



## ARTS & CULTURE

# In Mississippi, Small-town Musician Keeps Blues Alive

March 05, 2021

The town of Bentonia, in the southern state of Mississippi, has fewer than 500 people. But it is known as the birthplace of a special **style** of blues music. One musician is doing what he can to keep the music and storytelling tradition alive.

Jimmy “Duck” Holmes is 73 years old. He is the last remaining Bentonia blues musician. He was just nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album. The album is called *Cypress Grove*.

Holmes hopes *Cypress Grove* will help save the Bentonia blues long after he is gone.

The world has changed around Holmes and his Blue Front Café, the country’s oldest surviving **juke joint**. Across the South, these spaces were historically owned and visited by African Americans. But many juke joints have closed as owners have passed away. Blues experts believe Holmes is the only American operating a juke joint passed down by his parents.

The Grammy Awards take place this year on March 14. Holmes plans to watch the ceremony from the Blue Front Café. He cannot go to the event in person because of the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, he will be surrounded by musicians from across Mississippi who want to perform with him.

“I’ll be here in this **hole in the wall** every day, for as long as I can, so that people don’t forget,” Holmes said. “We’re trying to make sure it doesn’t die.”

### The early days

Holmes' parents opened Blue Front in 1948, when Holmes was just a baby. It was the first Black-owned business in Bentonia. At the time, the town was mainly a community of Black farmers. Holmes' parents, Carey and Mary, were **sharecroppers**.

Mary ran the Blue Front during the day while Holmes worked with his father in the fields. By the time he was nine, Holmes was operating farming equipment by himself.

The Holmes' business was a community gathering place. People came to have their clothing pressed, get a haircut, or buy salt, pepper and other food products. And they came for the blues. Musicians stood in line outside, waiting to perform there.

During cotton-**picking** season, the Blue Front was open 24 hours a day to serve farmworkers. They came in to eat Mary's famous buffalo fish. On weekends, people stayed all night drinking, dancing and playing music.

The town was never home to more than 600 people, but its **location** on the Illinois Central Railway brought visitors. Later, the only roadway between the southern cities of Memphis and Jackson passed through Bentonia. That made the town more popular.

Historians who traveled through Mississippi to document blues musicians discovered Bentonia's style. Its use of minor **key** musical notes gave it a sound unlike the better-known blues styles.

Growing up, Holmes learned music from his neighbor, Henry Stuckey. Stuckey is known as "the father of the Bentonia blues." He was an aging World War I veteran and played music for Holmes and his 13 brothers and sisters.

The Bentonia style is passed from one musician to the next; it cannot be learned through written music.

"The old-timers I learned from couldn't read, and they couldn't read sheet music," said Holmes, who also does not read music.

Dan Auerbach produced Holmes' album Cypress Grove. He is also a member of the band The Black Keys. He said the beauty of Holmes' music is the **improvisation**.

"Those songs, they're like a living organism, almost. They're changing daily," he said. "You can feel the realness and the immediacy of the music...and that's what makes it so special."

## The present time

Today, a four-lane **highway** moves traffic away from Bentonia. Many businesses have closed down. Buildings have been torn down. More than 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

The train passes through town every day but it does not stop.

Holmes never imagined leaving Bentonia. He lives on the same farm where he was raised, about a kilometer and a half from the Blue Front Café.

He has become Bentonia's biggest **draw**. Visitors come from all over the world to see him. They want to hear the music and learn the tradition.

Before the pandemic, Mississippi musicians performed at the Blue Front every other Friday, sometimes more. They played different blues styles.

Holmes holds Bentonia Blues workshops. And every day that he is at the Blue Front, he is willing to teach anyone who walks in.

Some fans are surprised that he is so easy to reach, said Robert Connely Farr. The Mississippi native, who now lives in Canada, has been visiting Holmes for **guitar** lessons for many years.

Farr said, "I think it's important to Jimmy," that this place is open and that it always has music and life in it.

Holmes has performed in Europe, South America and across the U.S. He opened for The Black Keys in Washington, D.C. in 2019. But he always comes back home.

Holmes said that no young people in Bentonia want to learn the Bentonia style. They say it is too complex. They do not realize how every style of American music has roots in the blues, he said.

But he keeps extra guitars around the Blue Front, just in case someone wants to play.

“It will survive somehow,” Holmes said as he sat in his empty juke joint. “I learned enough that I was able to carry it on, and probably, once I’m gone, somebody will be sitting around here playing, someone who picked up the things that I was doing. I have to hope. I have to hope.”

I’m Alice Bryant. And I’m Dan Friedell.

*The Associated Press reported this story. Alice Bryant adapted it for Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.*

---

## Words in This Story

**style** – n. a particular way in which something is done, created or performed

**juke joint** – n. a small inexpensive place for eating, drinking and dancing to the music of a jukebox or live band

**hole in the wall** – n. a small, dingy place, especially a bar or restaurant

**sharecropper** – n. a tenant farmer who is given credit for seed, tools, living quarters and food, who works the land, and who receives a share the value of the crop minus charges

**pick** – v. to remove (a fruit, flower, etc.) from a plant especially by using your hand

**key** – n. a system of musical tones based on a scale beginning on the note for which the system is named

**location** – n. a place or position

**improvisation** – n. the act of impromptu speaking or performance

**draw** – n. someone or something that causes a lot of people to come to a place

**guitar** – n. a stringed musical instrument

