AFAM Graduate’s History-Making Term of Office Ends

Mary Alexander, an ETSU graduate with a concentration in history and African American Studies, became the first African American to be elected to the Washington County Commission. As County Commissioner, she represented the 4th District, from 2002 to 2006. When she was elected in 2002, she said that she had “no long-term plans for politics.” She added that she would “take it as it comes.” Although Ms. Alexander decided not to run for reelection in 2006, she said that she had not ruled out running for political office in the future. Ms. Alexander served on many committees during her tenure on the County Commission, including her chairmanship of the Education Committee and membership on the Rules Committee and Library Board. Her work on the Education Committee was especially important to her because she believes that education is the key to making progress in every field. She said that the attraction of new businesses and the retention of existing businesses in the Northeast Tennessee region are examples of the importance of education, because businesses depend on a well educated and qualified workforce. Ms. Alexander’s work in improving the County’s educational system will continue under her leadership of the Langston Heritage Group in Washington County and through her role as a history teacher at ETSU and area institutions. Ms. Alexander earned her M.A. degree in history, with an emphasis on African American Studies in December 2001.

FACULTY NEWS

Marcia Songer, Assistant Professor of English and Associate Director of the University Honors Program, teaches African Literature in the AFAM Program. Her article, “The Ultimate Penance of Brother Cadfael,” appeared in Clues 23-4 (2005), 63-68.

Elwood Watson, Associate Professor of History, co-edited with Darcy Martin, There She Is, Miss America, published by Palgrave Macmillan in August 2004. Watson teaches various courses in the AFAM minor, including African American Culture Since World War II.
A Tribute to Betty Hill Goah

By Adam G. Dickson

The death of Mrs. Betty Hill Goah stunned many in the Johnson City community. From a spiritual perspective one understands that death is an inevitable fact of life. But what was so hurtful was that Mrs. Betty had open heart surgery, and many subsequent surgeries, and through it all it seemed as if she would slowly but surely recover. But on Wednesday morning, March 8, 2006, at 6 A.M. while on a business trip in Dallas, I received a phone call from NAACP president and good friend Ralph Davis telling me the sad news. Since that moment, I have found myself thinking about her strength, determination, and how privileged I was to know her as a colleague, mentor, and friend.

Betty Hill Goah was a unique character who deserves some analysis. One unique characteristic that Mrs. Betty possessed was that from a young woman up to her passing, she was a committed public servant. She was a principal planner of a demonstration where students of the “colored” Langston High School marched to Science Hill High School to protest the segregation in the Johnson City school system. She and my father, Fred Dickson, worked for the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration. Her service work continued with the Neighborhood Service Center and the Tennessee Hunger Coalition. Mrs. Betty’s legacy, however, will be her role as founder and coordinator of the North-east Tennessee Minority Health Community Development Coalition. She took an issue of such importance and reality and demanded that the black Tri-Cities community realize the state of our health and take proactive, preventive measures to improve our health. She and her colleague, now successor, Margaret Davis, traveled extensively to receive training so that they could educate the black community through the churches on issues such as heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. Not every church in the community has accepted the
THE 2005-2006 AFAM PROGRAM IN REVIEW

Courses

The 2005-2006 academic year was a great success. Twenty-four hours of coursework were offered during the fall 2005 semester and an additional twenty-four hours of coursework were offered during the spring 2006 semester, making a total of forty-eight semester hours and sixteen courses offered through the departments of history, geography, criminal justice, English, political science, music, and foreign languages.

Lectures

Distinguished speakers from myriad walks of life graced the ETSU campus during the 2005-2006 academic year, and their messages were also taken into the community. John Milton Wesley, Mississippi-born writer and poet, read his poetry to a large audience in the Carroll Reece Museum on September 15, 2005, and shared with them his memories of Emmett Till’s Money, Mississippi, lynching, which took place fifty years ago. Wesley spoke of how his life, and that of his hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi, changed after the horrific event. After his

The first Betty Hill Goah AFAM Scholarship will be awarded in the fall of 2006. Students who wish to apply for the scholarship should send a letter of interest to:

AFAM Program; c/o Dr. Drinkard-Harkshawe
East Tennessee State University; Box 70672
Johnson City, Tennessee 37614

Interested persons may also call 423-439-6688 for more information.

To make a tax-deductible contribution to the Goah AFAM Scholarship Fund, write checks payable to: The ETSU Foundation/AFAM Program. Mail checks to: The ETSU Foundation; East Tennessee State University; Box 70732; Johnson City, Tennessee 37614

Dickson is an ETSU graduate. He teaches Black American Political Thought in the Political Science Department.

health training, but that never deterred Mrs. Betty. And because of her persistence, many black church congregations understand the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Another unique characteristic of Mrs. Betty was her position as a strong woman. Mrs. Betty was an outspoken woman whom I respected deeply. Having a mother and sister who are both strong women, I had no problem with Mrs. Betty’s strong-at-times tone. But I am sure that some men, especially the fraternal, machismo-entrenched male, could not accept her administrative, take-charge demeanor. Some men have notions that women are to live silent lives and only speak when spoken to. Mrs. Betty never aligned with this notion. She, along with compatriot Mrs. Ann McConnell, played a landmark role in addressing a wide variety of community development issues in Johnson City and the East Tennessee region. These women deserve recognition because they are local examples of many nationally-known black women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Mary Church Terrell, who led with courage and conviction. Because we tend to focus solely on Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, and other outstanding male leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, we seem to forget the mothers and housewives who made many sacrifices to create a truly inclusive community.

Since Mrs. Betty’s passing, many have speculated about the future of the black community in the region. As a new generation of black leadership develops in the area, it is hoped that the following principles exemplified by Mrs. Betty Hill Goah will be followed. First, develop and sustain a commitment to public service. Second, as a public servant, always maintain a standard of character and integrity in dealing with the public. Third, – and probably most important for our time – in dealing with the many racial disparities that exist in our country (housing, health status, wealth accumulation, etc.), the new leadership must research, present, and enact positive and proactive solutions that ultimately unite all factions within the community toward constructive change. Mrs. Betty’s funeral was three hours long and jam-packed, standing room only. If we truly want to honor Mrs. Betty’s memory, let us take these principles and her legacy and get to work.

Dickson is an ETSU graduate. He teaches Black American Political Thought in the Political Science Department.
African & African American Studies

Lectures Cont.

ETSU campus lecture, Wesley and the AFAM Director were the featured Constitution Day speakers at Sullivan County Middle School. Dorothy Drinkard-Hawkshawe discussed the historical significance of the U.S. Constitution, and Milton followed up with a discussion on how Constitutional principles had worked in his life. He told the students that the U.S. Constitution was a living document that should be used to protect our liberties and preserve our democracy.

Two weeks later, Wesley’s September lecture was followed by Hank Thomas’ talk on his personal experiences with the Freedom Rides of 1961. In 1961, Thomas was a Howard University student who chose to make history, although he did not know it at the time, by becoming one of the original thirteen riders who left Washington, D.C., on a Greyhound bus and a Trailway bus on May 4 to test a 1960 Supreme Court decision (Boynston v. Virginia) that outlawed segregated seating on interstate buses and segregated facilities in bus terminals. Thomas was on the Southbound Greyhound bus that was set afire outside of Anniston, Alabama, where he and fellow riders were attacked and barely escaped with their lives. Thomas also discussed his involvement in voter registration drives in Tennessee. His article on Somerville in Fayette County, Tennessee, was written for distribution at his ETSU lecture. It is printed in this Newsletter for our readers. Thomas shared his life experiences as a civil rights leader, who was nearly killed; a Vietnam soldier, who received the Purple Heart; and a very successful business man, who owns hotels in three states and several restaurants, with business students in classroom discussions at ETSU and with the wider community. Among other things, Thomas was interviewed by Fred Sauceman, Executive Assistant to the President. The interview was aired on public radio around the Northeast Tennessee region.

Following is the article written by Thomas for distribution. (See page 5.)

Art Exhibit

The AFAM Program, with the support of the Sherrod Library and the History Department, sponsored a month-long exhibit of George Hardin’s photograph collection of Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee. The photographs of Beale Street, taken over a period of forty years, could be seen in the main lobby and the third floor of Sherrod Library. The staff of Sherrod Library also composed a book list for further reading on Beale Street and the blues, along with a schedule of related events throughout the state of Tennessee. Because of the excellent work performed by the Sherrod Library staff, the exhibit was a great success.

Concert

AFAM’s last extracurricular event for the 2005-2006 academic year was a concert entitled, “A History of Gospel Music,” performed by the Friendship Baptist Mass Choir and its associate members. The history of gospel music was written by an ETSU graduate, Margaret Davis; and the music director was Phedelma Turner. The concert took place at 6:00 P.M. in the Martha Culp Auditorium on February 13, 2006. Approximately two hundred individuals attended on this cold Monday evening. Many of the attendees were from the community; but ETSU students and faculty also came out in large numbers to enjoy the magnificent music that traced the history of Gospel music from the African “Call and Response” pattern, through the slavery era and early days of Gospel, to the Golden Ages of the 1940s and 1950s, to the present time. The music of Gospel greats such as Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland, Thomas Dorsey, Kirk Franklin, and many more was performed. The concert was a treat that left the audience hungry for more—an educational, spiritual, and inspirational experience that will not be soon forgotten by those in attendance.
In the winter of 1962, I was a student at Howard University. Like thousands of other students on southern college campuses, I had already earned some battle ribbons in the Civil Rights Movement. I had been arrested several times. The battle for human rights was spreading throughout the South. Students like me were arrested and were physically brutalized by white terrorists and the police.

But what happened to us, as students, was quite mild compared to what happened to black adults who tried to register to vote in many states in the South. Among other things, they were humiliated by registrars who asked ridiculous questions that could never be answered to the satisfaction of the voting officials. The Ku Klux Klan often made night rides to the listed persons' homes. Many of their homes were riddled with bullets and/or firebombed. There was an organized reign of terror by the police and Christian extremists. However, blacks were not deterred. As the terrorists stepped up their campaign of horror, blacks became even more determined to win the battle for the vote.

When the physical violence didn't succeed in keeping African Americans from trying to register to vote, the terrorists went a step further—economic violence. White employers started terminating employees who registered to vote. One of the first persons to lose his job was an African American World War II veteran. The next form of economic violence was the refusal by white-owned grocery stores to sell food to blacks whose names were posted. Needless to say, some blacks asked that their names be removed from the voter’s registration list.

Nevertheless, most blacks persisted in their fight to win the vote. To serve those blacks who had either lost their jobs or could not buy groceries in town, a hero stepped forward. The only African American-owned grocery store in the county was owned by a World War II veteran, John McFerren. He allowed the disfranchised people to purchase food on credit. When whites learned of this, McFerren suffered the consequences of his actions. His wholesaler would no longer sell food and supplies to him. In the face of this opposition, McFerren organized a trucking pool in order to get food from out of state. As expected, the drivers ran into roadblocks. One of the most serious of the drivers' obstacles was constant police harassment.

Fayette County officials also tried to close McFerren's grocery store for alleged back taxes. The NAACP came to his rescue and fought relentlessly in court on his behalf. Finally, after many court battles and after many blacks had been evicted from their homes, beaten, and arrested, a federal judge intervened. The wholesaler was ordered to sell to McFerren, the black grocery store owner.

In spite of the aforementioned victory, many blacks, who had been fired from their jobs because of their determination to vote, were evicted from their homes and had to live in tents during the winter of 1962, which was one of the coldest winters in decades. I was...
Beale Street: The Blues and Documentary Photography

By George E. Hardin

It’s great to be on the ETSU campus. This is my second visit here and again the hospitality I’ve received has been gracious. There is always something inspiring about being on the campus of a university. I’m sure you students realize what a grand opportunity you have to be in such an academic setting as this. As John Masefield said:

There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university.
It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know,
Where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see;
Where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge,
Will honor thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile,
Will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things.

They will give to the young in their impressionable years, the bond of a lofty purpose shared,
Of a great corporate life whose links will not be loosed until they die.
They give young people that close companionship for which youth longs,
And that chance of the endless discussion of the themes which are endless.

(Cont. on page 7)

Somerville Cont.

one of the many students who took food and winter clothing to the brave men and women who suffered the adverse consequences of trying to vote. Fourteen years earlier, 1948, the communists had tried to use starvation as a weapon against the freedom-loving people of West Berlin. Like the communists, the 1962 terrorists tried to starve freedom-loving blacks in Somerville, Tennessee into submission. Neither attempt succeeded in the long term.

We Shall Overcome was our anthem in the 1960s as we battled terrorists in the South. Nowhere was that song more meaningful than it was in Somerville, Tennessee, 1961-1962.

Note: John McFerren, now in his eighties, still owns his grocery store in Somerville, which is part of Fayette County, Tennessee.

Hank Thomas is a Vietnam veteran, recipient of the Purple Heart, and one of the Original 13 Freedom Riders of May 1961. He is also a successful business man, residing in Atlanta, Ga.

After presentations by Wesley and Thomas, George Hardin and William A. Coleman rounded out the AFAM lecture series for the fall 2005 semester. Hardin, as a former Tennessee newspaper reporter, covered some of the major events of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s. He discussed many of these events, including the Nashville student sit-ins, in his talk at ETSU on October 13, 2005. Like the first two speakers, he visited ETSU classes before and after his major talk. He shared his newspaper knowledge and experiences with students in two copy editing classes. He also lectured at Northside Elementary School.

On November 10, 2005, retired Navy Captain William A. Coleman, Jr. spoke on the role of African Americans in World War II. The lecture in Carroll Reece Museum was attended by members of the community, students, faculty, and reporters from the Johnson City Press. In an article that appeared in the November 11, 2005, issue of the newspaper, Coleman is quoted as saying “The role of African Americans in the military... has often gone unrecognized. For decades, blacks weren’t considered equals in the military and weren’t even allowed to fight beside white soldiers, much less become officers.” Coleman continued, “But much of that changed during World War II. I think the WWII period was the beginning of the greatest surge we had.’’

During the spring 2006 semester, George Hardin once again visited the campus to speak. In February he spoke on “Beale Street, Home of the Blues.” Over a period of forty years, Hardin took photographs of the famous Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee. These photographs were on display in the Sherrod Library throughout the month of February in recognition of African Americans’ contributions to world culture. His lecture, which took place in the Sherrod Library on February 16, was accompanied by a musical performance by Saxophonist, Danny Williams, Jr. To the delight of the audience, Williams played several of W.C. Handy’s compositions.

Because of the wealth of information that Hardin provided in his lecture, the latter is printed in this Newsletter.
Without which youth would seem a waste of time.

This evening our theme—the discussion of which will not be endless—is “Beale Street, the Blues and Documentary Photography.”

Beale Street in Memphis has a unique place in the iconography of American music. Its fame, or notoriety, some would contend, comes from the fact that W.C. Handy composed “The Memphis Blues,” the first blues song, on Beale Street in 1912.

The blues is an earthy music about people caught up in the complexities of living and it deals with problems of relationships, conflicts on the job, and with family members and friends. Blues lyrics question the purpose of life and brood over the inescapable issue of death.

Documentary photography is a broad category of photography that consists of making images of people going about their daily lives, and street photography is one of its subdivisions.

The blues, which made Beale Street famous, is bawdy music with suggestive lyrics and double entendres. It is music that was created as a means of self-expression and evolved into a form of entertainment. As it made that progression, blues lyrics were sometimes sanitized as the music made its way from its origins in houses of ill repute and dingy juke joints to the glittering stages of Broadway and beyond.

In terms of the name given this music, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says the use of the word “blue” as a definition for “depressed, miserable and low-spirited” dates to the 1500s. The blues concerns itself with survival in the face of overwhelming odds.

The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) said “The Memphis Blues” “contains the first published jazz break in sheet music history.”

Not long after he wrote “The Memphis Blues” in Pee Wee’s Saloon at 315 Beale Street, Handy wrote in 1914 what was to become his most famous composition, “The St. Louis Blues.” ASCAP reported that “The St. Louis Blues” was the second most-recorded song in the first half of the 20th century, surpassed only by “Silent Night.”

George Gershwin autographed a copy of his “Rhapsody in Blue” with the following words: “To Mr. W.C. Handy, whose early blues songs are the forefathers of this work.”

“The Memphis Blues” was the new title given to the tune called “Mr. Crump,” which was written as a campaign song for Memphis political leader E.H. Crump, who was running on a reform ticket. Memphis was known for its rowdy reputation and Crump had vowed to no longer allow drinking, gambling, vice and other so-called sinful activities to continue in the city. Oddly enough, for the campaign song, Handy wrote lyrics that said, “I don’t care what Mr. Crump don’t ‘low. I’m going to barrelhouse anyhow.”

Handy, in writing about the song later, said, “The melody of ‘Mr. Crump’ was mine throughout. On the other hand, the 12-bar, three-line form of the first and last strains, with its three-chord basic harmonic structure... was that already used by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers, and other(s).... and had been a common medium through which any such individual might express his personal feelings in a sort of musical soliloquy.”

For most of Beale Street’s history, mainly African Americans patronized its businesses and entertainment venues. When urban renewal was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, many of these establishments were demolished, such as the One Minute Café and the Palace Theater. In the following years, new nightclubs, restaurants, and recreational facilities were created; and as integration came about, white patrons increasingly joined the ranks of those gravitating toward Beale Street for a taste of its festive atmosphere.

Beale Street was a launching pad to fame for numerous musicians. One of the best known among those currently performing came to Memphis after World War II from a life as an indigent, Mississippi, sharecropper. He began playing the blues on the corner for tips from passersby and started calling himself the Beale Street Blues Boy. In time, that was shortened to Blues Boy, and finally to B.B. We know him today as B.B. King.

B.B. King has said, “When I got to Beale Street, it was like a fantasy come true. I didn’t think of Memphis as Memphis. I thought of Beale Street as Memphis.”

King now owns a club, bearing his name, on Beale Street. His songs range from upbeat to remorseful. One of those in the latter category has the singer moaning about his pitiful life with the well-known lines:

Nobody loves me but my mother,
And she could jive, too!

B.B. King soon earned a place on WDIA, a Memphis radio station. While working as a disk jockey, he was called on to write a jingle for a tonic called Pep-ti-kon, which, like many patent medicines of the day, was “good for whatever ails you.”

He would sing:

Pep-ti-kon sure is good. Pep-ti-kon sure is good.

You can get it anywhere in your neighborhood.

King is quoted in his biography, “Every Day I Sing the Blues,” as saying: “I was the first ‘Pep-ti-kon boy.’ I don’t want to say that too loud. They would send me out on the weekends... with some salesmen, and I would play.... They sold a lot of the tonic and I wondered why people liked it so much until I noticed it was 12 percent alcohol.”

Bobby “Blue” Bland, Rosco Gordon, and Rufus Thomas got their start on Beale Street. Elvis Presley joined the whites who frequented Beale Street so he could watch black performers—some music historians say—in order to mimic their music and mannerisms.

Robert Henry, a Beale Street promoter, is quoted in the book “Beale Black and Blue” as saying about Elvis:

“I (took) him to the Hotel Improvement Club with me, and he would watch the colored singers... and then
he got to doing it the same way as them. He got that shaking, that wiggle, from Charlie Burse, Ukulele Ike we called him, right there at the Gray Mule on Beale. Elvis, he wasn’t doing nothing but what the colored people had been doing for the last hundred years. But people... went wild over him.”

Calvin Newborn, whose photograph is in my exhibition with the title “Flying” Calvin Newborn, told me that when Elvis was still a truck driver he came to the Flamingo Club where Calvin was playing and asked to play Calvin’s guitar. Calvin let him, and he broke the strings.

Elvis’ contributions to rock and roll are well documented, but in acknowledging the role he played, credit should be given to the antecedents of his music. Muddy Waters said, “The blues had a baby, and they called it rock ’n’ roll.”

Beale Street dates from the Reconstruction era, but its most celebrated years were from around the turn of the 20th century to about the end of World War II. During that time, Beale Street was the locale of movie theaters, restaurants, and retail stores. There also were nightclubs and poolrooms where gambling, illegal liquor sales and prostitution took place in the back rooms. So we could say that at least some of the men who frequented Beale Street in those days were drawn by the prospect of easy money, the aroma of illicit liquor and the rustle of unholy skirts.

In the opinion of Walter P. Adkins, who wrote about those days for his M.A. thesis at Ohio State University in 1935:

“Beale Street approaches more nearly an expression of the mass of American Negroes than any other place, including Harlem, for Beale is closer to the great bulk of the nation’s colored population, and speaks more distinctly their traditional language of frustration, hope, struggle and slow advance.”

Blues songs always reflected what was happening in the nation, and Beale Street was the place people from the town and the city went to celebrate when things were good and to forget when they were otherwise.

With the outbreak of World War I and the resulting shortage of workers in northern factories, labor agents were sent to the South and thousands of blacks headed northward. Between 1910 and 1930, almost one million black people left the South in what came to be known as the Great Migration, looking for better wages, more freedom for themselves and a better future for their children.

This was viewed with alarm by many white southerners and The Commercial Appeal, the Memphis newspaper whose staff I joined many, many years later, printed a statement in October 1916 urging blacks to stay in the South. The newspaper said black people “Better stay down here, because when things get tight, every one of you knows the road to the back door of some white man’s kitchen.”

Among those who headed North in the years after the Great Migration was McKinley Morganfield, better known by his stage name, Muddy Waters, who left Mississippi in 1943 on an Illinois Central train for Chicago, and, as popular history goes, took the blues with him.

One of Muddy’s most famous tunes has the lines:

Sittin’ on the outside, just me and my mate
I made the moon come up two hours late.
Isn’t that a man?
I’m a rolling stone.
I’m a man.

After Muddy made a well-received tour of England, a British band that had been formed as Blues Incorporated renamed itself, in tribute to Muddy Waters, the Rolling Stones.

Some of those who moved North found life in urban ghettos too hard and the winters too cold, resulting in reverse migration. This longing for the South is depicted in one of the World War II-era songs:

When the war is over, I’m going back down that sunny road.

Yes, when the war is over, I’m going back down that sunny road.
Can’t find nothing in Chicago. Can’t even earn my room and board.

Blues lyrics often have imperfect rhymes, are ungrammatical and sound like doggerel when read without the pulsating music and the singer’s plaintive voice. Lovers singing the blues, like lovers everywhere, use a language all their own. Men call their lovers “mama,” and women call their lovers “daddy.” They call each other “baby.” Borrowing the names used for parents suggests the lover wants unconditional love such as that which parents provide. The use of the term “baby” symbolizes total submission to and dependence on another to provide sustenance.

Suggestive lyrics are the norm rather than the exception for the blues. Among those with a double meaning are these:

I said, Tell me sweet mama, how you want your rollin done?
Tell me, sweet mama, gal, how you want your rollin done?
She say, “Slow and easy, like my old-time rider done.”
Roll my belly, mama, roll it like you roll my dough,
Want you to roll my belly, like you roll my dough,
I want you to roll me, sweet mama, till I tell you I don’t want no more.

Sometimes the blues becomes so intertwined in a singer’s life he talks to it as if it were another person, and the blues talks back:

Good morning, blues, blues how do you do?
Good morning, blues, blues how do you do?
I’m feeling pretty well; good pardner, how are you?

Blues singers typically infuse their songs with personal testimonies and their own worldview, such as the lines in Robert Johnson’s tune, “From Four Till Late,” in which he says, “A man is like a prisoner....” That’s not too far from the existentialists who say: We’re all prisoners; we’re all locked up behind the bars.
of the human condition.

Even though blues singers faced adversity, the will to continue remained strong. The blues singers might have had the blues, but the blues did not have them. This is reflected by Sam Chatmon, who sings:

I went down to that river, oh, I thought I’d jump and drown.

I thought about the woman I was loving, boys, I turned around.

I went down to the depot, asked the man how long the train been gone.

He said, “It’s been gone long enough for your woman to be at home.”

I’m going down to that railroad, lay my head on that railroad track.

I’m gonna think about that woman I’m loving, and man, I’m gonna snatch it back.

In “The Memphis Blues,” Handy said of Beale Street, “Take my advice, folks, and see Beale Street first…. I’d rather be there than any place I know.” It was a generous compliment. In September 2002, the U.S. Senate gave Handy, who died in New York in 1958, an equally generous, posthumous compliment in approving Resolution 316, which said:

“Whereas the blues music is the most influential form of American music, with its impact heard around the world in rock and roll, jazz, rhythm and blues, country, and even classical music;

“Whereas the blues is a national historic treasure, which needs to be preserved, studied, and documented for future generations;

“Whereas the blues is an important documentation of African-American culture in the twentieth century;

“Whereas the various forms of the blues document twentieth-century American history during the Great Depression and in the areas of race relations, pop culture, and the migration of the United States from a rural, agricultural society to an urban industrialized Nation;

“Whereas the blues and blues musicians from the United States, wheth-

er old or young, male or female, are recognized and revered worldwide as unique and important ambassadors of the United States and its music;

“Whereas it is important to educate the young people of the United States to understand that the music they listen to today has its roots and traditions in the blues;

“Whereas there are many living legends of the blues in the United States who need to be recognized and to have their story captured and preserved for future generations; and

“Whereas the year 2003 is the centennial anniversary of when W.C. Handy, a classically-trained musician, heard the blues for the first time, in a train station in Mississippi, thus enabling him to compose the first blues music to be distributed throughout the United States, which led to him being named “Father of the Blues.” Now, therefore, be “Resolved, That the Senate:

1. designates the year beginning February 1, 2003, as the “Year of the Blues” and

2. requests that the President issue a proclamation calling on the people of the United States to observe the “Year of the Blues” with appropriate ceremonies, activities, and educational programs.”

The City of Memphis took note and honored Handy that year with a memorial parade, which I photographed. His great-granddaughter, Edwina Handy DeCosta, marched at the head of the procession. She is vice president of the music company Handy founded on Broadway in New York, and spoke at a ceremony paying tribute to Memphis musicians in Handy Park.

I was about fourteen the first time I was allowed to go to Beale Street, on my own, in order to attend the movies—along with my brother who was two years older. City leaders had long since cleaned up Beale Street. It was respectable and even churchgoers had no qualms about patronizing its stores, restaurants, and other businesses. My interest in photography was beginning about the same time. My first serious forays into photography began when my mother bought my brother and me a simple camera and developing kit. My brother wasn’t interested, so I studied the instructions and finally learned to develop pictures on the kitchen table.

As I photographed family members and friends, I also began making pictures of the street on which I lived. Eventually, I became interested in Beale Street, both in its history and as a photographic subject. By the time I was in the 10th grade, I was making special trips downtown to wander along Beale Street looking for photo opportunities. I had bought my first “good” camera. It cost $38—quite a bit of money for a kid in my circumstances. Therefore, I had to put it in the layaway. I would sometimes skip lunch to save money so I could make a payment. Eventually, along with making photographs on the street, I began making Polaroid photographs of nightclub patrons for a dollar and a quarter.

In becoming a street photographer, one learns to see a kind of visual poetry in commonplace scenes. The observer is reminded of the fact that a street can be compared to a theater where admission is free and the curtain is always up. This certainly is true of Beale Street, where the drama of human life is played out day and night in a variety of ways.

The photographs in my exhibition here at ETSU were made over a period of some 40 years, and show that Beale Street, in common with its inhabitants, has character. Beale Street is dynamic rather than static, changing not only from year to year and season to season but also from day to day. Beale Street at 11 a.m. on Wednesday is not the same as Beale Street at 11 p.m. on Friday.

While photographing Beale Street, I was following in the tradition of the classic street photographer, who is an observer and not a participant. The street photographer is a
bystander who bears witness to the scene before him, freezes a moment in time with the click of a shutter, and in the end lets others see through his eyes. Documentary photography is the umbrella under which street photography exists as a specialized branch, and as a genre street photography has a long and storied history. The first book on the subject was published in 1870. Some of the most acclaimed practitioners of modern photography are known for their perceptive images of street life: Gordon Parks, Eugene Smith, Roy DeCarava, and Cartier-Bresson.

Colin Westerbeck said street photography “is a kind of photography that tells us something crucial about the nature of the medium as a whole, about what is unique to the imagery that it produces. The combination of this instrument, a camera, and this subject matter, the street, yields a type of picture that is idiosyncratic to photography in a way that formal portraits, pictorial landscapes, and other kinds of genre scenes are not. . . .

“Since its earliest days,” Westerbeck said, “photography has held out a promise no other medium could match, of being faster than the hand, or even the eye, at capturing physical detail.”

He said the art of street photographers “has a special reliance on the multiplicity of photography, its ability to create serial imagery and sequences of pictures. . . . On the one hand, the many shots that they can get at even a rapidly moving, changing subject allow them to strive for the singular image, some one, perfect composition in which all the other possibilities are condensed. On the other hand, they might make purposely open-ended, unbalanced pictures that can’t stand alone and need to be played off one another in groups. . . .”

To that, I might add it’s also obvious that the photographer reveals something about himself at the same time he reveals his prints. His way of seeing, his aesthetic sensibilities, and his technical knowledge are placed on display for everyone to see.

As my interest in photography intensified, I became attracted to its potential as an art form and, over the years, I came to agree with Ansel Adams who said, “After a certain spiritual maturity is reached, the artist usually thinks less about ‘art’ than about the significance and purpose of art, thereby becoming a philosopher.”

When the photographer is on location, waiting to record a street scene, he is attuned to recognize what has been called the decisive moment when all the elements come together to make a compelling photograph. He is caught up in the hustle and bustle of life. It is a time of anticipation and a time of tension. However, once the photographer is in the darkroom to process the film and make the prints, he enters the solitary phase of making the image—a time of reflection and contemplation. As Aaron Sussman said, “I take to my darkroom out of affection for others. There I make friends with the world again. There I learn to look away to focus on infinity. There I play God with film, paper, chemicals and lenses. There, in the dark, I begin to see.”

I remember the magical feeling, the excitement when I first began darkroom work. It was a fascination that continued as I progressed from amateur to professional photographer. And I can say with certainty that when I began working in digital photography and began printing by computer, some of the enchantment and mystique of making pictures appeared to have slipped away. It must be added, however, that a new kind of mystique—the mystique of a new technology—came into being, involving concerns about pixels, histograms, JPEGs and megabytes.

As cameras have become automated and more light-sensitive, getting an image is easier than ever before; but getting a compelling image is as hard as it has always been. Composition, tonality and exposure, perspective, shadows, and highlights are no easier to deal with in digital photography than with film. The adage continues to ring true: Photography is easy to learn but hard to master.

At the beginning of my career, I photographed W.C. Handy, who was then in his twilight years but still making occasional trips to Memphis from New York where he headed the oldest black-owned music publishing company in the world. After Handy died, I produced a picture story on the dedication of his statue in Handy Park. The story ran in Sepia magazine in 1960 under the title “Mr. Handy’s Beale Street.” That title was chosen because in the lead of the article, I recounted an incident Handy wrote about in his autobiography, “Father of the Blues”:

A black man was sleeping in Handy Park in 1936 when a policeman tapped him on the feet and said, “Wake up and go home.” The sleeper opened his eyes and said, “Y’all white folks ain’t got nothin’ to do with me sleeping here. This is Handy’s Park.” Black people of that time considered the segregated park their own, just as they considered Beale Street their own, although the street’s businesses were mainly owned by whites.

In the Sepia article, I wrote:

“Beale Street … has changed considerably since the days when Handy had an office at 392, and Pee Wee’s was still in existence, but it still has its characters and its individuality.

“The Beale Streeters with such (nick) names as “Hobo” Brown, “Bullwhip Shorty” and “Guitar Slim” are giving way to the bearded young intellectuals who follow the Beat Generation, and… are ready to denounce mass conformity at the drop of a hat….. Here now are the hipsters carrying LPs by Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Ornette Coleman and Gerry Mulligan. Even the latter day Beale Streeters are no longer lingering around.

“Bill Walker, the artist, has quit the scene for New York, and the murals he painted on the walls of the Flamingo Room have been removed in remodeling.

“The sharecroppers who used to come to town on weekends, loiter around the cafes and buy credit
clothes from A. Schwab and Green-er’s are a vanishing breed."

I mentioned in the Sepia story that Mahalia Jackson, billed as the world’s foremost gospel singer, sang at the Handy statue unveiling. For her, it was a singular appearance because she had long since distanced herself from the blues and turned down offers by Louis Armstrong, among others, to sing secular music. She did not sing the blues that day, but a religious number, “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

Miss Jackson once said, “I don’t sing the blues myself—not since those days when I was a child. I don’t ever take any nightclub engagements. But you’ve got to know what the blues meant to us then to understand properly about them (now). The Negroes all over the South kept those blues playing to give us relief from our burdens and to give us courage to go on....”

There has always been a close melodic connection as well as a practical bridge between religious music and the blues. Both have been used by African Americans to assert their humanity in confronting hard times and oppression. The Rev. Dr. James Cone, one of the foremost proponents of liberation theology, wrote a book titled The Spirituals and the Blues in which he noted this connection. He said, “I have written about the spirituals and the blues because I have lived the experience which created them.... The spirituals and the blues were a way of life, an artistic affirmation of the meaningfulness of black existence.... I, therefore, write about the spirituals and the blues, because I am the blues and my life is a spiritual. Without them, I cannot be.”

Beale Street today consists of new enterprises such as the Hard Rock Café, Rum Boogie and Pat O’Brien’s. Hernando Street, the eastern boundary of Handy Park, has been renamed Rufus Thomas Boulevard for the creator of “The Dog,” “The Funky Chicken” and other novelty dances. Across the street is Isaac Hayes’ Club, and a block west of the park is the building that formerly housed the Elvis Club, opened some years after his death, and now closed because it was losing money. The FedEx Forum, new home of the Memphis Grizzlies professional basketball team, was built at Beale and Fourth and opened in 2004.

W.C. Handy’s former home, a shotgun house in the southern part of the city, has been moved to Beale Street and converted to a small museum. Brass music notes with famous names in music have been embedded in the sidewalk. Among the honorees are alto saxophonist Hank Crawford, my high school classmate, who was music director for the Ray Charles band. Crawford performed in Austin, Texas, where I now live, last November; and I wrote a story about him for the local newspaper.

The music notes honor not only blues and jazz artists but those from the gospel ranks as well, such as the Rev. W. Herbert Brewster, who wrote the song “Move on up A Little a Higher,” recorded by Mahalia Jackson; and the first gospel record to sell a million copies. As a child, I attended the church where Rev. Brewster was pastor.

It is significant to point out that in his later years W.C. Handy began writing religious music. One of his last compositions, co-written with Charles Cooke, was “They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap in Joy,” based on a passage from the 126th Psalm. Handy’s father would have been proud. When W.C. was a child and told his father, the Rev. Charles B. Handy, he wanted to become a musician, his father told the young W.C., “Son, I’d rather see you in a hearse. I’d rather follow you to the graveyard than to hear that you had become a musician.”

Religious music antedates the blues as a presence on Beale Street. Beale Street First Baptist Church, shown in one of my photographs, was built by former slaves shortly after the Civil War and is said to be the first brick church built by black people in the South.

The concept of the blues as a mood and as a kind of music still has a presence that resonates although times have changed. A relevant comment was made by the acclaimed actress Halle Berry:

“If you really think about it, racism can give you the blues so bad you don’t feel like continuing on. But that’s not the answer. I think you have to stay positive, stay strong, but stay aware.”

In summing up my comments on Beale Street, the blues, and documentary photography, I reiterate: Beale Street is like a theater where admission is free and the curtain is always up.

The blues concerns itself with the issues of living and the will to survive in the face of overwhelming odds.

Documentary photography takes the view that the inherent dignity of ordinary people—as they are involved in routine activities—is evident when they are recorded with sensitivity and grace.
## AFAM Course Schedules, 2005-2006

### Spring 2005
- CJCR 4670 Race, Gender and Crime
- ENGL 4032 African Literature
- GEOG 1012 Intro to Cultural Geography
- HIST 3901 African American Hist. Since 1877
- MUSC 1035 History of Jazz
- PSCI 4957 Black American Political Thought

### Fall 2005
- ENGL 4047 African American Literature
- GEOG 1012 Intro to Cultural Geography
- HIST 3900 African American History To 1877
- HIST 4957 Blacks in Film & Stage, 1900-1950
- HIST 5010 African American Culture Since WWII
- HIST 5030 Comparative Slavery
- MUSC 1035 History of Jazz
- SPAN 4957 African/Afro/Hispanic Cinema

### Spring 2006
- AFAM 3989 Cooperative Education
- AFAM 4950 Senior Seminar
- CJCR 4670 Race, Gender, and Culture
- ENGL 4032 African Literature
- HIST 3901 African American Hist. Since 1877
- MUSC 1035 History of Jazz
- PSCI 4930 Black American Political Thought
- SPAN 4957 African/Afro/Hispanic Cinema

### Fall 2006
- AFAM 4900 Special Studies
- ENGL 3400 African American Lit. I
- GEOG 1012 Intro to Cultural Geography
- GEOG 4307 Regional Geography of Africa
- HIST 3020 American Ethnic & Cultural History
- HIST 3900 African American History To 1877
- MUSC 1035 History of Jazz
- SOAA 3119 Minorities