



Ground Zero Blues Club
Clarksdale, Mississippi

www.groundzerobluesclub.com

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GOD SAVE THE BLUES

GROUND ZERO
BLUES CLUB

**The Mississippi Delta—
Where cotton is king and corn liquor is queen.
Every night is Saturday night.
Every day is payday.
Two vacations a year, six months apiece.
The richest land, the poorest people.**

It's not your typical bathroom graffiti, but it's what you'll find at Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Clarksdale is a small town nestled in the heart of the Delta. It's home to some of the best farmland in the United States, but it's the blues that put it on the map. John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters sang of their struggles and turned the town into a piece of history.

Since 1979, tourists have come by the busload to explore the Delta Blues Museum in the place where it all began—but when they wanted to hear the blues, there was nowhere in Clarksdale for them to go.

By the late 90s, Clarksdale's economy was in decline. New technology meant three farm workers could do the job of 300, and job opportunities were scarce. The despair in the air was begging for the return of the blues—a call that Bill Luckett and a longtime friend wanted to answer. They decided to build a blues club.

"We wanted a building near the railroad track, because that historically divided black and white Clarksdale," says Bill. "This was going to be a place for everyone."

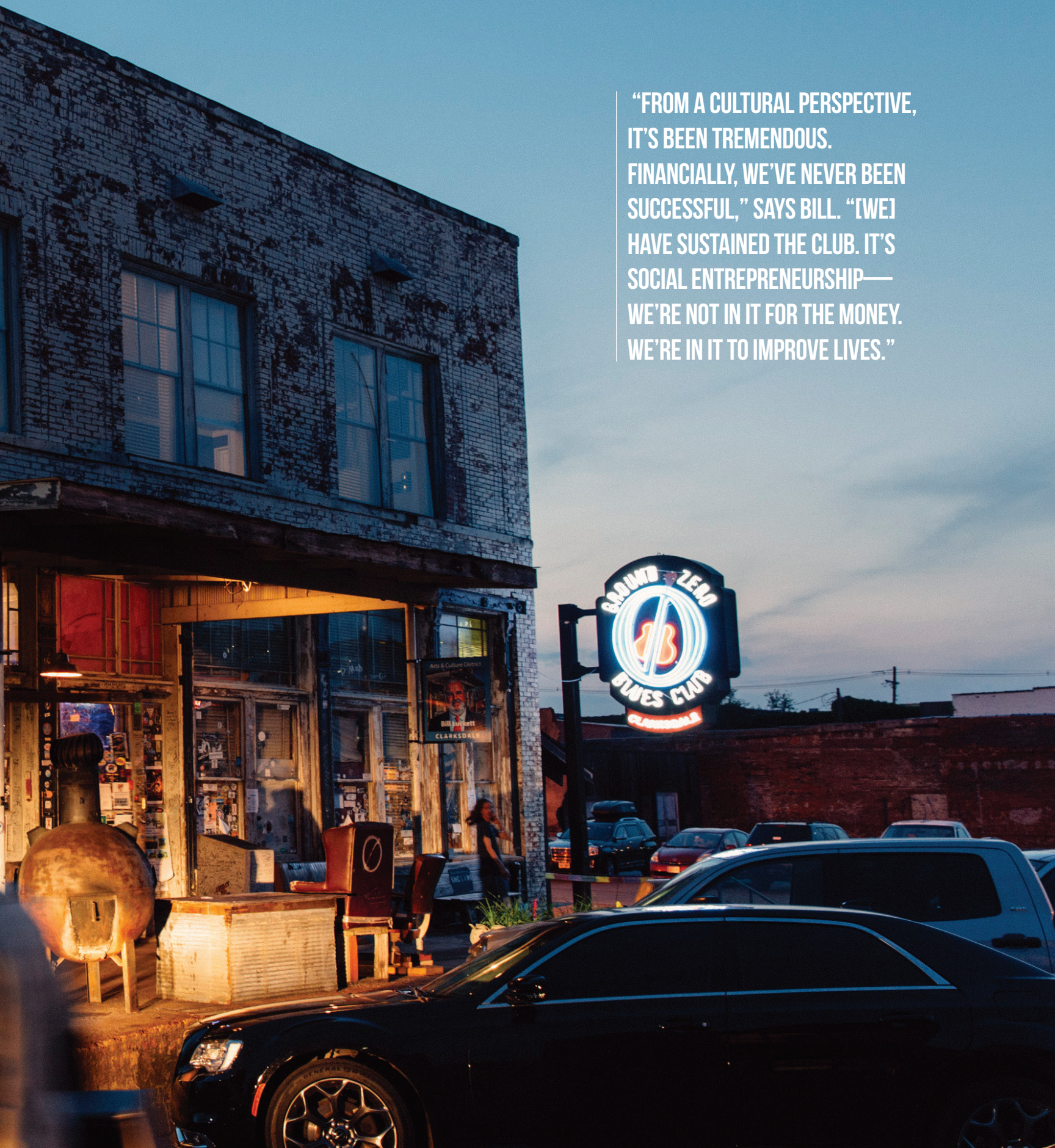
Mississippi has a way of making things happen, and a picture-perfect building fell into their laps. Howard Stovall, a friend from Memphis, gave Bill a call. He happened to have an old family building, brick with a front porch, that he was thinking about selling. It was right near the tracks on Delta Avenue, and Bill closed on it the first business day of January 2001.

"The place where a nuclear explosion occurs, or the point of the beginning of something. That's the definition of ground zero," says Bill. "I copied it from the dictionary and posted it on the front door." For Clarksdale, ground zero meant the place where the blues began, and its influence has radiated throughout Mississippi and the world.

At the beginning, there were naysayers. "Are you crazy? You're doing what?" Bill heard the questions over and over, but he never doubted. He knew that Clarksdale contained something special, something that people would want to be a part of. "We're in the poorest part of the poorest state in America, but we are so rich culturally, I knew people had to take notice," Bill says. And so the doors



“FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE,
IT’S BEEN TREMENDOUS.
FINANCIALLY, WE’VE NEVER BEEN
SUCCESSFUL,” SAYS BILL. “[WE]
HAVE SUSTAINED THE CLUB. IT’S
SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP—
WE’RE NOT IN IT FOR THE MONEY.
WE’RE IN IT TO IMPROVE LIVES.”





(Clockwise): Almost every inch of the walls inside Ground Zero is covered in writings or posters; An eager crowd waits for the famous nightly blues performance; More decoration from inside the blues club; A colorful, spray-painted car is parked outside of Ground Zero Blues Club.



opened in May of 2001.

A bunch of somebodies and nobodies started singing the blues two nights a week. Tourists and locals packed the house, sitting next to each other on the mismatched front porch furniture before the music started. Bill sat inside, eating fried grits and barbecue, watching the town come to life.

It wasn't long before famous folks started trekking to Clarksdale to pay homage to their musical roots. Everyone from Robert Plant to Chuck Berry has craved the authenticity of Ground Zero Blues Club. Some of them, like Willie Nelson, even took the stage. "From a cultural perspective, it's been tremendous. Financially, we've never been successful," says Bill. "[We] have sustained the club. It's social entrepreneurship—we're not in it for the money. We're in it to improve lives."

And life in Clarksdale has improved. Twenty years ago, if you were standing on Delta Avenue after 5 o'clock, you'd never see a person or a car. These days it's hard to find a parking

spot. Since Ground Zero opened, the whole of downtown has come to life, and places to live keep popping up.

Bill hasn't been the only one to contribute to the town's renaissance, but he was at the front end of it. "Most people leave Mississippi to look for a bright future, but [we] brought that future back here," says Bill. "The best thing I can say is, it's home. I'm fully invested in Clarksdale."

Bill loves the blues club like he loves Mississippi. He can't stay away for too long. "I was there for lunch. I was there last night. I like to enjoy the food and the people. You can meet the world on that front porch," he says. And it's true—people travel from places as far as Estonia and Sudan. Flags from foreign visitors hang proudly in the space. It seems like everyone in the world knows about this town.

Though the amount of people passing through has grown tremendously, Clarksdale's hometown crowd is still close-knit. "I have friends from kindergarten still

“THEY ASK, ‘IS IT GONNA BE LOUD?’” SAYS BILL. “THE ANSWER IS YES—BUT THAT’S WHY YOU CAME HERE, ISN’T IT?”

here.” says Bill. “I’ll look around the blues club at night and see my high school classmates. Clarksdale is gritty, and we don’t want it to become a Disney World.” It’s a sense of community that couldn’t be recreated anywhere else; a block party full of friends and neighbors that can’t wait for you to come over and join the fun—just don’t try to change it.

As Clarksdale cements itself as a tourist destination, blues nights at Ground Zero are in high demand. Music has expanded from two to four nights a week, and Bill finished out eight apartments on the second floor for guests wanting to stay a few nights. “They ask, ‘Is it gonna be loud?’” says Bill. “The answer is yes—but that’s why you came here, isn’t it?”

WORDS BY **ASHLEY LOCKE**

PHOTOS BY **WES FRAZER**



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