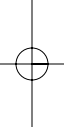
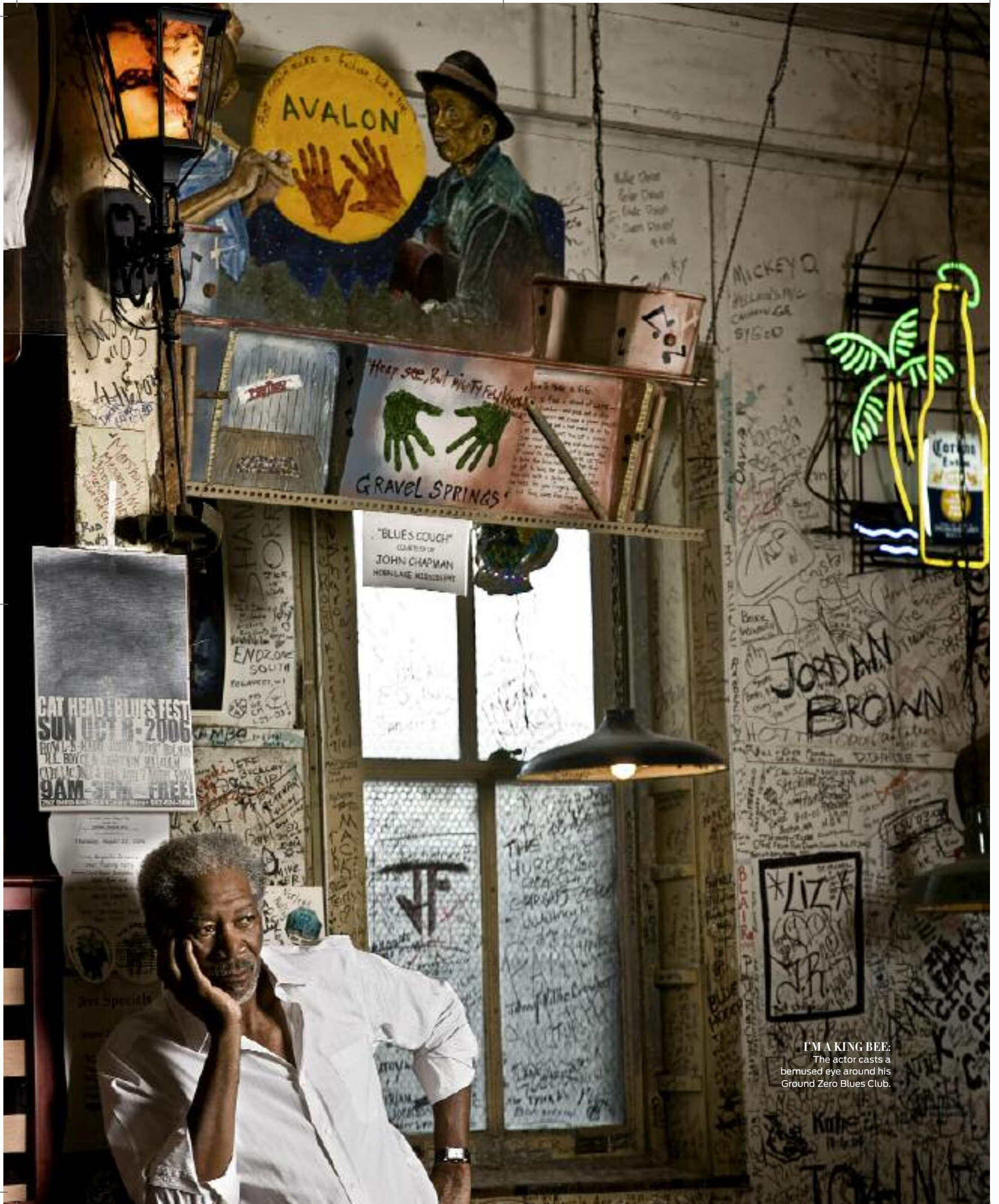


# BLUES TRAVELER

**MORGAN FREEMAN**  
USES HIS WINGS TO STICK CLOSE TO HOME —  
AND MAYBE HELP SAVE DELTA MUSIC.  
BY NICK KOLAKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN SPANIER. STYLING BY CAROLYN BENDALL





**I'M A KING BEE:**  
 The actor casts a bemused eye around his Ground Zero Blues Club.



two weeks prior he was filming a thriller in the Czech Republic with Angelina Jolie, and his next big jaunt will take him to Montana, but for the moment, Morgan Freeman is perfectly happy to be touching down in Mississippi — especially if it's at the stick of the Cessna Citation ISP Model 501 he's piloted for two years. When he spots the white dual-engine jet parked on the tarmac, that well-worn face breaks into the sort of impish grin that so disarmed Ashley Judd in *Kiss the Girls*: “Hello, darling!”

A couple hours later, the endless green fields stretch to the horizon, Freeman drops to an obstacle-free approach as easy as walking down a porch step and then he's here: Clarksdale, Mississippi, putative cradle of the blues, and less than an hour down a narrow blacktop from his boyhood home.

Clarksdale is the place, of course, where legend has it that Robert Johnson knelt at the crossroads of Highways 61 and 49 and sold his soul to the devil for perfect strumming fingers. Freeman spent his formative years about 50 miles southeast of that crossroads. Born in Memphis in 1937, he briefly moved with his parents to the South Side of Chicago, and then spent long stretches living with his sharecropper grandparents, who worked the fields outside tiny Greenwood, Mississippi. He's always had fond memories of those times. The family barely got by, it was the height of the Jim Crow South, but something about the community's warmth, culture and, especially, music seems to have worked its way into his veins.

Fourteen years ago, Freeman decided once again to put down roots more firmly in the area, acquiring the family plot from his mother and stepfather and building a house there. Most of the old juke joints had flickered out by then, and while the region still had

a special hold on him, it had grown increasingly difficult for outsiders to understand exactly what he saw in the place. “People were stumbling up and down the streets, asking, ‘Where can we hear some blues?’” Freeman says. “So Bill said, one day — no, I said, ‘We ought to have a place.’”

Bill is Bill Lockett, the lawyer Freeman hired to help with construction on his house and a Southern gentleman of the type they seemingly stopped minting around the time of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: an attorney/businessman/cultural patron/builder who, as he says, has lived here “for all but six weeks of my life,” and couldn't be having more fun pumping new vitality into the town with his Oscar-winning pal of 11 years.

“Then we built Madidi,” says Freeman, referring to the fine-dining establishment two blocks from the club, “and I did most of the grunt work.”

Jokes Lockett: “He hung a blind in the second window.”

“I can't drive nails,” Freeman concedes.

Ground Zero Blues Club, which opened in May 2001, announces its intentions right on the front door, with a laminated sign that reads, in part: THE VERY BEGINNING: SQUARE ONE. From the club's concrete porch, dotted with plush ripped sofas and a grill sculpted to look like a giant pig, you can toss a stone and hit the railroad tracks where Muddy Waters once rode a train north.

The inside of Ground Zero has that deliberately battered interior blues aficionados will travel hours to see — a space modeled after the old-school juke joints where the masters drank, played and occasionally

died in very unpleasant ways. Seemingly every guest, some from as far as California and London, has signed the rough whitewashed walls (“Jameka Ebonie”/ “Evan Bad Ass”), the columns in the center of the room (“JEN.” “JEN.” “JEN”), even the rims of the pool tables. A kudzu of Christmas lights and rice-paper lanterns grows from the exposed-joint ceiling. In a glass case above the bar, dangling like a holy relic in a Florentine cathedral, gleams a white guitar signed by John Lee Hooker.

The place is, indeed, a kind of church — a shrine to the sort of watering holes that existed when Freeman was growing up. “We didn't want to jazz it up too much, because it's a juke joint,” he says of the once fully dilapidated building. “The outside looked pretty much the same as this.” Walking in one evening, he moves with feline suppleness down the bar, shaking hands, trading banter — “I don't do autographs, I do hugs,” he tells one woman before throwing his arm around her — cracking jokes and generally appearing completely at home even as people crowd around to get a piece of him.

#### HOW HE GOT THOSE SEEN-IT-ALL EYES

Cut to the 1940s. As the nation fights a bloody war to the bitter end, Hollywood churns out fighter-pilot pictures by the dozen: Square-jawed heroes in sheepskin bomber jackets living heroic lives and dying valiant deaths in flicks with titles such as *God Is My Co-Pilot* and *Aerial Gunner*. Sitting in his classroom, a young Morgan Freeman doodles dogfights in the margins of his papers, and flies his desk across imaginary



**GOING DOWN THAT ROAD:**  
(Clockwise from right) Freeman and Lockett share a moment; a souvenir from a ride in an Air Force jet; a tribute painting, from Ground Zero; from the military days.



skies: “All those pictures just got me,” he says.

The feeling never wore off; before he graduated from high school, in the mid-’50s, he tried to enlist in the Air Force, which told him to cool his jets a while longer. “They said to go back and finish school — they’d wait a year,” he says dryly.

In some alternate universe, perhaps, Colonel Morgan Freeman, USAF (Ret.), sits on a porch telling war stories over a pint or two of Guinness, but that version of things never came to fruition. In 1958, “I was sitting in a T33 jet trainer and had an epiphany,” he says. “I realized. ‘This isn’t what I want; I want to pretend. I don’t want to shoot nobody — I want them to dust themselves off and go back to their actor’s marks.’”

Three months later, Freeman left the Air Force and, with \$175 in his pocket, headed for Hollywood, those

dreams of flight put on hold for another four decades.

If anything, his career at first resembled that of the bluesmen — a hard road, with only small successes. He moved to New York before again bouncing west, working when he could, eventually finding his way into a musical repertory group in San Francisco. Afterward, he took a job at the post office to save money, hoping to move to Paris and pursue a dance career. He made it as far east as New York, where he stayed, alternating gigs — including a dancing stint at the 1964 World’s Fair — with odd jobs to pay the rent.

“There are times you do something you’re good at, and you get energized,” he says. “Someone tells you that you’re good at this, so you get the energy to stay with it a little while longer.”

His first real break came in

1966, as an understudy for the stage production of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. “One night the main actor had a hissy fit and wouldn’t get onstage. And I had to go onstage as an actor,” he says. “The power I’ve always felt onstage surged through me, and I said, ‘This, this is what I’m supposed to be doing.’”

Bigger breaks came in time. During the ’70s, he spent six years playing the character Easy Reader on *The Electric Company* children’s program. Early fans of that role likely got a nasty case of whiplash a decade later with Freeman’s Oscar-nominated performance as a pimp called Fast Black in 1987’s otherwise forgettable *Street Smart*. He played a chauffeur in *Driving Miss Daisy*, a fierce Civil War soldier in *Glory* and a prison sage in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Suddenly legendary film critic Pauline Kael was asking if he wasn’t the greatest actor in America. He earned more Oscar nominations and a Tony Award. He co-starred in *Seven*, and in 2005 finally won that coveted gold statue for *Million Dollar Baby*.

He made enough money to buy a plane.

#### HOW HE GOT STARTED AGAIN

Five years ago, Freeman and Lockett were at dinner. The actor looked at his friend and said, simply, “I’m ready.”

“Ready for what?” his buddy replied.

A little under 24 hours later, the two were sitting inside a turbocharged twin-engine Seneca. Lockett had been flying for 30 years, and in short order he took Freeman aloft on seven quick trips. “The last time I got in, crossed my arms and said, ‘OK, this is what you’re going to do,’” Lockett recalls. His instructions: Start the plane, take off on 3-6, fly out 2,500 feet to the Mississippi River, fly the river’s center line, turn east for Charleston and loop back around for

Clarksdale. Freeman flew, and “I never lifted my hands off my chest,” Luckett says.

These days, Freeman spends much of his time flying into or out of Clarksdale or Beef Island, British Virgin Islands. While the former offers some of the easiest approaches on the planet (no high-tension power lines, one small clump of trees less than 30 feet high), the landing strip on Beef Island is flanked by hills and miles of unforgiving sea. “I like it because it’s difficult. You need to *fly* in,” Freeman says over dinner at Madidi. Once you leave the docks, you also need to *sail*. Owner of a 43-footer, Freeman seems to revel in the sport as much as he does his flying, especially the way it tests him and occasionally puts him back in touch with what Muddy Waters might have called those howlin’ wolf moments. “Thirty-foot waves,” he recalls of one particularly fearsome storm. “I yelled down to my wife in the cabin, ‘Take a look at *this!*’”

Three years ago, the base commander at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi invited Freeman and Luckett to fly with USAF Captains in T37s. Strapped into flight suits and boots, they roared into the sky, their pilots executing a series of unsettling loops and rolls. “He was about 50 years late in terms of experiencing flight in an Air Force jet,” Luckett says. “But he was up there, for a short while.”

#### SAVING THE BLUES, ONE NIGHT AT A TIME

Some years Freeman is in Mississippi for all but three weeks; some years, three weeks is all the time he has in the

state. “All depends on the work,” he says. “Work comes in all different forms.” Luckett handles many of the day-to-day operations.

But without the planes (he also pilots a Cessna 414 Ram VII), it would likely be even harder to spend enough time in a place like this; that 65-minute drive from Memphis airport would swallow huge chunks of his schedule.

And if that happened — if he couldn’t be entrenched in the community — then there would be no sights like this: Sit on one of the torn couches outside the Ground Zero Blues Club on a summer day so hot it feels like a burning hand pressing gently on your skin. Watch the arrival of the locals and the out-of-towners as they park on the gravel by the railroad tracks in their battered flatbeds and shiny minivans, the tourists grimacing as they down their \$2 Blue Chikan Suicide Shot, named after local bluesman James “Super Chikan” Johnson.

Now watch as people who likely would never have visited Clarksville were it not for the Ground Zero stand up and walk to the door to add their signatures to the mass scrawl. See how, on the rough board screwed above the doorknob, one woman was possessed to pen a lovesick screed to all the greats she has ever heard: “11/18/06 April Vicknair [hearts] Robert Johnson, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray [Vaughan], BB King, Muddy Waters, etc.”

When this place, and its music, can inspire an outpouring like that, that’s when you know Freeman and his copilot have done their jobs as the blues angels of Clarksdale. m

## { DELTA DELIGHTS }

FLYING INTO CLARKSDALE OFFERS A CHANCE TO FEED THE SOUL THROUGH MUSIC — OR THROUGH BROILED MEAT WITH FINGER-LICKING-WORTHY SAUCE.

**Ground Zero Blues Club:** Freeman’s homage to the juke joints of his youth is now the place for live blues acts and Southern soul cuisine. Plus, the seven upstairs rooms, more extensively renovated, rent to visitors starting at \$75 a night. Check out the second-floor hallway with artifacts from the building’s century-old history, including a 1953 model Coke machine and a “peerless water closet” that dates to 1900. (0 Blues Alley. 662-621-9009; groundzerobluesclub.com)

**Abe’s BBQ:** A fixture of Clarksdale’s B&B (blues and barbecue) scene since before Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson were singing about having been done wrong. This hole in the wall serves succulent pork, hot tamales, burgers and ribs. For a teaser, order some of its sauce online. (616 State Street. 662-624-9947; abesbbq.com)

**Cat Head:** This tiny gallery not only sells local folk art and blues music; it’s also a superior resource for finding live blues events in the Delta. Just remember to ask for directions to whichever venue or festival you decide to visit; some are a little off the beaten track. (252 Delta Avenue. 662-624-5992; cathead.biz)

**Shack Up Inn:** If you want your quest for the blues to have a ring of down-home authenticity, it’d be hard to do better than the Shack Up Inn, where visitors can stay in a shotgun shack — albeit a fully renovated, tastefully decorated one with air conditioning and running water. A favorite haunt for visiting musicians, prices range from \$50 to 85 per night. (001 Commissary Circle. 662-624-8329; shackupinn.com)

**Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival:** Formerly known as the King Biscuit Blues Festival (the saga of how it lost rights to its name is worthy of a blues song), this annual three-day gathering (October 4-6) draws some 10,000 people to the tiny town of Helena, Arkansas (about 30 miles northwest of Clarksdale, most of it a straight shot down I-55), to hear dozens of local and national blues musicians. In the true spirit of music celebrating the down-and-out, it’s also free. (bluesandheritage.com)



**BLUES DOWN HOME:** From guitars to show fliers, the Ground Zero stage puts its heritage front and center.