

Missippi

Fock 2: Tupelo Zoned and a Happy 4th

The next Tupelo visit was remarkable as well. It was in '92, with Patrick and Neal, fresh off our whirlwind Wheeling experience, but before the deer-beheading incident. Part of our original plan for that trip had been to swing far enough west to go to Memphis, especially to Graceland, Elvis Presley's famous mansion. As the Elvis fan of the group, he was psyched to be goin' to Elvis Mecca.

The transmission setback had set us back time-wise, though, and we had to streamline our route to get to Nawlins in time to rendezvous with our fellow revelers. The new route was jussssst fine with me, since it would take us down Natchez Trace.

This also meant another pause for the cause in Tupelo, which, I had not realized until Neal pointed out a sign, was the birthplace of the very same Elvis Presley. Well, dip me in shit and call me a fudgicle. How about that? And the sign indicated that the exact home of his birth was just down the next side street.

We took the left, and down at the end of the narrow street, the last house on the right was the Presley home. It was tiny. It was like Max times two, and that was all. There was a small sign out front, but no other special whoop-de-doo about it. The front porch had a swing: a nice, two-person seat, suspended from the ceiling by chains. We made so bold as to walk up and sit in it for a spell. Neal was lovin' it. Patrick and I thought it was pretty cool too, but to a true Elvis fan like Neal, it must have been something to savor.

We stayed quite a while, actually. The sun had already set when we got there, but we didn't leave until it was fully dark. Since NTP looks like just about any other road in the dark, we were in no special rush to get back on it. We decided to sample the nightlife of northern Mississippi's largest city.

After a short ride up the main drag, one place on the right stood out. It was large, low, and painted black with white stars all over it. The big words "Twilight Zone" sprawled across the front wall. The parking lot was big, and there were a few pickup trucks and Jeeps already there, so we pulled in to see what might be what.

Twilight Zone was a good name for this place, because it was strange. Maybe not otherworldly, but definitely strange. First of all, it was enormous; it used to be a bowling alley, so it was wide, long, flat, and empty. You could put 500 people in there and it would still look vacant. When we arrived, there might have been 50 "customers", and you'll see why I put that in quotes in a moment. The fifty of so were spread out all over the room, at small plastic tables, almost like outdoor patio furniture, and folding chairs.

We gave it a well-since-we're-here shrug and walked across a good amount of hard tile floor to get to the central bar. The bargirl was somewhat pretty. I guess that makes her pretty pretty. So, she wasn't very pretty, just kinda pretty. But, anyway, she greeted us amiably (maybe her name was Amy), and asked what we wanted. Being neophytes to Mississippi club life, we asked her what kind of beer they sold.

"Oh, we don't have any beer," she replied, and stood waiting for our second choice.

Taken seriously aback, we faltered. How could they not have beer? It is the staple of all bars. There are some that are limited to selling just beer and wine, but I had never heard of one that sold only liquor and no beer. "Uhhhhh... how about a rum-and-Coke then?"

"Oh, we don't have rum. Fancy a Coke, then?"

"No, not really. What do you have?"

"Oh, we have Coke, Diet Coke, ginger ale, orange juice, cran--"

Seeing the trend, I stopped her in mid-list. "So, you don't sell alcohol?"

"Oh, no, we sure don't." I don't know why everything she said had to begin with "Oh."

We looked around, perplexed, at the various people that we saw around the room, kicking back with Bud bottles, Miller Lite cans, and various types of cups or tumblers. "Well, isn't this a bar?"

She smiled, "Oh, it sure is! Biggest bar in Tupelo!"

"So... if you don't sell booze, where did all these people get theirs?"

"Oh, they brought it in with them." She could tell that she had stunned us with that last one, so she finally offered a bit of an explanation. "Oh, you can bring your own, all you want."

At that point, we noticed that there were coolers at almost every table. Some were small, \$1.99 styrofoam jobs that wouldn't last the night, and others were huge Coleman Colossals big enough to ice down the moose you just shot.

Having been a barkeep myself, I wanted to ask her, "So why the hell are you even here?" but I decided to leave that mystery unsolved for the time being. We agreed to take the absurd concept and roll with it for a while. Bringing our own beer into a bar was a novel concept. Certainly seemed like a good way to save money. We double-checked with the door dude on the way out, and he confirmed that what Amy had told us was indeed true.

Our cooler was loaded, heavy, and situated among many bags and belongings in Max, so instead of lugging the whole thing in, we each grabbed about three beers, cracked one, and started to walk in. Door dude stopped us.

"You can't bring that in here," he said, gesturing slightly.

"You just told us we could," we countered, puzzled.

"Not the open ones," he splained, "y'all can't cross the threshold with an open container."

"Wow," we said, almost in unison. This was really getting tricky. "OK, we'll finish these and carry the others in. That's OK, right?"

He was beginning to think we were zoning on him. "Yup."

A few minutes later, we were back, with sealed beers in hand. I had to ask though, "If we had been carrying a cooler, and had put those open beers inside it, would that have been OK?"

He eyed me with disdain. I could see the phrase "fuggin' yankee asshole" forming in his brain. But he replied levelly, "If the cooler was shut." Patrick pulled at my arm, and we went inside.

There was music in there, but it wasn't very good. The acoustics in this place sucked worse than a high school gym. What would you expect from a bowling alley? The club was easily big enough to have live bands, and to pull in good crowds for concerts, but the sound was so bad, I can't see why anyone would have played there. There were some people dancing, but they weren't very good either. In fact, there were no guys dancing at all. Women danced with women, while the guys sat back and sauced. We figured that dancing would be a pansy thing for a Mizzippi man to do.

About a half-hour is all we could take of that place. All we could figure was that they had lost their liquor license, probably just had it suspended for a while for serving to a minor or something, and they were making a go of staying open anyway. I think they sold cold, pre-made sandwiches and some snacks, along with the soft drinks, but we never really found out for sure. But they still had to staff and power and air-condition the place, and that's not cheap. I have no idea how they expected to make any money.

When I passed this way in 1997, on my way home from a track school in Baton Rouge -- and the accompanying binge in The Big Easy -- I didn't really feel the need to fortify The Tupelo Experience any further. Trouble was, there's no place else! Tupelo lies right along the NTP, and every other dinky town around seemed like some scary little in-bred burg where Massachusetts tags would only get me in trouble. So, Tupelo it was.

This sultry summer Sunday began with a return to Elvis Presley's birthplace. It was noticeably dressed up since '92, and porch-swinging was clearly frowned upon. Large picnic shelters had been built out back, and the Elvis Presley Museum in the adjacent lot was now open for gouging, uh, I mean, business.

My profound distaste for the commercial twist at that site was somewhat mitigated by the fact that I was able to purchase gasoline around the corner for just \$.89/gallon. Damn! I hadn't seen that since the '70's. And a bag of ice for only \$.79. EIGHT pounds! Not this five pounds for \$1.19 shit that you get up north. The South was doing ice right.

I saw no sign of the T-Zone, though I can't say I was really looking for it.

I did see the famous pizza place, I think, but I still can't remember which chain it was. The batting cage was long gone.

Tupelo did prove to have a tantalizing side to it though. As I passed through the deserted downtown blocks -- everybody was at church, I could hear them singing -- I noticed the banners. Long, green-and-gray, roughed-vinyl banners adorned the downtown streetlight poles. They were of simple design, with a silhouette of the city "skyline" (the tallest building was about eight stories), and the words "DOWNTOWN TUPELO" spanning the top and bottom edges. The banners themselves weren't as appealing as the trophy aspect of them was: the I-stole-a-souvenir thing that got so out of hand in New

Orleans and Atlanta on our Olympic Trials.

And they were EASY. They must have been: there were only two banners left, and about eighteen empty brackets on the other poles. Hanging with the bottom rung at about eye level, and with no twist-ties anchoring them, and no end-knobs preventing the easy slide-off, they were just taunting me! I drove around the block three times casing one, refusing to believe it would be so easy.

But I didn't do it. All I could picture was me standing there, next to my Massachusetts van, tugging this city-owned property off its frame, when fatass, tobacky-chewin' Sheriff Bubba would drive around the corner and say, "Whathafug yew doon wid mah siiine, boy??" and toss my pretty white ass in the hoosegow for Grand Larceny. So, I let the banner be. [But if it had been nighttime, that sucker woulda been MINE!]

But then there was the sad case of Sammy.

Once back on Natchez Trace, there was an hour or two of steady rain. I pulled into a turnout called Witchdance, and as I climbed in back to construct a ham samich or two for lunch, I noticed this little, young, brown and white dog just standing in the rain. He was curious about the van -- no other cars were there -- but not so curious as to come right over; he kept a prudent distance. He looked pathetic: scrawny, ribby, blank eyes, sad face, a dirty coat matted and stringy from the rain, and no collar. I opened the side door and offered him some ham. He eyed it hungrily, but was very timid about coming over to get it. Finally, hunger won out and he slowly inched over and took it from me, then slunk away to gulp it down.

He walked away, but came sidling back a minute or two later. I held out a piece of turkey for him, and he came up more readily this time. As he reached for it, I went to gently pat his head. He immediately withdrew, wincing before I even touched him. I fear he had felt the sting of a cruel hand in his young life, and was very bashful because of it. He did come back, and did take the turkey, and did let me pat him a little, but then went and stood off forlornly in the rain, looking back at me.

You can imagine the idiot thoughts that were in my head, like if it would be possible to live with a stray dog, in a van, in 100-degree swelter, for two more weeks, with full-time coaching school, and full-time partying, and returning to a no-pets-allowed apartment. Yeah, that'll work!! So I left the little son of a bitch behind. I suspect he didn't last much longer. Probably got gobbled up by the squirrels and weevils and goblins in the forest. Or by those fugging LOUD insects! Poor Sammy.

The rain eventually stopped, and the road rolled on. Even the "construction" was benign: the sign that cautioned, "Loose Gravel, No Center Line, Next 52 Miles" proved to be poppycock. The gravel wasn't loose at all -- I'll bet it sunk into that hot pavement pretty damn fast once they put it down -- and you don't need a center line when there's no damn traffic, so now I could use the *whole* road, not just one side, for 52 miles!! What a bonus!

So, the thought of including Natchez Trace in RR2K after all, was decent consolation for the inconvenience and aggravation of the smashed window. Blue Man had been traumatized, and I could think of no better way to soothe him than to let him relax on the NTP.

As I reached the Mississippi border, I ran into a great bunch of guys: eight black guys ranging from their late-20's to their late-30's, and their motorcycles. That may sound daunting, but it was obvious from the first second that these were fun guys. First of all, their bikes were absolutely *beautiful* -- I mean real showroom quality bikes. They had the full fenders in various glossy colors and trim with gleaming chrome, and some had elaborate but classy paintings on the tanks. These were not tough-guy, blow-your-ears-out Harley hogs; these were very expensive, high quality, touring motorcycles.

And when I pulled into the Info Center at the border, these guys were standing and sitting all over the "Welcome to Louisiana" sign that was facing the other way, and were mugging it up for the camera with big foolish grade-school grins. I arrived just in time, because as I leaned out the window and gave them a silly grin of my own, they recruited me to take their photo so all eight of them could be in it.

They were all from Chicago, and were taking the ride back after a weekend on Bourbon Street. Their assessment of the street was typical: rolled eyes, big smile, and "whooo-oooo". I took a few pics of them on the sign and then on their bikes. One of them had a license plate "MR RAMM", so we hit it off great. He even let me get on his sweet bike and pose with them. Too bad I can't show you the photo, but you know the deal by now. Those guys put me in a much, much better frame of mind.

So, less than an hour after the GWSM (Ghettoshit Window Smashing Moment), Blue Man and I were cruising smoothly and happily on the NTP. The tall overhanging trees, the well-kept grass, the

empty rolling roadway, all brought back awesome memories of previous trips. I pulled into one of the first shady picnic areas and took a lunch break, complementing my couple of cold cut sandwiches with a frigid shower of water from the cooler. Oooooowwww, what a wake-up *that* was!

After several minutes of straightening the van and tossing out a few days worth of trash that had rolled under various seats and such, I was about to leave and find a coveted spot further up the road. A big old Cadillac had pulled in while I was tending to Blue Man's tidiness, but I paid little attention to it. It had driven right across the grass to the back of the picnic area, so it wasn't like the people parked next to me. I did notice them, an elderly black couple that had settled comfortably on the very back table, but I busied myself with my own tendings.

I was just about to mount up, and when I stepped out of the van to close it up for the ride, I noticed the elderly man had walked over to where I was. He was probably 75 years old, about six feet tall, very thin, still fairly upright, though a little slumped at the neck, with a healthy but wrinkled face. His eyes were kind, and his hand was steady as he greeted me, saying, "I want to wish you a happy Independence Day."

Smiling, I shook his hand – his grip was strong and firm and sincere – and heartily wished him the same. He asked, "are you traveling by yerself?" I said I was. "Well", he replied, "I'd like to invite you over to have a glass of champagne with my wife and I."

I was floored. That was so nice of him. I was very polite and very grateful as I declined, saying that I had a place I wanted to get to, but I wondered for the rest of the trip why I did so. I mean, he knew nothing of me: I could've been some redneck bigot that would have told him where to pop his cork, yet he saw me alone on a holiday, and invited me to share champagne with him. Damn, I wish I had; I would love to have heard his life story, and listen to their voices, and just feel The Deep South incarnate. He just caught me so off guard. People just don't *do* that! God, I wish him well, wherever he is.

It's so strange that the "Nicest Person" and the "Worst Person" of the 31-day trip were encountered within eight hours of each other.

About 2:30 or so, I found My Spot. There was a very specific place that I had in my mind. It was a roadside patch of flat lush grass, under a single wide and very shady tree – no, I don't know what freaking kind it was: it had leaves, lots of 'em. NTP has many regular pullouts and picnic areas, but this was a spot I had noticed on previous rides, and had targeted as a great place to stop and relax.

So there it was, just north of Mile 51. I coasted Blue Man to a stop near the trunk, on the grass, about 15 feet from the road surface. Opening all the side and back doors, I stretched out on the bed, propped myself up on three pillows, with Grateful Dead music on chill-out volume (is there a more American band than the Dead?), set my cooler-bag at arm's reach, and just simply reeeeeeee-laxed.

The day was sultry-southern hot, but the shade was nice, and the breeze was tremendous. I did a few jottings in the Notbook, but mostly just sprawled there for about an hour. Every several minutes a car or pickup or motorcycle would drive on by, and most of them gave a beep and a wave. I must have looked every bit as comfortable and content as I was.

After an hour or so, possibly urged by Nature's internal call, I went for a casual stroll in the woods. It was so quiet in there, shady and serene. I sat on a log for a long time, leaning back against a tree, looking up at the many shades of green that were rustling overhead, and amusing the little forest critters who happened by.

When I returned to the van, it was time to move on. It was very late afternoon by now, and I wanted to see another hundred or so miles of this great, great road before daylight ran out. Just before I had left Rochester, I had had the cruise control on Blue Man fixed, which cost \$420. I thought the number was ironic, given my mindset during many of those long cruise-controlled stretches – like this one on NTP -- but clearly worth it.

In all, I think I celebrated Independence Day very well. I was on my favorite road, as relaxed as I have been in a long, long time, and enjoying the freedom and beauty of America. If I had stayed in New Orleans, I would have been hot and sticky with sweaty shorts, probably too drunk too early and smelling very bad, and definitely spending too much money.

And when darkness came on as I drove north up I-55, the tiny sliver of moon smiled at me, and some the fireworks from some small Mississippi town decorated the sky to the west.