

## The Bentonia Genre of Delta Blues

The Bentonia School, a style of guitar playing often attributed to blues players from Bentonia, Mississippi, features a shared repertoire of songs, guitar tunings and chord voicings with a distinctively minor tone not found in other styles of blues music.

While not all blues musicians from Bentonia played in this style, one particular blues player, Skip James (1902–1969), had a distinct, complicated, and highly sophisticated style that veered from typical blues guitar playing. His style became known as Bentonia School.

James became the most well-known of the small pool of musicians associated with the Bentonia School. Others include Jack Owens and the unrecorded Henry Stuckey. Both James' and Owens' styles featured haunting minor chords and droning strings which, in comparison to the music of many other blues musicians, ring with an ominous and eerie feel.



### The Blue Front Cafe

The Blue Front Cafe opened in 1948 under the ownership of Carey and Mary Holmes, an African American couple from Bentonia. In its heyday the Blue Front was famed for its buffalo fish, blues, and moonshine whiskey. One of the couple's sons, Jimmy Holmes took over the Cafe in 1970.

During the 1980s the Blue Front Cafe began to attract tourists in search of authentic blues in a rustic setting. In its early years, the Cafe was a local gathering spot for crowds of workers from the Yazoo County cotton fields. Carey and Mary Holmes raised their ten children and three nephews and sent most of them to college on the income generated by the Cafe and their cotton crops. The Cafe served up hot meals, groceries, drinks, recreation, entertainment, and even haircuts.

The Blue Front Cafe has been recognized as a spot of historical significance to Delta Blues with a Mississippi Blues Trail marker.



### Bentonia Blues Festival

The Bentonia Blues Festival, established in 1972 and revived after a few year's hiatus in the mid-'90s, brings Blues and Gospel artists from around the region back to the birthplace of the Bentonia sound. In 2012, the festival returned to its original location on the Holmes Farm just off Hwy 49 north of Bentonia.

In addition to musical entertainment, the annual festival features food, family contests and games, and arts and crafts. The Bentonia Blues Festival is typically held on the third Saturday in June. For details about the festival, contact the Yazoo County Convention and Visitors Bureau or visit [www.visityazoo.org](http://www.visityazoo.org).

For more about Delta Blues  
follow the Mississippi Blues Trail  
[www.msbluestrail.org](http://www.msbluestrail.org)



110 N. Jerry Clower Blvd., Suite S  
PO Box 186  
Yazoo City, MS 39194  
800-381-0662  
[www.visityazoo.org](http://www.visityazoo.org)

SOAK UP SOME  
*Yazoo*  
Blues



*Yazoo County, Mississippi has a rich history of producing influential and unique Delta Blues music by local musicians and songwriters, and that tradition continues today.*





## Nehemiah “Skip” James

(1) Skip James was one of a half-dozen virtuosos of Delta Blues. He stood out from other artists not only because of his skill, but because of his courage in pursuing his creative style despite its departure from current popular sounds. With dark themes and sophisticated finger-picking, James helped redefine what could be done with three-chord music. Added to that was his interesting vocal phrasing and wild piano playing. His music typically reflected a dark outlook on life.

James gave up music for a number of years and then was rediscovered at age 62 during the mid-1960s blues revival. At the time he was supporting himself by working as a field hand; an astonishing waste of talent. He is best known for songs like “Devil Got My Woman,” “Hard Time Killing Floor,” and “Sick Bed Blues.”

## Tommy McClennan

(2) Tommy McClennan was known for his physical, intense Mississippi blues. An underrated guitar player, he was born in 1908 on a farm and grew up in nearby Yazoo City. McClennan played across the South Delta in towns like Greenwood, Indianola and Itta Bena during the 1920s and through the 1930s, sometimes with his only local rival, and stylistic “sound-a-like”, Robert Petway. Reportedly, McClennan was a very nervous and slightly built man, but he must have really rocked in those Mississippi juke joints. He was a powerful and convincing vocalist, and his playing had both impact and nuance. He began recording for Bluebird in 1939; and around 1940 Tommy moved to Chicago. Between 1940 and 1942, he was back in the studio several times, with his last recording session in February of '42. All his recordings were made in Chicago for the Bluebird label, a total output of 40 titles. McClennan is thought to have stopped performing about 1952. A decade later he died, destitute, in the Chicago ghetto.

## Jack Owens

(3, 4) Jack Owens was born L. F. Nelson, and lived and worked in Bentonia. Owens was never a professional recording artist, but he farmed, bootlegged and ran a weekend juke joint in Bentonia for most of his life. He was not recorded until the blues revival of the 1960s. Owens was rediscovered by David Evans in 1966, who was led to him by either Skip James or Cornelius Bright. Evans recorded Owen’s first album Goin’ Up the Country that same year and It Must Have Been the Devil (with Bud Spires) in 1970. He made other recordings (some by Alan Lomax) in the 1960s and 1970s, and performed at several music festivals in the United States and Europe until his death in 1997.

Owens was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts, and inducted into the nation’s Folk Arts Hall of Fame. He shared many elements of his guitar style and repertoire with fellow Bentonian Skip James, and was often accompanied on harmonica by his friend Bud Spires.

## Mississippi Blues Trail Markers in Yazoo County:

- Skip James • Tommy McClennan
- Jack Owens • “Gatemouth” Moore
- Blue Front Cafe

## Bud Spires

(3) Bud Spires grew up near Bentonia, and played blues harp with Jack Owens. In the book The Land Where the Blues Began, Alan Lomax describes Spires: “Bud was a one-man, red-hot singing orchestra, accompanying himself on the harmonica, putting rough, bluesy chords after some lines and squealed comments to underscore the sexiest images. Sometimes his instrument almost disappeared in his mouth as he both blew and sucked notes out of its metal reeds.” (1993: p.388).

## “Gatemouth” Moore

(5) Arnold Dwight “Gatemouth” Moore, a lesser-known blues icon is recognized for some of his blues compositions – “Did You Ever Love A Woman”, “I Ain’t Mad at You, Pretty Baby”, “Somebody’s Got To Go”. Blues greats such as B.B. King, Rufus Thomas, and Jimmy Witherspoon also recorded some of his tunes. In 1930 Moore moved from Memphis to KansasCity, where he worked with several jazz bands during the 1930s and 40s.

Most of Moore’s later recordings were in the gospel vein, however, in 1977 Moore made his final album, Great R&B Oldies, revisiting the blues. Moore retired to Yazoo City many years before his death in 2004. He was honored by a resolution from the Mississippi state legislature, commending him for his illustrious career in blues and gospel.

## Jimmy “Duck” Holmes

(6) Jimmy “Duck” Holmes is the proprietor of one of the oldest juke joints in Mississippi, the Blue Front Café in Bentonia. In the mid-2000s he began performing blues actively after many years of performing casually, and has already garnered several awards and many accolades. He is a practitioner and conscious advocate of a distinctive blues style from his hometown whose most famous proponent was blues pioneer Skip James.

Holmes, who never met Skip James, studied the music of Owens, learning songs including “Cherry Ball”, “Hard Times”, “It Must Have Been the Devil”, but didn’t perform very actively until relatively recently. He promoted blues through the founding in 1972 of the Bentonia Blues Festival, which took place annually until the mid-’90s and was revived in 2006. He took over the Blue Front in 1970 after the death of his father, and beginning in the ‘80s the Café became a popular destination for blues tourists, including annual visits by bus loads of international fans.