

There have been 45 presidents of the US since King George was sent packing. The US, though, has had three Kings, who have left a lasting legacy. Next year is the 50th anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King's assassination and last week we followed in his footsteps from Memphis where he made his Mountaintop speech and was assassinated to the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson and the opening of a new chapter in the Civil Rights story. This week we look at BB King, Blues and Beale Street, before finishing the series in Graceland and Elvis Presley, The King.

**W**OKE up this morning! Well, this is the home of the Blues, Memphis, Tennessee, so there was really only one thing for it, I headed down to Beale. Which is, of course, the first place every visitor comes when they first arrive here. Even this early in the morning, 9am, the Blues is blaring out from the bars and clubs even though they won't open until early evening.

We were in BB King's Blues Club the night before, dancing to the early hours to the house band, working off the Barbecue chicken, rice and catfish and going back for seconds, rolling down the river to Ike and Tina Turner's Proud Mary.

Riley King first came here from his native Mississippi in his late teens but really started making his mark when the sole black radio station in town, WDIA, championed him in his early 20s and christened him Beale Street Blues Boy, abbreviated to Blues Boy and then BB (he was just B to his friends). BB has been intertwined with Beale Street ever since.

His club is at the foot of the pedestrianised stretch where revellers mill every night, spilling out of the clubs taking the party outside.

WC Handy, the Father of the Blues, looks down the road at us all from outside the pedestrianised cordon further down Beale Street... his boyhood shack has been recreated in exact detail nearby.

**I**T was Band leader Handy, travelling around the Mississippi Delta over the turn of the 20th century, who curated the sounds which would become the Blues and developed it and brought it to the mainstream in Memphis, his standard Memphis Blues which was originally called Crump's Blues, was written for the mayoral candidate.

Handy, his trumpet in hand, stands across the road from the Robert Church Park, named for the South's first black millionaire who along with Handy did most to turn Beale Street into a cultural and commercial hub for black Memphians.

Today it is a tourist hub but it is also a living, breathing, musical experience and as is explained to us, it provides work for gigging local musicians. And it has the seal of approval with the Blues experts in our party.

At the heart of Memphis life then, as now, is the Church, and the historic First Baptist Church has special resonance.

*It all started with WC Handy, but it was BB King who introduced all of us (U2 included) to magical Beale Street*

# The story of the BLUES



The real Beale: Beale Street, Bono singing with BB King, and below, our Jim and colleague Steph with BB's and Prince's replica guitars

Every Bluesman has his woman leaving because 'he done them wrong' though there's always the assumption in the songs that he'll talk his way back.

All Bluesmen are the same, the same but then different.

And then on top of all that, there's Robert Johnson, the Baddest Man in Blues, who legend has it made a deal with the Devil at a crossroads, near to where we stop off at Dockery Plantation after which he returned to town with a new-found guitar style which set him apart from his peers.

Whatever the truth, and who wouldn't want to believe this story, we do know that Robert was a bit of an out Devil for the women.

**H**e seemed to have one in every port or town, more often than not somebody else's, which ultimately was his own undoing when he was poisoned at the age of only 27, the wife of a jealous husband lacing his whiskey with Strychnine.

Our own hero BB also loved and was much loved by women.

He even named his guitars after women, or one woman, Lucille, a damsel in distress. Legend has it that two fellas were fighting over her at one of his gigs when a fire broke out interrupting the concert forcing everyone to evacuate the building. BB realising that his favourite guitar was still inside rushed into the burning building to retrieve it and thereafter named his guitars after her.

I get to caress Lucille later in our trip at the Westin Hotel in Jackson where as a promotion, replica guitars of the greats are left in selective rooms.

Women held a special affection for BB, he married three times and sired 11 children at least, maybe even 15.

When love came to town BB sure didn't turn it down.

And that's worth singing about.

## TRAVELFACTS

### HOW TO GET THERE

Jim flew with United Airlines, Dublin to Newark, New Jersey and then onto Memphis, returning Jackson, Mississippi to Houston, Texas, then onto Newark and then onto Dublin.

### WHERE TO STAY

Car hire, three nights Memphis - Peabody, one night Cleveland, Mississippi - Hampton Inn, two nights Natchez - The Burns B&B, two nights Jackson - Westin. Costs may vary. Lead in cost per person £1665 (€1865).



## THREE KINGS BY JIM MURTY



They all came here to worship and sing Gospel. Gospel was BB's first influence when he watched his own pastor play guitar in church back in Mississippi.

Jerry Lee Lewis's club is down Beale Street, one of many jumping joints, including the highly-

recommend Rum Boogie Bar where our own Wolfgang got up to play harmonica and earned a tenner from the band, his first-ever paid commission.

There's an Irish bar too, obviously, Silky O'Sullivan, with duelling pianos, a Blues museum, numerous soul diners, and also

Sansky's which boasts that it is the clothier to the King. Elvis, like BB, was from Mississippi which is where we'll go next to see where the Blues all started.

The Blues Trail is a 200-marker route through time and Mississippi, chronicling all the great Blues singers, B.B., Muddy Waters, Charley Patton, Son House, Sonny Boy Williamson, John Lee Hooker et al, and retelling their stories. If you are an independent traveller you should make use of the Blues Trail app.

I can never trust either my sense of direction regardless of how

straight these roads are... much of it is the vertical Highway 61, the Blues Highway... or my command of technology.

But that's just me, and thankfully our 20-strong party has laid-back and knowledgeable Southerner Clint driving us and educating us in the Blues, cranking up the sounds on the CD deck.

Short of sleep... it's all these late Bluesy nights, I drift off into a dream as we pass the open flat brown fields that at one time teemed with black slaves and later sharecroppers.

Oh, I wish I was single because my lady is driving me mad.

And suddenly I'm back... it's the music.

In truth, you could never mistake Modern-Day man with

Bluesman, they were a different species.

No woman nowadays would allow it.

Not that they seemed to then either.

**NEXT WEEK: WE ALL WILL BE RECEIVED IN GRACELAND... THE ELVIS PRESLEY STORY**

# AN OLYMPICS TRIAL IS A GOOD KOREA MOVE, KIM!

## SKI REPORT

Catherine Murphy  
SKI WRITER OF THE YEAR



Going up in the world: North Korea's ski king Kim Jong-Un

IN just over a month, Team Ireland will travel to Pyeongchang in South Korea to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics.

Amongst the athletes who've already qualified and dream of bringing medals home to Ireland are Sochi snowboarding veteran Seamus O'Connor from San Diego, Austria-based Alpine skier Patrick McMillan, freestylers Brendan Newby from Utah and John Brown from New Hampshire, slalom and giant slalom racer Tess Arbez from France and cross-country skier Thomas Westgard from Norway.

By January 24th, another three athletes - Dublin-based Cormac Comerford, Essex native Kieran Norris and Emma Ryan from Massachusetts - will know if they have done enough to qualify after a tough few months of racing.

Our 2018 team members hail from a diverse range of places around the globe and are eligible to compete for Ireland through Irish parents or grandparents.

They follow in the footsteps of former Irish Olympians Kirsty and Tamsen McGarry, Pauli Schwarzacher-Joyce and Clifton Wrottesley who narrowly missed out on a bobsleigh bronze medal at Salt Lake City in 2002.

Like many, I'm intrigued by what awaits the Irish team in Pyeongchang when the games begin on February 9.

In his New Year address, IOC President Thomas Bach remarked that 'there has never been such a political background to a host city for a summer or winter Olympic Games', referring to the high political tension between North and South Korea.

Nuclear war rhetoric between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump has everyone on edge and unsurprisingly, by late 2017 ticket sales for the Games were still reportedly low.

The Games themselves are recovering from controversy with the Russian team suspended as a result of the Sochi 2014 doping scandal and a decision made that only clean individual Russian athletes will be allowed to compete.

Add those ingredients together

and there could be quite a journey ahead for our athletes.

One thing that's certain is that Kim Jong-Un will be watching closely, perhaps jealously, as the Games unfold.

In 2017, British snowboarding champion Jamie Barrow made a controversial trip to North Korea, visiting the capital Pyongyang before heading to the ski resort of Masikryong on Mount Taewha.

Constructed in just ten months during 2013, the luxury ski resort was designed to rival Pyeongchang and as a vanity project for Jong-Un, who reportedly spent time at school in Switzerland.

While basketball champion Denis Rodman once famously said that he has skied with Kim Jong-Un, the DPRK leader was photographed riding a chair lift without skis during a visit to the slopes.

Skiing is labelled an elitist sport at the best of times but the notion of a luxury resort where a ski lesson costs the equivalent of an average month's wage is criticised as an immoral folly. Masikryong's slopes are often empty, out of reach of all but the richest North Koreans and curious international visitors.

UN sanctions mean that 'luxury' equipment like snow mobiles cannot be bought. Instead locals - adults and children - have been photographed clearing icy roads leading to the resort with pick axes and other basic tools.

IOC president Thomas Bach has said the Olympic Games must always go beyond political division and act as a symbol of hope and peace. Let's hope all parties are listening and let's wish Team Ireland a successful and safe Winter Olympics in South Korea.

Good luck Team Ireland!