

## Beale Street

Beale Street began life as one of Memphis's most exclusive enclaves; its elite residents were driven out by the yellow fever epidemics, to be replaced by a diverse mix of blacks, whites, Greeks, Jews, Chinese and Italians. But it was Beale's black culture that gave the street its fame. This was where black roustabouts, deckhands and travelers passing through Memphis immediately headed for; rural blacks came for the bustling Saturday market; and, in times of strict segregation, Beale acted as the center for black businesses, financiers and professionals. As the black main street of the mid-South, Beale in its Twenties' heyday was jammed with vaudeville theaters, concert halls, bars and jook-joints (mostly white-owned). Along with the frivolity came a reputation for heavy gambling, voodoo, murder and prostitution. One appalled evangelist proclaimed that "if whiskey ran ankle deep in Memphis&you could not get drunker quicker than you can on Beale Street now." Although Beale still drew huge crowds in the Forties, the drift to the suburbs and, ironically, the success of the civil rights years in opening the rest of Memphis to black businesses, almost killed it off. The bulldozers of the late Sixties spared only the Orpheum Theatre and a few commercial buildings between Second and Fourth streets. Beale Street has now been restored as an Historic District, its shops, clubs and cafés bedecked with Twenties-style facades and signs, while a Walk of Fame with brass musical notes embedded into the sidewalk honors musical greats such as B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf. Tourist money has led to extensive development, but with the exception of a few out-and-out souvenir shops, most of the new businesses remain in tune with the past, and for blues fans in particular its music venues showcase top regional talents. At its western end, 1997 saw the conversion of 126 Beale St - formerly home to Lansky's, tailors to the Memphis stars - into Elvis Presley's - Memphis Restaurant, which now rivals B.B. King's just beyond as the street's busiest nightspot. A little further along, A. Schwab's Dry Goods Store, at no. 163, looks much as it must have done when it opened in 1876, with an incredible array of such voodoo paraphernalia, familiar from the blues, as Mojo Hands and High John the Conqueror lucky roots in fragrant oil, as well as 99¢ neckties and Sunday School badges (closed Sun). Next door, the free Memphis Police Museum, open around the clock, holds an assortment of old photos, newspapers and crime-fighting accoutrements - great fun at night after club-hopping. A fairly new arrival to the city at Beale and Third streets is the Gibson Guitar Plant, 145 Lt George W. Lee Ave, which has guided tours (\$10; tel 901/543-0800 for times and reservations) where visitors can watch the craftworkers construct six-string and bass guitars. Upstairs is the Rock'n'Soul: Social Crossroads, formerly The Memphis Music Hall of Fame (Mon-Sun 10am-6pm; \$8.50), an excellent audio-visual display, presented in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, which puts issues such as migration, racism, civil rights and youth culture in a musical context. East along Beale at no. 352, the tiny former home of W.C. Handy (summer Tues-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 1pm-5pm; winter Tues-Sat 11am-4pm; \$1; tel 901/522-1556), who in 1910 was the first man to publish blues tunes. His Memphis Blues - originally Mr Crump - was the theme song for the 1909 mayoral election of Edward H. Crump, whose crooked political machine was to run the city until the early Fifties. The excellent, but peripatetic Center for Southern Folklore (daily 11am-6pm, Sat & Sun 11am-11pm; free; tel 901/525-3655), at 119 S Main St, celebrates the music, food, storytelling and crafts of the people of the mid-South. A small stage puts on high-quality live music most afternoons or evenings, with gospel groups and choirs on Sundays, and there's also an espresso café, an exhibition area and a good giftshop that sells folk art, blues cassettes and quilts. The Center is also home to the Shrine of the Elvis Impersonators (drop a quarter into the slot to see an assortment of would-be Elvises light up and revolve in a glittery spectacle). The comments book makes entertaining reading: in amongst the teen angst, drug-fueled poetry and satirical doodles is the eternal question, "If Elvis was so great, why is he buried in the back garden like a hamster?"