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Major in American Studies and Italian
Delta Sound: Cold War America and the Blues
Location: Rome, Italy / Clarksdale, MS, USA

Final Report

The first segment of my research took place in the Eternal City, Rome, where I attended the 9th Edition of the Mojo Station Blues Festival. Il Mojo Station is a weekly blues-oriented radio show that airs on Radio Popolare Roma; they advertise themselves as the first blues radio show in Rome, and as promoters of the blues and Afroamerican culture in general. Their festival has now grown into one of the largest and most well-known in Italy, featuring a number of international musicians. Italian blues groups constituted the entire lineup for the first night of the festival and a majority for the second night, when they were joined by Mariem Hassan, a highly political musician focused on the political and social issues of her native Western Sahara (though stylistically her music differs from what we traditionally think of as 'blues,' her inclusion in the festival can be considered an acknowledgement of her music's shared sociopolitical roots, and therefore a subconscious definition of what Italians consider 'true' blues). Musicians from across the United States were brought to Rome for the final night of the festival, including Lightnin' Malcolm and Robert "Wolfman" Belfour.

The second stage of research was conducted in and around Clarksdale, Mississippi. I chose Clarksdale both for its historic features (most notably, the crossroads of U.S. Highways 49 and 61, a site which is now legendary in blues lore), as well as its recent growth at the forefront of the blues tourism movement. I travelled throughout the town visiting historic landmarks, the Delta Blues Museum, and a variety of blues clubs, juke joints, and restaurants, speaking with performers and audience members along the way. My visit also coincided with the Sunflower River Blues & Gospel Festival, now in its 26th year, as well as the Cat Head Mini-Blues Festival. The two festivals drew a variety of acts, mostly from Mississippi, but spanning several genres. It also attracted spectators from both around the country and around the world, all there seeking to experience this unique piece of Americana.

In terms of applicability, these trips were extraordinarily helpful to me in my thesis work. I was able to view first-hand the way different people around the world think about America and how they define authentic blues music (whereas in Italy it has more to do with playing ability and ties to America itself, stateside it tends to get defined in terms of race, class, and life experience). I also had the opportunity to speak with some legendary performers, and to interact with the tourists and consumers who also make up this international blues community. Out of everything I saw and did, one of the most surprising things was witnessing race and class politics play out in real time in front of me in Mississippi - although the music often serves as a unifying experience, tensions lingering from Mississippi's tumultuous history made themselves clear at various points. That aside, I cherished every moment of these two trips, and even beyond my senior thesis, I can certainly envision this type of academic field research building into a life-long career.