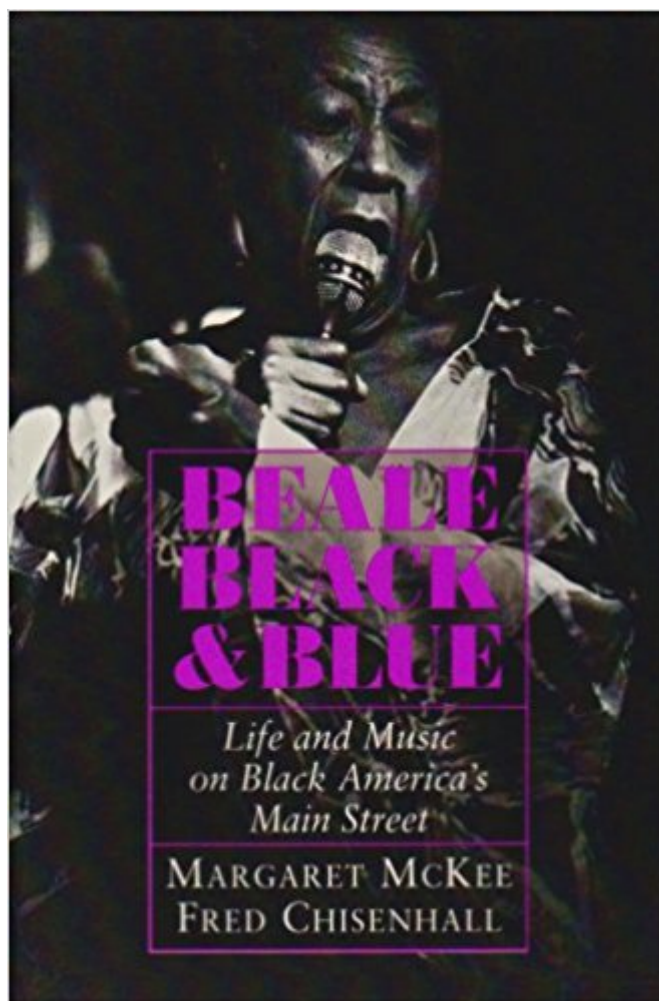


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Beale Black And Blue: Life And Music On Black America's Main Street



Synopsis

W. C. Handy, Furry Lewis, Booker White, Lillie May Glover, Roosevelt Sykes, Arthur Crudup, B. B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, Muddy Waters -- these and other musicians, singers, and songwriters, including the young Elvis Presley, eventually went to Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, to learn, improve, and practice their art. "To Handy and untold other blacks, Beale became as much a symbol of escape from black despair as Harriet Tubman's underground railroad," says Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall. They present Beale as a living microcosm of determination, survival, and change -- from its early days as a raucous haven for gamblers and grafters and as a black show business center to its present-day languishing. Choosing the former newspaper columnist, disc jockey, and schoolteacher Nat. D. Williams, as their main authority for the first part of this volume -- the street's history -- the authors have selected an individual with wisdom, perspective, and a distinctive voice that speaks from a lifetime of experience on Beale. His radio show on WDIA, "Tan Town Jamboree," was heard by thirteen-year-old Elvis Presley. Nat D. said, "We had a boast that if you made it on Beale Street, you can make it anywhere. And Elvis Presley made it on Beale first." Another Beale Streeter recalls, "He got that shaking, that wiggle, from Charlie Burse -- Ukulele like we called him -- right there at the Gray Mule on Beale." The street's history is richly complemented by the rare, extensive interviews that constitute the second half of the volume. "We undertook our research," the authors tell us, "not as a study of the blues but of the blues musicians themselves. They were a dying breed, these wandering minstrels who had become the principal storytellers of their people." Most of the musicians interviewed grew up in the rural southern areas where the authors found them, sometimes not far from their early homes. They tell of the music that took them to Memphis' street of the living blues. All show a resilience to despair, despite life's harsh times. Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, who never received his accumulated royalties, shrugs, "I come here with nothing and I ain't going away with nothing, and it's no need worrying my life with it." In the life of Beale Street and in the conversations of its musicians, we experience with penetrating awareness a delicate balance of humor, courage, and pain.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For much of this century, blues musicians like W. C. Handy, Booker White, Lillie May Glover, B. B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, Muddy Waters, and even Elvis Presley gravitated to Beale Street, in Memphis, Tennessee, to learn and practice their art. For many of them, the environment they encountered and helped to create there provided an escape from the poverty, despair, and anonymity that had marked their lives. *Beale Black and Blue* is an intimate and lively history of Beale Street and of the musicians who made its name synonymous with the blues. In the first part of the book Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall provide a social and political history of Beale Street from the turn of the century through the 1970s, from its heyday as an important center of black commerce and culture to its latter-day decline brought on in part, ironically, by the successes of the civil rights movement, which helped integrate blacks into the wider society. Following this section is a series of interviews with many of the musicians who were drawn to Beale Street. Despite the hardships and mistreatment some of them endured, they reflect fondly on their lives and careers. For anyone interested in the history of one of America's most important and enduring art forms, *Beale Black and Blue* is a book not to be missed.

OLD BIO Margaret McKee was a reporter for several years on the Memphis Press-Scimitar. Fred Chisenhall is the assistant managing editor of the Memphis Press-Scimitar. Margaret McKee and her husband, Fred Chisenhall (1932-2008), worked in the newspaper business in Memphis for many years.

Anyone interested in the history of the Blues will find this book a treasure. The richest part of the book is the series of interviews they did with bluesmen like Big Joe Williams, BB King, Bobby Blue Bland, Sam Chatmon, John Estes, and Furry Lewis. They give a good picture of how these men

came to the Blues, how they struggled to survive, and how they saw both the days when the blues was current and their rediscovery by folk-music developed blues audiences in the 1960s and 1970s. There is much here about the political relationships between Memphis politicians and the Black community during the Jim Crow era as well as much about the play of different social forces in the Black community. This is a useful book.

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