



"You're welcome, if you can find it." -Henry Gipson

GIP'S Place

Where Blessings Meet the Blues

By Shelley Stewart Photos by Meg McKinney

Mardi Gras beads, strings of lights, birthday banners, and snowflakes adorn the rafters of the tin-roof shed, creating a wonderland of deranged splendor. Beer bottles are lined up, and yellowing images of singers, sidemen, and Delta bands stare down from the juke-joint walls. Mismatched chairs and tiny tables fill up as neighbors and blues-loving nomads drift in to stake their claims. The wild-eyed feline on a painted sign proclaims this as "Gip's Place—Where All the Cats Play."

Word spreads underground about this Bessemer mecca for blues-lovers. On almost any Saturday night, the place is packed. Wailing harmonica and rifts so raw they tear at the soul fill the air with pulsating sound. As the night goes on, some dance the boogie on the precious few inches of available floorspace.

Henry Gipson, affectionately called Mr. Gip, allows that he's had his place since 1952, for "nigh on 60 years" including a few years his brother ran it "before he had to leave town." He has hosted such blues greats as the late Willie King, Curtis Files, Big Mike Griffin, Kent and Cedric Burnside, Kenny Brown, Liz Brown, Roscoe Robinson, and The North Mississippi All-Stars.

Lightnin' Malcolm joined Elliott and the Untouchables at Gip's Place in an unforgettable session that lasted long into the night. Sam Lay, a musician who played with Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Bob Dylan, is legendary to the regulars. The list goes on and on. Most bluesmen jump at the chance to play here because so few places like Gip's still exist.

No one—maybe not even he—knows exactly how old Mr. Gip is. Hank Moore and Lenny Madden, who "discovered" Gip's Place back in the late '70s, say they celebrated his 85th birthday at least four or five different years. The son of a sharecropper, Mr. Gip worked for many years as a railroad man. Now he owns Pine Hill Cemetery and still digs graves with his backhoe. His passion, though, is singing the



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blues. After the main show is over, he often takes part in informal jam sessions that may not end until 3 a.m.

No matter how late the Saturday night, Mr. Gip and his wife, who rarely comes back to the shed, will spend all day Sunday in church. "Here's a real grave-digger who sings the blues all night and prays all day," Moore says with a laugh. "Only in Alabama!"

And only in Alabama would a gut-busting night of the blues begin with a prayer and a blessing for everyone there. Then come the rules: No cursing, no weapons, gentlemen are to leave only with the ladies they come with, and absolutely no drugs or gambling allowed. Patrons bring their own beverages. Mr. Gip is from the old school; he's a tall dignified figure in a Panama hat, presiding over his domain with a gentle but very firm hand.

One night Watermelon Slim, winner of numerous national awards for his music, cut loose with profanity on stage between songs. Mr. Gip immediately set him straight, much to Slim's bewilderment. "Hey, I thought this place was a juke joint," Slim later complained to Madden. "Yeah," Madden said, "but it's Mr. Gip's juke joint!"

Ever the genial host, the owner makes the rounds with a paper cup of who-knows-what in his hand, smiling and stopping to

talk with the patrons, black and white. "Mr. Gip's heart is so big that he doesn't see any difference in people. He wants them to come together," Moore says. "So they do. There aren't any differences here. They come together every Saturday and just enjoy the music."

When Lenny Madden moved to the South, he had already discovered Mississippi John Hurt and had learned to play haunting blues on his guitar. A fellow musician heard him play and eventually trusted Madden enough to invite him out to Bessemer. "Mr. Gip was lying there asleep when we walked in," Madden says. "I played a little Robert Johnson, and his eyes just lit up. I started going down there and then told Hank [Moore] about it." Soon they couldn't stay away.

At the time, in 1978, there were racial undercurrents in Birmingham. A constant stream of great blues musicians, most of them black, came through town but their music stayed in its narrow subculture, never advertised to the public at large. Many of these musicians came out to play at Gip's Place, where they mightily impressed the two new visitors.

The music was too good not to be more widely heard, yet few outside the very modest neighborhood were even aware of

it. "A friend of mine was talking about another place, saying that it was the best blues joint anywhere around," Madden said. "I told her, 'Y'all have one right underneath your nose that you don't even know about!' But it was two more years before the friend ventured to Bessemer.

There used to be only a stage behind Mr. Gip's house, and music-lovers sat on the ground or perched on one of the old sofas scattered about the place. Madden and

Moore stepped up to build flooring and a roof so the building could accommodate listeners more comfortably.

Now the room can be used year-round, but on warm nights people often go outside, swaying around communal tables to rhythms rich with history. Many in the crowd are members of the Magic City Blues Society, which even has a section on its web site called "What's Happening at Gip's?" Most, though, are just people who love the music enough to make the trek. They come from all over Alabama and even farther at times.

Roger Stephenson, a British transplant who—except for his accent—seems more Southern than a native son, helps book regional and even national acts for Gip's Place. Passing around a tin bucket, he oversees the collection of \$10 cover charges, which barely meets the expense. If it doesn't, he and Madden dip into their own pockets to pay the bands.

"We've never had a band be disappointed though," Moore adds. "They respect what this place represents: the tradition. And always, the music."

People say that the Blues gets in your blood. "It's in you, and it got to come out," sang John Lee Hooker in his famous song, Boogie Chillun. •



- For more information on Gip's Place, go to www.myspace.com/gipsjukejoint or visit www.magiccityblues.org
- Blues fans who need directions to Gip's Place may contact rjs44@charter.net or hankmoore@mindspring.com
- Bring \$10 cover and your own beverages. Most shows start at 9 p.m.



A musician plays on a home made cigar box guitar - a trend started by poor musicians and made popular by blues greats like Bo Diddley and Blind Willie McTell.



Lenny Madden, a transplant to the South, discovered Gip's Place back in the 70's.