

aperture

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REVIEWS



MISSISSIPPI DELTA PHOTOGRAPHY

The Mississippi Delta has been called “the most Southern place on earth.” A swampy, heavily forested wilderness with a history of extreme wealth and equally extreme poverty, of bountiful hospitality and racial oppression, of palatial plantations and sharecropper shacks, the Delta offers a concentrated collection of most of the basic tropes of Southern culture.

In the 1980s, Birney Imes set out to photograph this visually fertile scene; these pictures were recently on show at the Delta Blues Museum. His is a truly inside vision: you cannot imagine capturing the landscapes on view here without knowing the lay of the land and its distinctive culture. Like the familiar riffs of a traditional blues, here are rusted-out cars, sagging buildings, primitive churches, endless cotton fields, juke joints, and kudzu-covered out-houses. People are seen only infrequently—when they are, they sit or stand as mute as the surrounding landscape. Both scenery and human occupants are photographed as if stunned into stillness by the weight of economic history and highly codified social behavior.

Imes’s compositions are also shaped as classically as a traditional blues tune, with straight-on shots, balanced lines and forms, centered subjects, and evenly distributed light. But *what* light: the

ABOVE: Birney Imes, *Arcola Cafe*, Arcola, Mississippi, 1985; RIGHT: Panny Flautt Mayfield, *Margaret’s Blue Diamond*, 1980s.

Imes: Courtesy Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta; Mayfield: Courtesy the artist

blazing, yellow-white Delta sun drenches his scenes with a bleaching presence. Imes’s light is beautiful and stirring; it thoroughly exposes its humble subjects, but with a touching illumination. No Egglestonian irony here: *appreciation* is Imes’s order of business.

Panny Flautt Mayfield’s black-and-white photographs of the action in local juke joints also reveal an insider’s eye. Like Imes, she is a longtime white Mississippi resident and journalist with an interest in African-American culture. But unlike Imes, her focus is on capturing the action inside these clubs—Imes explored their architecture in his 1990 book *Juke Joint*.

In Mayfield’s works, the clubs have funky names like Red’s and Bobo’s Grocery; the subjects are the likes of Bilbo Walker and his dancing daughters, Tater and Super Chikan; and the down-home club setting is fueled by hard-driving blues and a hard-drinking culture. Mayfield’s shots are like the very best picks from a very good party. She gives up control of the framing and composition to the moment that *happens*—not the moment she is looking for. All sorts of details litter the edges of the images, from set lists to the ubiquitous beer bottles. There’s a sense of open generosity in her overall point of view that sidesteps the tangled issue of voyeurship. Mayfield brings her subjects and their world into sight with a lively immediacy no less compelling for all its casualness. These photographs resonate with unfiltered affection for their subjects and their culture.

Like Imes’s photographs, Mayfield’s were shot in the 1980s. The devotion with which these two white photographers have preserved African-American life in the Delta is akin to the dedication of those white British musicians who revived interest in the blues in the 1960s. We are left to wonder if these photographs are the last innocent evidence of an extraordinarily vivid and valuable culture. ♣

—John Howell

Birney Imes’s and Panny Flautt Mayfield’s photographs were featured at the Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 14–July 5, 2006. An exhibition of Mayfield’s work will open at the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture in October 2008.



PHOTOGRAPHY

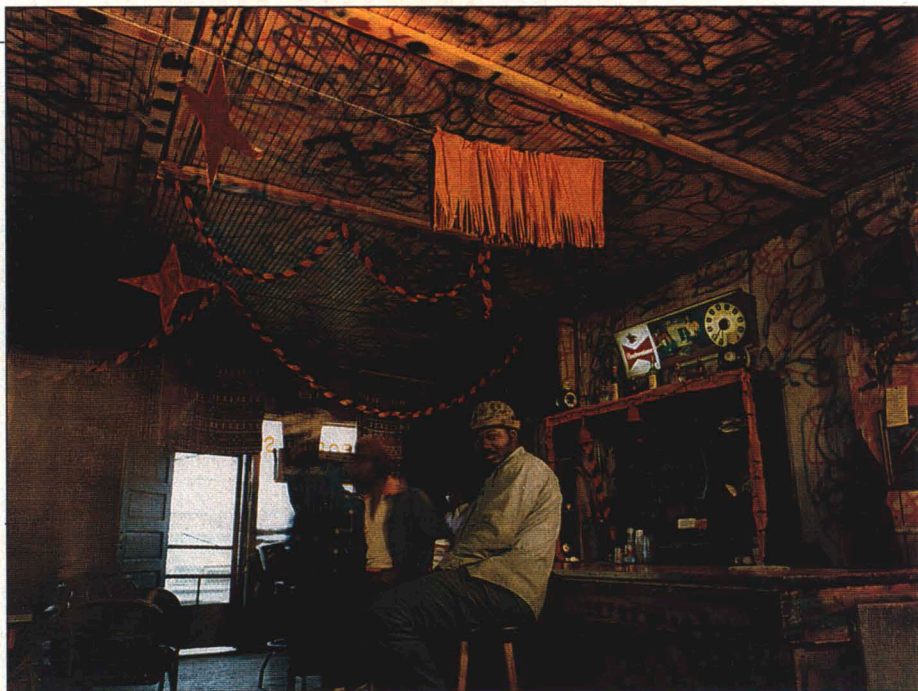
Where to Go in Merigold

Imes immortalizes the juke joints of the Delta

NO LOTTERING. That's what the sign above the jukebox says at Turner's Grill in Clarksdale, Miss., or did, anyway, in 1983, when photographer Birney Imes came through on his tour of the juke joints of the Mississippi Delta. It may be there yet, high on a wall whose color could only have been chosen so as not to show blood. As for the two women lottering beneath it—the tall one in the white dress, the preternaturally buxom one in the short black skirt—they presumably have moved on. The bottle of Colt 45 they were sharing was halfway down already. And like most of the people in Imes's brilliantly lit time-exposure photographs, their images are blurred, ghostly, at once there and not there; they moved.

A juke joint, judging from the 58 plates in Imes's book of that name (*Unpaged. University Press of Mississippi. \$39.95*), is a shack off in the woods with Budweiser in quart bottles, tall cans and short cans, a pool table, a jukebox, and a big sign on which the word NO appears at least a half dozen times. NO DOPE SMOKING (Ferry Club, Lowndes County). NO CANS ON THE TABLE, presumably the pool table (Monkey's Place, Merigold). NO FIGHTING, NO BAD LANGUAGE, NO CREDIT. BE NICE OR LEAVE (Juicy's Place, Marcella). The other requirement is at least 75 feet of electrical extension cord, draped over nails, leading to a fixture improvised from a plumber's trouble light and a beer-can shade. Imes has an extraordinary eye for building-code violations and upholstery rips. He is especially good on the crude wall daubings that appear to be the work of a single, obsessed half-wit folk artist who passed through these parts in the mid-1980s. As for the people, even those who managed to stay in focus have a quality of reserve, lost in their thoughts, conversations or games of eight ball. They evince a dignity that belies the squalor they have to endure to get a simple can of beer. Juke joints! No wonder the Delta gave rise to the blues.

JERRY ADLER



PHOTOS BY BIRNEY IMES



Be nice or leave: Beer, pool, music and the most primitive of décors are hallmarks of hangouts like The People's Choice Cafe in Leland (above), the Chinese Grocery in Drew (left) and The Royal Crown Cafe in Boyle (below)

