

Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism

The blues has a long and storied history in the United States, and its evolution from humble beginnings in tent shows to a major tourist attraction is a fascinating one. This article explores the history of the blues, its impact on American culture, and its continued relevance today.

The Early Years

The blues emerged in the late 19th century in the rural South, as a fusion of African American spirituals and work songs with European folk music. The first blues performers were often itinerant musicians who traveled from town to town, playing for tips in saloons and juke joints.



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by Paige A. McGinley

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In the early 20th century, the blues began to gain popularity outside of the South, thanks in part to the migration of African Americans to northern

cities. Blues musicians began to perform in vaudeville shows and on radio, and they soon became a major force in American popular music.

The Tent Show Era

In the 1920s and 1930s, the blues tent show circuit reached its peak. These shows were often held in large tents set up in rural areas, and they featured a variety of blues musicians, dancers, and comedians. Tent shows were a popular form of entertainment for African Americans, and they helped to spread the blues to a wider audience.

Some of the most famous blues tent shows included the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, the Silas Green Minstrels, and the Mississippi Sheiks. These shows featured some of the greatest blues musicians of the era, including W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith, and B.B. King.

The Transition to Tourism

In the post-World War II era, the blues tent show circuit began to decline, as more and more African Americans moved to urban areas. However, the blues continued to thrive in other forms, such as on records and in nightclubs.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the blues experienced a revival, thanks in part to the efforts of white blues musicians such as Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. The blues also became a popular tourist attraction, with festivals and museums dedicated to the music springing up around the country.

Today, the blues is still a vital part of American culture. It continues to be performed and enjoyed by people of all races and backgrounds, and it is a testament to the enduring power of this uniquely American art form.

The Impact of Blues Tourism

Blues tourism has had a significant impact on the economies of many communities around the United States. In Clarksdale, Mississippi, for example, the Delta Blues Museum has been a major tourist attraction since it opened in 2001. The museum has helped to revitalize the city's downtown area and has created jobs for local residents.

In Memphis, Tennessee, the Beale Street Historic District is home to a number of blues clubs and restaurants. The district is a popular tourist destination, and it is estimated that blues tourism generates over \$100 million annually for the Memphis economy.

Blues tourism has also had a positive impact on the local music scene in many communities. In Clarksdale, for example, the Delta Blues Museum has helped to foster a new generation of blues musicians. The museum has also hosted a number of educational programs for young people, helping to ensure that the blues will continue to thrive for many years to come.

The Future of Blues Tourism

Blues tourism is a growing industry, and it is likely to continue to grow in the years to come. There is a growing interest in authentic travel experiences, and blues tourism offers a unique opportunity for visitors to connect with American history and culture.

As the blues continues to evolve and attract new fans, it is likely that blues tourism will become even more popular. There are many exciting opportunities for blues tourism in the future, and it is sure to continue to

have a positive impact on the economies and cultures of communities around the United States.

The blues is a uniquely American art form that has had a profound impact on American culture. Its evolution from humble beginnings in tent shows to a major tourist attraction is a testament to the enduring power of this music. Blues tourism is a growing industry that has a positive impact on the economies and cultures of communities around the United States. As the blues continues to evolve and attract new fans, it is likely that blues tourism will become even more popular in the years to come.



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