

Blues, Country and Soul Mix in Memphis, Tennessee

This Is America

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This Is America. I'm Steve Ember.

This week, we learn about a city in the South that helped give the world many kinds of American music. Come along with us, as Avi Arditti and Kelly Jean Kelly take us to Memphis, Tennessee.

A future president of the United States helped build Memphis. Andrew Jackson and two other men settled the city in 1819. They chose the place where the Wolf River flowed into the Mississippi River. Jackson named the community after the ancient Egyptian city of Memphis on the Nile River.

The Memphis of modern America is the biggest city in the state of Tennessee. More than one million people live in the Memphis area. Six hundred fifty thousand of them live in the city. Memphis is a center of business, industry and transportation.

Memphis grew when a railroad bridge across the Mississippi River was completed in 1892. The bridge increased trade, and by 1900 it made Memphis the world's largest market for cotton and wood products.

Visitors can learn about the city through its literature. Almost 100 years ago, the African-American writer Richard Wright wrote his first stories while working as a dishwasher in Memphis. His book called "Native Son" was published in 1941. It was a huge success. It strongly influenced public opinion about race issues and created acceptance for other African-American writers.

Peter Taylor's book "Summons to Memphis" won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1985. The Tennessee writer explores how white middle and upper class southerners responded to changes in southern culture in the last century. The playwright Tennessee Williams examined some of the same social issues in his play "The Glass Menagerie." In the play, a young woman named Laura has a collection of glass animals. She is a shy person and mostly stays home by herself. One day, her brother brings home a friend from work.

"Isn't there something you're more interested in than anything else?"

"Well, I do have my glass collection."

"Glass? What kind is it?"

"Just ornaments. Animals mostly."

"Oh."

"Here's an example of one if you'd like to see it."

"Sure. Well."

"Be careful, if you breathe it breaks."

"I better not touch it then. I'm awful clumsy with things."

"Well, I trust you with it."

Close to the Mississippi River and just south of the center of town is Beale Street, one of the most famous streets in America. W.C. Handy worked on Beale Street as a musician in the early 1900s. The African-American composer is known as the "Father of the Blues."

In 1916, W.C. Handy wrote a song about the famous street. Here is Louis Armstrong singing "Beale Street Blues."

More than 60 percent of the people in the city of Memphis are black. Memphis is home to the National Civil Rights Museum. Visitors learn about the history of the American civil rights movement. The museum buildings include the place where Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered.

On April 4, 1968, a white man named James Earl Ray shot the civil rights leader. Martin Luther King was in Memphis to support waste collection workers on strike against the city. Most of the striking workers were black.

In 1991, voters in Memphis elected the first black mayor of the city. The National Civil Rights Museum opened that same year.

Also in 1991, the famed blues singer and guitarist B.B. King opened his own blues club on Beale Street.

B.B. King is known for songs like this one, called "Caldonia."

People who come to Tennessee can also see a huge bronze statue of B.B. King at the Tennessee Welcome Center.

Something else to see is the Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum on Beale Street.

The Rock 'n' Soul Museum explores the music and culture of the city. It shows how blues, country and soul music came together in Memphis and how they spread around the world.

Elvis Presley Gets His Start in Memphis

Many experts say rock and roll began in Memphis. And a man named Sam Phillips played a big part. Sam Phillips was a white record producer in Memphis in the 1950s. He produced records by local black musicians and early recordings by rock and roll performers Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Roy Orbison. One day, an 18-year-old truck driver came to the studio. He wanted to record a song for his mother. That young man was Elvis Presley.

Sam Phillips produced Elvis Presley's first real record in 1954. Elvis sang a song written by blues musician Arthur Crudup called "That's All Right." It helped make rock and roll popular around the world.

Today, people visit Memphis from all over the United States and the world. The most popular place for visitors is Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley. He lived there for 20 years until his death in 1977. The man known as the King of Rock 'n' Roll is buried at Graceland, along with his parents.

Memphis also celebrates Elvis Week. Elvis Week is held in August. Events planned at Graceland and other places in the city include parties, dancing and music.

Memphis Hotel Hosts Privileged Ducks

There is a large and beautiful hotel in Memphis called the Peabody Memphis. It was built in 1869. Many famous people have stayed at the Peabody. But it is also known for some birds that live in a special place on top of the hotel.

Every morning, the Peabody Marching Ducks ride an elevator down to the first floor. There is always a crowd to watch as the five mallards march across the main room to a small pool of water where they spend the day. Every afternoon, the ducks leave their pool and march into the elevator that takes them home. The restaurant at the Peabody never serves duck.

Many people visit Memphis for the month-long Memphis in May International Festival. Each year the festival honors another country. The goal is for students in Memphis to learn about one country each year until they graduate. The Commercial Appeal newspaper prints lesson plans for teachers about the chosen country. These are sent to every home and to the city libraries.

At the end of the school year, the city celebrates local traditions at the Memphis in May International Festival. One of those traditions, of course, is music. Part of Memphis in May is the Beale Street Music Festival. It is one of the largest music festivals in the country.

Another Memphis tradition is food, including spicy pork slow-cooked over a smoky fire. Teams of cooks practice all year to compete in the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest. Other traditional foods in Memphis are fried chicken, catfish, fried green tomatoes, hush puppies and sweet potato pie.

We leave you with "Memphis Blues," performed by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.

Our program was written by Jerilyn Watson and Onka Dekker and voiced by Avi Arditti and Kelly Jean Kelly. I'm Steve Ember inviting you to join us again next week for This Is America from VOA Learning English.

Film excerpt from 1950 20th Century Fox version of "The Glass Menagerie," starring Jane Wyman and Kirk Douglas.