



ONE NIGHT IN CLARKSDALE

with Guy Wilkinson

I'D BEEN DRIVING SIX HOURS

straight, pausing only for gas and a wilted cheese sandwich. But my scheduled overnight pit stop was nothing like I'd pictured it. Sure, there was a museum, some interesting history, but the hotel stood on a bluff to one side of a six-lane freeway, the sickly, pallid glow of a McDonald's arch the only blip on an otherwise homogenous landscape.

Fumbling in the glove box, I found my phone, an old Nokia; it looked like a brick and the screen was cracked, but it still worked fine. I dug out my dog-eared notebook, dialling a number scrawled in scuffy handwriting somewhere at the back.

"Riverside Hotel."

The voice was kindly, avuncular almost. Strong southern accent.

"I was wondering if you had a room for tonight?"

"Ah, we're mighty busy here tonight, son, on account of the festival and all."

Festival?

"C'mon, you must have something. Please. I'll sleep in the broom cupboard."

Across the freeway a Big Mac glowed from a neon sign, some kind of nightmarish ode to obesity.

"OK, son, but don't you push it now."

I floored the accelerator, driving north, past gas stations, bus depots and mega malls until slowly the highway morphed to a more bucolic backdrop, all cotton fields, rusted pick-ups and white crucifixes on immaculate church lawns.

It was dusk when I hit Clarksdale, Mississippi. The sky had turned a kind of noirish blue. Traffic lights hung from low-slung wires above pot-holed streets. Only Abe's Barbecue, a crumbling corner-side diner showed any sign of life.

I pulled up outside the Riverside Hotel. A bunch of mismatched chairs and sofas were scattered out front. The front door creaked as I pushed it open. On the walls were dozens of framed

Rat (aka Frank L Ratliff) outside Red's juke joint.

“JIM TOLD ME OF HIS TIME GROWING UP IN MEMPHIS, WATCHING RACIALLY MIXED BANDS DURING AN ERA WHEN LYNCHING WAS STILL COMMONPLACE IN THE SOUTH.”

pictures of blues legends, men playing acoustic guitars outside share-cropper shacks, old run-down farmhouses and newspaper clippings of historic music events.

I was still studying them when a man wrestling a basket of laundry came towards me, offering his hand. Dressed in blue jeans and an over-sized t-shirt, he introduced himself as Rat (aka Frank L Ratliff), the proprietor who I'd spoken with earlier. He took me to meet some of his friends sitting in the front room.

“Well, shoot, you look like a man who could use a drink,” said one of them.

His name was Jim Williams, a lawyer and jazz musician from Memphis.

Dressed in a rumpled, unbuttoned shirt, a grubby white vest, sweat leaking from the sides of my trilby, I no doubt cut a sorry figure.

Jim poured me a generous belt of scotch. Almost instantly, I felt the synapses firing again.

Turns out Rat fell into the hotel business after his mother began renting rooms to soldiers during the Second World War. Down in the basement, Ike Turner cut the seminal record *Rocket 88*, while anyone from Sam Cooke to Robert Nighthawk had laid their heads over the years.

“Throughout the '40s and '50s, this was the only black hotel in town, so they had to stay while travelling through,” said Rat.

Before managing the Riverside, he'd worked in a bakery for 23 years, only missing five days the entire time.

“In this town, ain't no jobs. A lotta companies went outta business, but I refuse to leave. I been here all my life; I'm doin' good.”

Lured by the escalating sound of live music, Jim and I ventured out.

Around the corner, the town's main square had been converted to host the annual Sunflower Blues and Gospel Festival. Food stalls selling Memphis barbecue pork ribs, corn dogs, Polish sausages, funnel cakes and shredded pork nachos surrounded a main stage beside the town hall.

Jim told me of his time growing up in Memphis watching racially mixed bands during an era when lynching was still commonplace in the South. He talked of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and the dark cloud it cast over America just as it seemed the country was turning a corner.

Now based in Tennessee, he heads to Clarksdale every year to experience a slice of America almost lost in a time vacuum.

“Experiencing events like this gives me a sense of hope,” he said. “There are times I've sat up late talking to Rat, and I'd pause with some awareness that if we'd been having this conversation as teenagers, we might have been thrown in jail.”

Sitting among crowds gathered on the grass, we drank cold beer and ate smoked ribs while the sun receded behind sagging telegraph wires. Dozens of acts took to the stage throughout the night, with local blues maestro James “Super Chikan” Johnson topping the bill. Right after, we ventured across the street towards Clarksdale's best-loved juke joint: Red's.

Outside, the bouncer eyed me suspiciously. It was pitch dark but he wore wraparound sunglasses.

“You the poh-lice?”

“What? Me?”

“Look like poh-lice to me, man.”

I stared at him, incredulous, but he just smiled, waving me past towards the front door.

“Just messin' with you, man.”

A bunch of guys frying catfish out front laughed.

Inside Red's, the room was bathed in a dingy red light. A band known as Big Jack Johnson and the Corn Lickers were tearing the place to shreds, ruthless, foot-stomping blues pounding from battered amps. The air reeked of stale beer and a mixed crowd danced on a threadbare rug in the centre of the room.

Grabbing another brew, Jim and I propped up the bar, taking in the scene, smiling, drinking, nodding to the beat.

Then Jim got a call. He had to split. Emergency. “I'll be back though,” he said, darting out the door.

I stuck around as long as my legs would hold up. It was some of the best live music I'd ever heard. Jim never did return.

Back at the hotel, there was a low murmur of conversation from the front room. A late-night crowd had gathered. A bottle of whisky was making the rounds. Laughter.

I paused for a moment outside. Hammered, wrecked, dead on my feet, I'm ashamed to say I crept on past, staggering down the stairs to my room, out cold before my head hit the pillow.

Over the next few days I teamed up with Josh Cuffe and Ray Stoesser, two college mates who'd busted ass all summer to buy a van. Together we explored more of the Delta.

In an eerily quiet church graveyard, we visited the grave of Robert Johnson, the iconic guitar troubadour said to have sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of highways 49 and 61. Above the surrounding cornfields, the early signs of a tornado were forming amid darkening skies.

Cruising both highways, we dropped in on museums, we ate pulled pork (so, so much pulled pork), we talked to local people and even hit up more juke joints.

But the festival was done, the stalls gone, the town quiet once again. Somehow nothing ever quite recaptured the magic of that first night.

Months later, back in Australia, I received an email from Jim. He was sorry he'd had to leave so suddenly and even sorrier to report Rat had recently lost a long-standing battle with a heart condition.

I felt saddened. His hospitality and kindness ensured no one who passed through the Riverside's doors is ever likely to forget him, but I was sorry to have spurned the chance to get to know him more.

I did learn something from my night in Clarksdale, though: when the stars align, when the travel gods cook up that rare hoodoo—the people, the place, the timing—be sure to ride it through to the bitter end.

Chances are, it may never happen again. **END**