

Crying the blues

In spite of an ever-changing sonic landscape, this Alabama juke joint remains a spirited social institution and a perfect setting in which to sing the blues.

By *Elle Hardy*
Photography *Rob Culpeper*

The only rule here at Gip's Place, one of the US's last great juke joints, is that guests must put down their drinks for the rendition of "Amazing Grace" that has opened every Saturday night for the past 65 years. The owner is 97-year-old Henry "Gip" Gipson, a gravedigger by day and musician by night, who opened the music venue in Bessemer, Alabama – population 27,000 – in 1952.

Houses of worship for the Delta blues, juke joints began as a place of respite for African Americans in the darkness of Jim Crow laws, in an era when segregation was so entrenched that Gip was almost beaten to death for accepting food served to him by a white woman.

"I have to keep it alive," Gip says of the juke-joint tradition, which has slowly disappeared alongside the greats who played in them. Once meeting places where the blues were passed between generations of itinerant players, the musical environment has changed with the landscape; an increasing number of people have moved to the cities, where new musical styles have thrived.



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But here in Bessemer, Gip's Place remains an institution. "It's a shrine to the counter-culture, a bastion of the people's voice," says Kyle Butler, bassist of house band Gip Gipson's Uniontown Prophets. "I call it our place instead of Gip's Place, otherwise I get in trouble," says manager Diane Guyton. "It's all of ours – and it's all of yours."

Perched on his stool, Gip cuts a frail, handsome figure. His face lights up with a broad grin as he is handed a dusty guitar and a quart of whiskey. Cataracts glowing, he surveys the crowd of several hundred and begins to play. His fingers seem sentient: like his idol, blues legend Muddy Waters, they "play before they have fear".

The Prophets begin their set and Gip invites me to share the first dance with him before he moves around the room, cavorting with women and then pairing them with men they did not arrive with. These days, the crowd here is racially diverse and decidedly mixed. Gip's motto? "No whites, no blacks, just the blues."

BB King and RL Burnside have played here and Gip's friend and evangelist preacher Billy Graham regularly drops by. Chuck Berry even gave Gip a guitar. But he reserves his praise for a lesser-known star, the Prophets' young singer and guitarist Todd Simpson. A gifted blues musician, Simpson may be one of the last juke joint protégés.

On stage Gip's murmuring drawl is clarion as he sings the opening bars; Simpson's Southern lisp transforms into a swirling baritone. In perfect harmony, the lanky white kid and the indefatigable old black man stay together on the stage until the new day breaks.



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