

AMERICA'S MUSICAL HERITAGE TOUR

Hello fellow music lovers!

Bill and I would like to share our experience of our wonderful trip to America to visit the 'music capitals' – including **Nashville, Memphis and New Orleans**. It was very humbling to visit places where the greats of Country, Rock and Roll, Jazz and Blues music have lived and performed – our 'bucket list' is now complete. We were on an organised bus trip – not our usual way to travel, but this way we were assured of seeing as much as possible with minimum of fuss, no queuing to get into venues, and to have commentaries from the Tour Guide providing us with invaluable information.

First stop was **NASHVILLE**. What a beautiful city – modern, clean and **fun**. We visited the **COUNTRY HALL OF FAME** - wow! Here we saw memorabilia, instruments, costumes, photographs of all those artists that we all grew up listening to and instilled in us our love of country music. We could have spent a full day there and still not seen everything – it was a wonderful legacy to the country greats. We had a ball on **HONKY TONK ROW** – starting with a drink at Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville Hotel just to soak up the vibe. **Music, Music, Music** – every café and hotel had live entertainment. We were in "Country Music Heaven". The mobile bars were a hoot - imagine a bar, say 6 stools on each side and pedals – one in particular was full of chicky babes waving and screaming to all in sundry as they pedalled by – it could only happen in Nashville. Probably the most well known pub was Tootsies where many greats made a start on their musical journey – just one to mention is Loretta Lynn (Tootsies featured in the movie "The Coal Miner's Daughter"). We saw Ernie Tubb's record shop which is renowned for specialising in hard-to-find CD's, Tapes, Videos and Books. That night we had reserved seats at the world-famous **GRAND OLE OPRY**. **It was a truly unforgettable show**. Just to be there to know it was the mecca for country musicians was enough, but to be part of the audience of a series of live radio shows was another. Each taping had one main host/hostess who introduced the artists. The performances were amazing – singers, musicians, dancers, comedians – having us all on a high from go to wo. Please Google Chris Janson and listen to him sing "Buy me a Boat" (humorous) and "When I'm Holding Her" (which had many of the audience in tears). Needless to say, he brought the house down!! If I won the Lottery tomorrow I would finance this young, handsome, talented man to visit Australia for you all to see. Next we visited **THE RCA STUDIO B** – one of the country's most important studios where over 35,000 songs were recorded. Again there was lots of memorabilia, and an informative commentary explaining who had recorded there between 1957 and 1977.

There were lots of '**moments**' during our trip – one was – as we walked into the RCA Studio there was a recording of Jim Reeves singing "Welcome to my World", which is the title of one of Bill's CD's. Just brought home to me that a lot of the songs that Bill sings to you evolved from the places we were visiting. Another **moment** – it was explained that Elvis always recorded from the 'soft spot' in the studio, which was marked on the floor with a blue cross. Bill and I stood on that cross as we recorded "Can't Help Falling In Love With You" along with all those on the bus. We have a CD of the recording as a souvenir.

Next stop **MEMPHIS**. Here we visited **SUN STUDIOS** – this historic studio launched the careers of Elvis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and many more **Rock 'n' Roll** artists. Also **STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC** celebrating the **Soul** music made famous by Otis Redding, Booker T and the MG's, Aretha Franklin etc.

That night we enjoyed dinner and a walk down the famous **Beale Street** with its many music clubs – just soaking up the atmosphere. The next day a local guide played and sang selections from the city's rich musical heritage, along with lots of comedy and interaction. There was never a dull moment on the trip.

No trip to Memphis is complete without the obligatory visit to **GRACELAND**. We walked through the mansion which would have been truly magnificent at the time Elvis and the family lived there – the décor is somewhat retro now. I was absolutely 'gob smacked' when I entered the long narrow room which housed the gold records and trophies awarded to Elvis. OMG – I knew he was popular, but had never comprehended how acclaimed this man was. There will never be another **ELVIS** !! The Meditation Garden where Elvis and members of his family have been laid to rest was poignant – another **moment**.

We were starting to get the feel of the Deep South by now – with some of the commentaries touching on the racism experienced in yesteryear. We visited the Lorraine Motel where the black activist Martin Luther King was assassinated. I have since Googled and read his famous "I have a dream" speech.

We left Memphis to follow the path of the mighty Mississippi River to travel deep into the heart of the Mississippi Delta – the "Birthplace of the Blues" where many of the truly indigenous American musicians such as Muddy Waters, Sam Cooke, Ike Turner influenced musicians worldwide. We visited the **DELTA BLUES MUSEUM**, again with memorabilia and artefacts. We had a special lunch at **GROUND ZERO BLUES CLUB** – owned by Morgan Freeman. By special I mean – we were introduced to the Southern Cuisine – such foods as Catfish, Succotash, Cajon Cooking (yummy spices), Grits (bit soggy for me), which added to the overall cultural experience.

The town of **GREENWOOD** was a surprise – very picturesque. A film called "**The Help**" was filmed in and around this town. We watched the film on the bus and it was great to see scenes that were featured in the movie – well worth watching. Also the **Tallahatchie Bridge** was nearby – remember the song by Bobby Gentry back in the 60's called the "Ode to Billy Joe". I kept pinching myself that we were actually 'there' and that we were being taken to so many places that we had only heard about in songs or seen in movies.

Our Tour Guide kept quoting "each day gets better" – which seemed impossible to us. Although each day had a unique experience and therefore did get better. We stayed in very nice hotels which had **veerry** comfortable beds – which were welcome at the end of each eventful day. They were so comfortable that we have bought a new bed since we came home as we were spoilt whilst away.

The late and great BB KING passed away on the 14th May (two days before we left) and so throughout the trip many artists paid tribute to this great musician. We visited the **BB KING MUSEUM** in **INDIANOLA** – his hometown (where he was to be laid to rest). Another **moment**.

We continued south to **NATCHEZ**, where we enjoyed a horse-drawn carriage ride through the town listening to the driver tell the stories of the history that make up this beautiful city - the architecture was unique. That night we had dinner in a magnificent, elegant **ANTEBELLUM MANSION** (pre Civil War). Kept expecting Scarlet O'Hara or Rhett Butler to appear. Very posh I might say!! – loved the piano playing in the background.

I had always wanted to see a Cotton Plantation - so you can imagine how I felt when we finally visited the Frogmore Plantation. We were greeted by a guide dressed in period costume who directed the bus driver to drive into a 'Cotton Gin' where she explained the process of growing and producing cotton. We saw the small wooden homes that the workers lived in (you've probably seen them in the movies) and then we 'went into a church' to hear a bit more about the history. Low and behold, there was a dark gentlemen dressed as a minister who sang some negro spiritual songs. He also sang 'Old Man River'. Isn't that the song you want to hear when you are in the South following the Mississippi??

By now we were in **LOUISIANA** where we learnt stories about Jerry Lee Lewis, Conway Twitty and other Louisiana Delta musicians – well and truly in **CAJUN COUNTRY**. We were treated to a unique experience at **MARTIN ACCORDIANS** where we learnt the history of accordion making and enjoyed music and story telling by the Martin family. It was here I asked if Bill could borrow a guitar so that he could experience playing and singing in America. Needless to say he surprised our co-travellers with a rendition of Hank Williams “You Win Again” with the Martin Family backing him on pedal steel guitar, base and accordion – another **moment**. That night we ate Cajun Cuisine and were taught how to dance Cajun Style by a local couple – lotta fun.

We thoroughly enjoyed the peaceful cruise through the swampy waterways of the Atchafalaya Basin. The two guides on the boat had that great southern drawl which authenticated our experience – moss-draped trees, wildlife AND alligators. The Cajun home cooking back at Magee’s Landing was to ‘die for’. Next we visited **HOUHAS HOUSE** on a sugar plantation. We toured another mansion which was filled with period antiques and Louisiana artwork. The tour guide was dressed in authentic period costume and was hilarious. Her accent was so soooouthern and entertaining. (She sounded very much like Dolly Parton). It was here I got to tinkle the ivories on the grand piano – everyone sang along.

The final destination was **NEW ORLEANS** with its French influence. Here we visited another museum where we saw Louis Armstrong’s trumpet and Fats Domino’s piano. We visited Jackson Square and walked down the famous **Bourbon Street** – buskers, neon lights – a real carnival atmosphere. We had a final farewell dinner with those on the tour at one of the oldest restaurants in New Orleans.

Bill and I opted to stay for an extra night so that we could experience a trip on a Paddle Steamer on the Mississippi River. It was wonderful – complete with steamboat music which is called Calliope – a musical instrument that produces sound by sending steam through large whistles. We were treated to more Cajun Cuisine for lunch and a Jazz Band playing live music – our final **moment**.

There were many other experiences along the way, but I’ve tried to focus on the main ones relating to Music. Overall, this was a most enjoyable, cultural and musical experience which we wanted to share with like-minded music lovers.

Together in Music

Billy Dee and Cindee

PS: Our highlight was the evening at the Grand Ole Opry – PRICELESS !!