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BLUES TRAIL MARKS PARCHMAN AS MAJOR INFLUENCE

Jackson, Mississippi (September 23, 2010) – The Mississippi Blues Trail adds one of the state’s most infamous sites, the State Penitentiary at Parchman, to its map on Tuesday, Sept. 28, at 10 a.m. with the dedication of the trail’s 113th historical marker.

“Any discussion of Delta blues doesn’t go very far before it has some connection to Parchman,” Gov. Haley Barbour said. “The State Penitentiary branded its position in music history by being the topic of many, many blues tunes and by housing quite a few bluesmen along the way. Parchman inspired so many of the songs that grew from the Delta blues tradition and became standards that drive blues musicians today.”

Parchman has an extensive musical history and its inmates have provided the Library of Congress and other organizations with a rich supply of songs and folklore over the years. The penitentiary has inspired many songs, including “Parchman Farm Blues” and “When Can I Change My Clothes” by blues singer-guitarist Booker “Bukka” White, who was once an inmate, and “Parchman Farm,” a popular tune by jazz singer-pianist Mose Allison from nearby Tippoo.

Folklorists John and Alan Lomax and others began coming to Parchman in the 1930s to document the pre-blues musical forms of field hollers and work songs, which survived here due to the prison’s relative isolation from modern cultural influences. Among the songs recorded at Parchman by Alan Lomax was a 1959 recording of James Carter’s “Po Lazarus,” which appeared on the Grammy-winning soundtrack to the film “O Brother Where Art Thou.” An album of unaccompanied vocals by female inmates recorded in the prison’s sewing room in 1939 has been cited by blues scholar Samuel Charters as an invaluable document of the way blues must have sounded in its earliest stages, decades before the recording was made.

Blues artists who served sentences at Parchman include Bukka White, R. L. Burnside, John “Big Bad Smitty” Smith, Terry “Big T” Williams, and, reportedly, Rice Miller, better known as Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2. A prison band program was organized at Parchman in 1960 under the leadership of former rockabilly singer Wendell Cannon, who took groups consisting of trustee inmates to perform across the state. Blues artists who participated in the band program, which ended in the late 1990s, included David (Malone) Kimbrough, Jr. and Mark “Muleman” Massey.

The Mississippi Blues Trail is a museum without walls taking visitors on a musical history journey through Mississippi. The trail started with the first official marker in Holly Ridge, the

resting place of the blues guitarist Charley Patton. The trail winds its way to sites honoring B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Son House and more.

For more information about the Mississippi Blues Trail, visit www.msblustrail.org or explore the official Mississippi Development Authority's Tourism Web site, www.visitmississippi.org. You may also contact Alex Thomas, MDA's Music Development program manager at 601.359.3297 or athomas@mississippi.org.

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