

Old Helena offers new experiences

By MIKE BRETON • October 21, 2010

The 25th Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival provided new experiences even for those who have attended many times. For example, this was the first time attendees had to pay for admission. However, \$25 for three days of **entertainment** was obviously a bargain, no matter who was performing. In three days on just the main stage — there were two others — there were 25 performers.

The biggest change was the happy announcement that the Arkansas Blues and Heritage **Festival** would revert to its original name as the King Biscuit Blues Festival. Despite the legal wrangling, all are glad to see the festival back as it always has been and that it will continue to be a tribute to that most "Helena" of institutions, the King Biscuit Time radio show. The flour is no longer milled there, but the weekday half-hour blues radio show that it sponsored in the '40s still is broadcasting and now the festival will continue with that great heritage.

While seated in our lawn chairs, a fellow two chairs away was writing in a book. My friend one chair away said, "He's the author of a mystery novel about the Delta and he's signing the book for me." Like us, he was there to enjoy the festival and its Delta assets. Meeting a published author on a topic that is of mutual interest and willing to spend time and talk about the book with us, is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It's true that the headliners were B.B. King, Dr. John and Taj Mahal, and they were good. But the surprise was the joy and pleasures we gained from other **musicians**, some we had heard before and some we hadn't. Here are the ones we want to get CDs of: Paul Thorn, Reba Russell, Marcia Ball, Anson Funderburgh and the Rockets, and Preston Shannon. Several of these artists also had composed the songs they sang, but the real treat was hearing them tell the circumstances that prompted them to write the songs. It was more than just enjoying the music; we also got to understand the background of the piece, which made it an even fuller, more personalized experience.

What makes this festival special is that it was the first festival in the Delta blues country, and that it

carries the name of the pioneer sponsor of blues entertainment. The classic bluesmen come to play in their old hometown, and the youngsters come to honor them and learn some of what they learned years ago in the same place. Every year there are fewer and fewer of the old-timers as the years take their toll. It's particularly touching to see the old-timers perform in limited capacity and to see that they are nonetheless venerated as the pioneers they are. Several of the entertainers mentioned those lost during the past year and others paid tribute to their inspirations by saying they'd like to "respectfully dedicate" a **song** to the departed hero. Helena is a special place of heritage, and those who attend become well aware of it.

This year marked the opportunity to introduce a first-time visitor to the many aspects of the festival. After the first song by the Kentucky Headhunters, our first-timer exclaimed, "Well, that was worth \$25 right there." Throughout the next two days, he was heard to repeat this over and over again. **Rough** estimates are that he got about \$250 worth of entertainment and education. He wasn't the only one. Several other Mountain Home faces were spotted enjoying themselves in the crowd. Ask any who were there, and you'll hear what a remarkable experience the festival is.

In 2011, the festival will be Oct. 6-8. In the meantime, check out samples of the works of the above-mentioned artists online at **iTunes** and YouTube, plus at these websites:

- www.paulthorn.com
- www.rebarussell.com
- www.marciaball.com
- www.ansonandtherockets.com
- www.prestonshannon.com
- www.deltaculturalcenter.com
- www.bluesandheritagefest.com. *Mike Breton of Mountain Home is a former school principal and longtime blues fan.*