign as an appropriate backdrop.

At pizza restaurant A Dough Re Mi, another local harmonica hero, Smoky Weiner, took to the stage with the Hot Links for hard-driving blues and rock with good old-fashioned guitar riffs.

In between sets, the musicians happily chatted to me and anyone else who wanted to talk. This was music for the people, totally accessible by the people. Most shows were free and everyone was having one helluva good time.

Perhaps the best time of all was had by rhythm and blues legend Nappy Brown, who joined the King Bees guitar duo and sax player Mike Kincaid to wow a packed audience at downtown club Cumberland’s with his powerful voice and on-stage antics. Not bad for a guy approaching 80.

I caught up with Slim and Co again at the gloriously-atmospheric Mills House Hotel, a city landmark with arched windows and paddle fans. Light streaming in through the wooden window slats created a halo effect behind singer Wanda Johnston, whose powerful voice had the audience singing and clapping. Wanda insisted blues originated in Charleston. Now I was in business.

Gary Erwin explained that musically speaking, blues came from the hollers and field songs of the plantations. “It was an expression of release and was sung by groups of people to facilitate their work,” he said. “Once the recording industry started early in the 20th century, it became the blues.”

As the blues spread, it became one of the US’ best-loved music genres. Yet the state’s role in its history was lost in the mists of time.

Before leaving Charleston, I toured one of the grandest plantations, Middleton Place. I strolled around its graceful gardens and flooded rice fields, once overlooked by an imposing mansion before it was sacked and burnt by Sherman’s Union troops at the end of the Civil War in 1865. Now they gently reflect the moss-festooned live oaks. A pair of bald eagles was nesting beyond the adjacent river and marshes. Amid all the beauty I found it hard to imagine the degradation and back-breaking labour >

There’s more than music

If music’s not your thing there is still plenty to do and see throughout South Carolina.

The state’s Atlantic coast runs for 187 miles from Georgia to North Carolina and encompasses many islands. Myrtle Beach is the biggest resort area and lies at the northern end of the 60-mile-long Grand Strand, which stretches from Pawleys Island to just across the North Carolina border. Family entertainment is on offer at the 50-year-old Myrtle Beach Pavilion Amusement Park and Myrtle Waves Water Park.

Golfers will be in seventh heaven with Myrtle Beach’s 120 courses. There’s more golf around Charleston, on Kiawah Island and on Hilton Head Island.

Hilton Head has been a holiday haunt since the 1950s and is now a popular family destination with 12 miles of soft sand beaches. It is also great for horse riding, cycling, kayaking and dolphin-watching cruises.

Eco tours operate on several of the other islands that dot the South Carolina coastline.

History buffs are spoilt for choice, too. There are historic sites marking key battles or events – the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Charleston’s Fort Sumter in 1861 – throughout the state.

Upstate, the Blue Ridge Mountains, part of the Appalachians, offer hiking, mountain biking and canoeing as well as scenic lakes and waterfalls. Lake Marion is the largest body of inland water in the South.

■ Pictured top: Myrtle Beach Pavilion. Above: Middleton Place Plantation, Charleston.

Pictured opposite, clockwise from top left: Baltimore Red Jones and Wayne Werner at Fiery Ron’s Home Team BBQ; Wanda Johnston at Mills House Hotel; Nappy Brown and the King Bees at Cumberland’s; Smoky Weiner at A Dough Re Mi and, next to him, a Hot Links’ guitarist; playing bass guitar for the King Bees; Juke Joint Johnny at the Lowcountry Blues Bash finale, Bowen’s Island.





A taste of gospel

Another form of music thought to have originated in South Carolina is gospel. As with the blues, it came from the enslaved people working on the plantations.

One of the best places to hear it in the state is at the House of Blues Gospel Brunch every Sunday in Myrtle Beach – opened in the mid-1990s by South Carolina’s own soul legend James Brown.

The resident gospel group for the last seven years has been Glory, pictured at the House of Blues in the montage opposite, and was formed by singer Bill Nelson, keyboard player Herbert Riley and saxophonist Tamir Mubarak.

Herbert said: “The gospel scene is still strong in South Carolina. A lot of the sounds we try and do today go back to the old spirituals, probably from the 1600s and 1700s. We just add a little beat to them.”

Gospel brunches are a tradition at all House of Blues venues. Herbert added: “It’s helping to keep the music legacy and allows people to hear music they wouldn’t otherwise hear. South Carolina has always been at the hub of music, but for some reason these days people don’t know that.”

> that had underpinned this opulence and spawned such evocative music.

The previous day, at Charleston’s Southeastern Wildlife Expo festival, I’d watched bluegrass band Bluestone Ramblers and met banjo player Allan Thompson. Allan believes bluegrass also partly originated from the state as the banjo evolved from an African instrument called the banya.

My travels took me up to North Myrtle Beach, by the North Carolina border. I passed by Pawleys Island, known for its rope hammocks, and Georgetown, another quaint port town. The inlets and bays off here were used as bases by pirates including Blackbeard, who once laid siege to Charleston.

A SONG AND A DANCE

Hit Fat Harold’s Beach Club or Ducks in North Myrtle Beach on a Saturday night and the floors will be full of people doing ‘the shag’. Not an orgy but a dance – indeed South Carolina’s official state dance – a slow jitterbug.

Twice a year the whole town goes crazy when the Society of Stranders stages spring and autumn shag dancing contests that draw more than 12,000 participants.

The dance is closely linked to Beach Music, which spawned groups such as The Drifters and The Platters.

But these soft sounds were not enough for me so I headed for the Blues Bash finale, held in a large wooden shack on a pier on Bowen’s Island, just south of Charleston. As the sun set behind the coastal marshes, the beer flowed and the artists cranked out the blues for all they were worth. With the dusk sky reddening, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. As the musicians reeled off riffs and hit crescendos, people jumped to their feet to boogie, and the whole shack erupted. Finally, as the last notes faded across the marshes, the audience drifted home contentedly.

The next time someone sings the blues, I’ll know where it comes from. ■

■ Peter flew to Charleston with Continental Airlines and used Avis car hire. Thanks also to the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce and TTM World.



Pictured top left: Shag dancing is South Carolina’s official state dance. Great places to do it are Fat Harold’s Beach Club, top right, or Ducks, above left, both on North Myrtle Beach. Above right: Judy’s House of Oldies on Myrtle Beach is a shrine to Beach Music and the place to buy shag dancing shoes and music.

A sample of South Carolina’s events

- Gospel Brunch, every Sunday, 9am-2pm, House of Blues, Myrtle Beach – clap along and join in as Glory perform gospel favourites.
- SOS Fall Migration, September 14-23, North Myrtle Beach – 10 days of shag dancing.
- South Carolina Bluegrass Festival, November 22-24, Myrtle Beach – banjo music by the beach.
- Lowcountry Blues Bash 2008, Charleston – mid-February, dates to be confirmed.

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