

Mississippi Burning

by Mike Handley

"There are no inhibitions in here," the postman shouted, gesturing at the dance floor with his Marlboro Light, the glowing tip aimed at a woman in a taut skirt. Leaning far forward, her hands nearly touching the plywood floor, she planted her feet and began polishing the smoky air with her backside.

All heads turned, mesmerized by the silent coitus between woman and air, and then it was over -- too soon -- just like it would've been had empty space been titillated flesh.

The dozen or so dancers' faces mirrored her skirt, black and white, the distinction blurred under the psychedelic glow of Christmas lights ringing the low-slung ceiling of Po Monkey's Lounge, a former sharecroppers' shack at the edge of a Mississippi cotton field.

Jeans-clad white boys with moleskin chins danced with black women in satin — the guys all jerky, all elbows, as if powered by puppeteers with learners' permits; the women as sensuously fluid as ribbon cane syrup dripping off a cathead biscuit. Black men, some in their 20s, others beyond 70, danced with blonde junior-leaguers whose grandmothers were no doubt spinning in their well manicured graves.

"I started coming here in 1989," the blue-eyed postman with the frosty beard continued, knees bouncing to the beat, another cigarette in hand. "My wife asked me one day if I'd heard of Po Monkey's, and I told her no."

Every time he uttered words starting with **p** or **b**, flecks of spittle hit my ear and I got a blast of vodka-warmed breath.

"She found out our daughter was hanging out at this **black** juke joint, so I had to check it out," he amended. "And I've **been** coming **back** ever since.

"There's no **black** and white here; just **people** having a good time," he smiled.

Willie Seaberry, Po Monkey himself, surveys his domain with a cigar stub in the corner of his mouth and a plastic cup of Crown Royal in hand. He allows no dope, no fighting, no cell phones, and if a man's pants are falling off his ass, he'll be asked to leave, either politely or once again with feeling.

"Nobody wants to see somebody's dirty underwear," the septuagenarian maintains, absently fingering the Bolivar County deputy's badge clipped to his belt.

Po Monkey, a tractor driver by day, has opened the doors to his establishment on Thursday and sometimes Saturday nights for more than 50 years, nowadays charging \$5 admission and selling \$3 beers or mixers for the clientele who bring their own hard stuff.

The original one-room shanty, built in the 1920s, has been expanded with a small wing to barely accommodate a pool table and two bathrooms, another to serve as a kitchen and tiny bedroom, and a rear alcove for a trio or DJ.

The walls and ceiling are festooned with Polaroids, all manner of stuffed monkeys, a pair of naked baby dolls, various holiday decorations, Christmas lights and yellowed pages from newspaper and magazine articles written about the joint.

Were it not for a brown "Mississippi Blues Trail" sign beside Hwy. 61 just north of the Merigold turnoff, its arrow pointing to the pitted gravel road, newcomers might never find the Hiter farm's single

remaining tenement house for which Po Monkey was bequeathed a lifetime lease. Because it's one of, if not the last rural juke joint in the Delta, it merits a blue marker normally reserved for spots visited by the likes of Robert Johnson, Son House, Muddy Waters and B.B. King, men who shaped America's best music.

Po Monkey Road (the sign is frequently stolen by collectors) winds between what appears to be a water-filled borrow ("bar") pit and a levee designed to shore up the northern end of a vast cotton field. The dirt track widens as it passes the lounge, allowing parking space for both rusted pickup trucks and gleaming BMWs.

A group tried a few years back to have the shanty placed on the National Register of Historic Places, but the effort failed when somebody with a clipboard declared it a firetrap. There are no windows, only one door, and extension cords suckle electricity from the few outlets like hungry piglets at a teat.

The music at Po Monkey's isn't pure blues. If you pay your \$5 expecting to hear the wail of a mouth harp or the whine of an acoustic guitar string, lyrics better suited for drinking than dancing, you might be disappointed.

Expect to hear Bobby Blue Bland, Little Milton or old-school soul that'll reach for your groin and not let go. Be prepared to turn at the soft touch of someone's hand on your shoulder, to see the invitation to dance in eyes that do not understand how anyone can spend the evening sitting.

"I can't **b**elieve my little girl was coming out here while she was still in high school," the postman groans. "**B**ut I can't say I **b**lame her!"

About 10:00, an hour and a half since the DJ began playing music stored on his laptop, Willie Seaberry was feeling his oats. After

disappearing into his bedroom, he walked out wearing an apron over his dapper clothes. He occasionally lifted the flap, and a plush, anatomically correct schlong rose in response.

The crowd howled every time, the regulars immediately, and the newcomers -- including five tall and blond tourists from Holland -- only after their double takes registered the lifelike plushie topped with a Merkin.

He then wore a procession of wigs -- on his head this time -- from red-white-and-blue to a frayed Brit judge's white mane.

It wasn't vulgar; just the sense of humor of a 74-year-old for whom laughter is the best medicine.

"Oh, **boy**, he's just getting started," the postman nodded.

I thought the place was packed. Every chair and ripped-out automobile seat was taken, the dance floor was full, and empty longnecks weighted down the homemade tables like spires from toppled Confederate monuments, only glass instead of marble.

But the front door kept opening, and patrons kept coming.

"This is nothing. I've seen so many **p**eople dancing in here, the floor shook like an earthquake," the postman read my bewildered expression.

And to think it wasn't even the weekend.

