

ROAD ROMP 2004

Days 17-19: Saturday, 26 June through Monday, 29 June 2004

FOCK 1: The Road Home

Graceland effectively ended Road Romp '04. Everything else would be just like driving home from the theater after the movie. There are no further highlights to report (that didn't stop me from telling you about Birmingham, though, did it?), so I'm just gonna sum up the last three days, with a reflection tossed in here and there.

10:30 a.m., Saturday, 6/26: on the move. HFBTM #49

Are laurels comfortable to rest on? It's a wreath, right? I guess you have to have more than one of them, but, still, they don't look like soft cushy things to hang out on. They might even have pointy ends.

Some of the billboards on the Alabama highways are almost 60 feet above the ground. By the time I got close enough to be able to read the text on them, they disappeared above my windshield. Are these things targeted towards convertible owners or motorcycles riders?

Alabama might be even more bland than Arkansas. It sure seemed it, especially since it was raining. On both sides, there were big grazing fields for cattle. The blah emptiness of the pastures was broken by a few trees. Just having a few random trees turns an ordinary field into a scenic sight. Trees are cooler than cool. All those wonderful scenes at Yoyo would have been just gray rocks without the green forest to frame them. I love trees. Even without the negative ions.

It occurred to me that I must be running out of good places to go, if I've chosen Birmingham and Montgomery for my route. I have documented my feelings about Alabama's scenic value, and its dearth of green dots. When a field with a few trees in it moves you to make a scenic comment, then you know that the state is lacking.

The rain and underordinary sights were not the worst part of this ride, though: AL-231 from Montgomery straight south into Florida was the worst road of the whole trip. I-65 veered hard west at Montgomery and was clearly a much longer route than I was after. State Highway 231 was dead straight south towards Tallahassee, but I should have known by its color that it would be trouble. A yellow highway on the Rand is bad news. It's not a limited access highway, so vehicles do not enter and exit via ramps. They use intersections, and intersections mean traffic lights. If I ever again find myself in Montgomery with a Florida destination, I will go way out of my way on I-65 just to avoid this road.

There were so many damn traffic lights!! You'd just have time to get up to speed when another one would be turning red. It was mostly open road, with just fields and woods and the occasional small cluster of buildings flanking it, but every little dinky hick country road that crossed it got its own damn light.

Worst of all, each slow-down was causing Moby's tranny to falter and chop. The problem had been dormant for almost the whole trip, mainly because I stayed on roads that were either free flowing or below 45 MPH, so there were minimum passages from 2nd to 3rd gear. The number 231 must have referred to 2nd-3rd-1st – the constant shifts it required.

It was just an awful ride. I was cussing and fuming and not enjoying a thing about this damn state. Happy Birthday, indeed! I tried to find distractions in the roadside sights.

There was a beat-up boxy cinder block building, with an old decrepit sign out front that said something like Baptist Calvary Church. It looked all locked up, with its windows replaced by plywood, but it had a vibrant and fresh blue paint job. And over the door, in perfect shape, was a brand new white sign with red letters that said UTOPIA. Nothing else, just UTOPIA. I

didn't check it out. Who needs Utopia anyway? If that building is Utopia, then I just don't see what the allure is. Though I did have to wonder what was inside.

There was one dead business after another on this road. I had to wonder what killed them. There is no rival interstate to steal away traffic in this part of the state. 231 is The Road. Maybe Montgomery itself is dying, and the traffic between Dothan/Florida and Monty has dwindled. This is not a "ghost town," this is a "ghost road." There are handfuls of nice (small) homes on it, but all these little business have just gone belly up.

There was an attraction called Pioneer Village, with a dozen or so buildings, including a Pioneer Museum, a covered bridge, and an old steam engine. Maybe it was as much shops as a historic theme area, but it had only two cars anyway. And they were probably both employees.

The next town, called Troy, was a sad mix. The first 30 or so families live in mobile homes. The first nice house is a realty office. It was an odd sight. Made me wonder what kind of realty they sold. Once past outer Troy, and into Troy proper, things seemed a tad more prosperous. There was another curious thing, though: a Holiday Inn Express immediately before a Holiday Inn. Right next door to one another. Seems a bit too literal. Is that considered competition? Like Bud and Bud Light?

And as 231 stuttered and stammered its way towards Florida, I was (for some reason) moved to ponder: What does a flagman do when Nature calls? He's stuck out there with his SLOW/STOP sign and a bunch of cars watching him. He can't just step to the roadside. Maybe that's why that guy in AZ didn't want the water I offered him. And it's not like anyone else can just come out and spell him for a while; it's not likely that everyone has gone through the rigorous and specialized flagman training. Lord only knows what chaos an improperly trained substitute would let loose on America's roads. ;]

Just north of MM 177, there was an official-looking, small, green, DOT-style sign with smaller letters than a street sign would have. It read: "Police Jurisdiction." Now, is this the end or the beginning of that jurisdiction? Why is the sign even there? What benefit, and to whom? Is this meant to aid criminals? Get here and you can get out and "nyeah-nyeah" the coppers? Weird place, this 'Bama.

Another sign shortly thereafter boldly stated: "Scenic Dirt Road, Turn Here." WTF? Classic Alabama scenery, I guess. But, come on, how uncommon is a dirt road in Alabama?? That attraction should be in New York City: a real goddamn dirt road in the heart of Brooklyn.

So, I crossed the Pea River. Kinda made me wanna stop and ... have a beer.

The two AA Energizer "e2" batteries, which had been in CD player since well before RR04 began, finally gave up the ghost. Real troopers they were. Well deserving of a toast in their honor. (Jayzuz, now my excuse to drink is honoring dead batteries. Pretty lame, Ricko.)

By the time I reached Dothan, about 15 miles short of Florida, I was feeling mighty frazzled. I needed a break to reset my karma. Ruby Tuesday's did the trick. Great burger, and two tall Bass Ales to get me back on track. I could've have stayed all day, except that it was freaking COLD in there! Service was good, but it should have been; at least a dozen front-of-the-house staff roamed around attending to the six or so customers -- oops, I mean "guests."

When I bartended at Uno's we were told to refer to them always as Guests. "Customers buy groceries," we were told, "Guests come to dinner." Yeah, right, we all scoffed, and guests have to pay for dinner too, right? What a crock. Just as bad as being a "Sales Associate" at Circuit City instead of just a salesperson. Associate, my ass oh shee-it. Pleeeeeease, you corporate goons, give your employees credit for seeing the world the way it is, and don't try to fool us like you try to fool your *customers*.

Then there was the AAMCO Transmission shop on the same road. It had one of those big signs atop a tall pole out front, with an 8' x 10' two-sided plastic sign that was lit from

within. Trouble was, the side facing southbound traffic was *upside down!* The north-facing side was fine, but why the hell would a business let its sign stay like that? How the hell could a sign installer make such an egregious mistake?? And then *not fix it???* I could only shake my head.

There were countless BBQ places all along the main roads of Dothan. I reckon it reflected the culinary tastes of the local population. Yes, some stereotypes do indeed exist for a reason.

I found myself on another spaghetti-bowl of highways at one intersection: 231N, 431N, 52E, Business-431N, 84E, 231S. That must cause a lot of delays, as out-of-towners (like me) have to sort through the various signs and arrows to ascertain which way we should be going – hopefully, we can do that before we end up in the wrong turning lane.

Man, this 49th birthday was one gloomy damn day. Just plain grim. Alabama needs sunshine to be tolerable, and there was no sunshine imminent. With the exception of Graceland and the NTP, there was nothing worth taking a good long look at since Albuquerque.

After several more miles of the Yellowhammer State, I just lost it. I picked up my Sony handheld voice recorder, and vented: “FUCK ALABAMA!!! Worst part of the goddamn trip!! This is the kind of stretch that makes you say, ‘I’m flying from now on!’ BAH!!!!”

I felt a tad better after that.

Then a roadside bar called “Five O’Clock Somewhere” put a smile back on my face, and all was well again.

I saw a sign for “National Peanut Festival, 1 Mile Ahead.” OK, fine, but this was a permanent sign, not some seasonal billboard. Soooo, is it a permanent festival? Are we perpetually celebrating peanuts here in Dothan? Maybe we are. Might as well, I reckon.

Then, at 2:32 p.m., after 7446 Road Romp ‘04 miles, Moby rolled back into Florida, the Sunshine State! Predictably, it was raining. The rain kept coming down, but that’s just what rain does. This was a real gully washer too. The strongest rain of the whole dang trip was in the Sunshine State. Well, where else was it going to be, in the New Mexico desert??

The precipitation bothered me for more than the usual road condition reasons; Moby’s windshield seal was leaking in about five places, so it was kinda rainin’ inside too. Oh well.

Is there anything that elicits more of a “WHOA!” than lightning? It is such a violent flash that it brings out a spontaneous response. You rarely plan a response to lightning, and if you do, it comes out sounding pretty phony, like you planned it or something.

The first thing that struck my eye on the Florida stretch of 231 was a big green field with dozens of grazing cows. Not exactly the Florida stereotype. You’d think you were in Iowa. In fact, it looked a lot like South Alabama. I wonder why?

A couple miles later, there was a medium-sized, plain, vacant building with a sign on it: “Hello Available [with a phone number]” I bet if you called the number, which I didn’t catch, someone would say “Hello,” since they had one available. It’s just past the center of Campbellton, on the right, if you want to go see it.

Shortly after that, there seemed to be a nice town coming up: good homes, nice produce shops, watermelons. But the outskirts looked better than inskirts, which is kind of the opposite of the way it usually seems to work. Makes sense this way, though, doesn’t it? The inskirts were there first so they are the oldest parts, and the outskirts were put up afterwards so they should look newer.

At 3:18, it was 4:18, just like that. Boom, bang, back in Eastern Time. Snap my fingers and an hour disappears. Another hour older in a heartbeat. Sigh.

The Florida Interstates – 10E and 75S – passed without incident, and at 9:03 p.m., I pulled into Dad and Marilyn's place in Leesburg to have a yumyum lasagna dinner, take a real shower, and sleep in a real bed. It was meat lasagna, unlike the Three Cheese 'Zag way back in Kanab, Utah. I won't say that either one was better than the other, but I will say that I had a lot more hunks of Marilyn's beefy 'zag than that one cheesy slab at the Rocking V.

Sunday the 27th was a chill-out day. It had been built in to the schedule in case things ran overtime along the way. And it probably would have been needed if I had had to bring Nato to the Palmetto Stato.

So, I just hung out in Orlando for the afternoon and evening, drinking a whole lot of rummo at some Summer Festival I found somewhere. Serendipity, baybeee.

Now, you would think that I would have had to be back to work on Monday morning, wouldn't you? And you'd be right! When Monday dawned -- 8:40 a.m. was dawn enough – I was on the job. I hit Florida's Turnpike south and angled for Fort Lauderdale. There was an errand to run, and I was just the man to run it.

We needed fans. Mobile home parts are getting harder to find these days, I'm told, and the kitchen exhaust fans were especially elusive. A vendor in Fort Lauderdale sells them but does not deliver. Shipping would have cost more than a few bucks, so I volunteered to swing by on my ride home and scoop them up, thus saving the shipping cost. What a trooper, huh?

But I was "sluggish" from that festival, and city traffic was irking Moby and making him feverish. The road trip was turning into a bit of a drone. It was good to get that leisure day, but the last three nights had been late: 4:30, 2:30, 3:00. I needed to get back to workin' life just to get a normal sleep pattern back. That live-by-the-sun thing dried up damn quickly once the scenic areas were left behind.

Fans acquired, it was truly homeward bound. BUT, there was still one stop that I had to make: Alabama Jack's, the pride of downtown Card Sound since 1947. I've told you about this place before. It's an open-air restaurant and bar that sits comfortably next to an intersection of salt water canals that cut through the dense mangroves bordering the eastern shore of Lake Surprise.

To get to the place, you must leave the highway system and go small. From the southern tip of mainland Florida, US-1 is THE route all the way to Key West. Alternate through-routes just do not exist, except one: Card Sound Road. This two-lane road bypasses the infamous 18-Mile Stretch of US-1 that connects Key Largo to the peninsula. The Stretch is notorious for high speeds, horrific accidents, and five-hour closures when those first two ingredients suddenly combine.

Card Sound Road is about five miles longer, but noticeably more scenic and considerably more sane. There is a \$1 toll bridge, but the view it affords you is worth a buck anyway.

As I approached my destination on Card Sound Road, I spied a hand-painted white plank sign on the right side of the road that said "LIVE BLUE CRAB" with an arrow pointing left. So, naturally, out of curiosity, I looked to the left side of the road, (in case this was some monstrous, blue, 20-foot-tall crab, I guess), and there was another hand-painted white plank sign that said, "Out of Crabs." Freakin' Keys. Typical.

3:20 on a Monday afternoon at Alabama Jack's is an exercise in Mellow. I was almost alone there, with just two other tables of sleepy customers and Mike the mighty barkeep. Some soothing reggae played over the sound system, and a soft breeze swirled throughout the dining area. The shade was cool, and shadows dim, and the view of the shimmering water was grand.

Alabama Jack's is a GFTS place (Good For The Soul). It's like a tollbooth for the mind: check your stresses and harries at the door 'cause you be in da Keys now, mon. No more 75 MPH zooming *russsssh*. The Interstate Highway system doesn't invade this territory, and neither should its mindset. Cruise control at 52 becomes the norm for the final couple of hours. A popular bumper sticker down here proclaims, "Slow down! This Ain't The Mainland!" We don't zoom in the Keys, we just rolllllll. Any zooming we have to do, we do on the water.

Alabama Jack's is the perfect Decompression Zone. You enter it from the Real World, have a nice unwind session over a yummo cheeseburger and a Sunset Ale, and then slide on into the Keys. And they were on the Food Network recently! Mike told me that Al Roker had been there with a crew, proclaiming to the world that Alabama Jack's was good eats.



Mike Sague is the son of the owner, Phyllis, whom I had the pleasure of sitting beside and chatting with on one of my visits. He and his sister Raquel are almost always at the helm of the bar. Mike is garrulous and gregarious, as a good barkeep should be, and runs his bar with smooth good nature. There is no obsequiousness with any customers – you don't have to kiss ass when your family owns the place – just "What'll it be?" and "Too easy, you got it."

One Sunday, while swilling and chowing, I found myself in a conversation with Mike and few other customers. Mike knew them kinda like he knew me: the normal across-the-bar friendship. Topics came and went, and finally stories about college days flew and fluttered. Mike pitched in with his own. One of the other guys eventually had to ask, "If you have a college degree, what are you doing *here*?"

Mike hesitated, looking for a delicate way to tell him to go fuck himself I bet, but I interjected, "Because he took a good look at the world and figured out that he's better off here." I meant every word of it too.

Mike high-fived me, to a round of nods, and clinking bottles. Two guys said at once, "fuckin' A right, man," which led to more clinking and shared good nature.

I only stop in here every couple of months or so, but Mike knows my order anyway, and he knows I order my two cheeseburgers one at a time.

It's not really by design that I do that; my intentions are usually just to have one. But it tastes real good and doesn't cost a hell of a lot, and once I get there I'm always looking for a reason to stay, so I order up a second helping of each and keep writing in the Notbook.

On weekends, the Card Sound Machine gets the place hopping with lively country music. They are the ultimate "house band," having played there every weekend for the last 19 years.

But today it was burgers, beers, and the balmy breeze. Perfect place to do The Ahhhhhhhh Thing.

"The USA is big and grand, and the desert is vast," I wrote this day, while chillin' out on the canal side of the bar. "I have seen enough desert to sate me; any future ramacks will avoid the bottom-left corner of the US. Colorado will be the gateway to Utah and northern Arizona. It may be two years away, but there is something tempting about walking the Big Hole rim-to-rim. Maybe even on my 50th birthday??" Tempting indeed, but all talk.

The Oh-Five Drive will be long and convoluted. The southwest has been the target of the last two excursions, and much Utah and Arizona marrow has been sucked. Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana beckon me now. Lots of miles, but I'm just the guy to drive them. Key West to Cape Flattery: Southernmost Point to Northwesternmost Point. It's a natural.

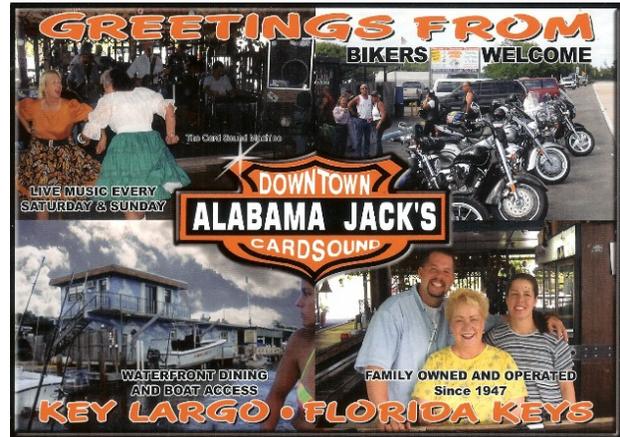
I closed the book, bid Mighty Mike a fond farewell, and cozied into the Mobe for the final two-and-a-half hours of one excellent roadtrip.

The southern half of Card Sound Road had been freshly paved since my last visit to A-Jax, and Moby ate up the dark, smooth, sexy asphalt. It felt odd to be ending a ramack across the southern states. All previous versions had concluded with final drives across Pennsylvania, or New Jersey, or New York, or Connecticut, or Massa-freaking-chusetts. But this is home now, here in the Fantabulous Florida Keys, and the ramacking emanates from hither now.

The final 100 miles was saturated with law enforcement: Homestead Dept. of Corrections, Miami-Dade County police, State DOT Police, a Florida State Trooper in a Corvette, and Monroe County Sheriff's Department. I got the hint, set CC at 52, and put my seat belt on.

I couldn't believe how good these palm trees looked after all that desert and, more recently, the blandness of the Deep South. As good as all that different scenery looked when I headed out of South Florida two-and-a-half weeks ago, it seemed even better to be coming back to this.

I made my stop on Cudjoe Key, about 22 miles from home, to pick up Critter from Marlene, the pet sitter. It was good to see the little beast again. He yawned when I picked



him up. He always yawns when he gets excited. I probably have the world's only narcoleptic ferret. I was very happy to see him again too.

It was just short of 7:00 p.m. when I drove along South Roosevelt Beach and looked out over the long blue ocean that Key West sits in. It was good to be home.

But I still had questions: Is there any kind of nog besides Egg? Do you quench anything besides thirst?

Maybe I'll find my answers Next Time.

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