

Pullen in Clarksdale

Clarksdale, Mississippi 1934

It couldn't get much hotter. An effort to breathe only provided another opportunity to work up a sweat. Movement was unthinkable. Clothes sticking to wet skin. Wind was a foreign thought here.

"People live in this?" Pullen asked himself. "Saviour, could Hell itself be more uncomfortable?" He took the glass in front of him to his forehead to provide a second of relief before drinking it down. There wasn't enough iced tea in the South to cool him. He stuck out in the crowd here with his huge frame, peculiar dress and his white skin.

He'd arrived in the town the night before by train on his way to somewhere but that didn't seem so important now. To find one moment's comfort from the Mississippi heat would suffice.

"Dey's highest point in Missippyy es 600 hunnart feet above's the level of de sea." He heard the proud bartender telling one of the patrons. "Dat means, day ain't no hill to climb if you's wants to feel a breeze." He laughed long and hard and the patrons within earshot laughed out of habit. Same old story, same old lines, same old laughter. "Dis delta don't know a breeze if it introduced issel Sunday mornin' at church."

Somehow, the heat took a backseat to what was going on this evening. A young black man, all dressed up in a clean, pressed white shirt, suspenders and his Sunday-go-to-meeting pants was sitting on a stool in a corner of the bar playing a flat top guitar. Pullen noticed his guitar was beat up, complete with what appeared to be a bullet hole or two. He was missing a string and using an old pill bottom as a slide as he tapped his foot in a slow, solid beat. The foot tapping was as much a part of the composition as the sounds of his guitar.

He was bent over the instrument, sweat pouring off him, drenching his shirt, as he looked up sheepishly to sing the melody to his tunes. There was something magical about the entire event. The man was one with his instrument, one with his sweat, one with the pill bottle, one with his melody, one with his little corner and one with anyone within hearing distance. It was unavoidable to enter into what was happening in that corner of the bar.

The locals were mesmerized by the magic. There was a oneness with the singer. Something that would never find its home in words was being lived out in this bar through this young man. It wasn't a single event – it happened every time he played – but for right now, it was all that existed this side of Heaven. Men and women sat with empty glasses in their hands, careful not to make any noise to cover the sound of the magic. There were children in the room that were kept more quiet than when they attended church.

"Between songs, you'n go on to da bath-oom, bet hush fo now." A father had his face stuck into the moist eyes of his beautiful little four year old boy as he held him tightly with both hands. The poor child was about to burst. He fought back the tears. Crying was not allowed when the magic was in the room.

Pullen considered the magic ordained from on high. He remembered the shepard David would play his harp to chase the demons away from King Saul. The levitical priets took the music and the high praises of God before the soldiers in battle. The prodigal son was greeting with music

and dancing upon his repentance. Yes, Lucifer had been the heaven's choir director but this music, right here in Clarksdale, Mississippi had to be from BEFORE the fall. This was the stuff of heaven.

As the night wore on, the mood would change with the compositions. The ideas were always the same: somebody had done somebody wrong, somebody had left someone else, somebody was about to get even – for somebody doing them wrong, but somehow, each tunes came with a fresh energy and sincere emotion that separated this music from rote singing of tired, old songs of yesteryear. Some of tunes were upbeat, and the small gathering would change its mod with the song. A kind of hypnosis over the whole place that was unavoidable.

People danced when the music led them to it. They sat around pensively when it led them to reflect of similar feelings. But the one thing that kept them together through the evening was that they were all too familiar with the feelings being sang by the lonely man in the corner on the barstool.

Come Monday, they'd be about their business again – rising early to make it to the fields before first light, catching a ride in a flatbed pick-up truck to a nearby field or small business, or maybe just getting up to greet the sun and try and look busy so they don't get put to work but or now, the man in the corner was their hero, their diversion, their reminder, and their saviour.

This, of course, would not play into their thoughts that would be embraced in church on that or any other Sunday of the year. That was gospel music. Sacred. Stuff not to be touched without the kid gloves it deserved. This was blues. His was the stuff you didn't mind getting dirty if it touched the floor. It'd clean up just fine. It was the music of the night and the music of the front porches – if you could afford a porch or a house attached to it.

Sundays was the Lord's day. Very different animal there. Pill bottle pickin' on a flat top wasn't to be found in the whitewashed buildings where the good people surrounding Clarksdale would worship. If they had them, they'd don the choir robes and fix up real nice. That was the time to look and act as one who was in the presence of the Almighty. After all, one was.

But here in this little place, where beers were served if they could be afforded, there cigarettes would be smoked if one were so inclined to do so – and one could afford to smoke – this is where the music of the night was heard. Everyone was welcome here. Wasn't like church. Didn't have to own a suit to listen to the blues. Probably wouldn't be interested in the blues if you had a suit.

Something about the two worlds couldn't talk to each other.

Pullen had only recently visited the southern states of America and had no idea what was waiting on him. This was the adventure he would follow for a time. What road leads to the gates of Heaven? Any road the Saviour leads us on. "Tthis road, Saviour," he'd prayed, "Lead me into your light. Lead me in Mississippi."

He had heard some discussions about what the black Americans were doing with music in the south and wanted to try and get a listen as he made his journey across the southeastern states. He'd heard dixie music both in New Orleans and in Mobile, the twanging country that flowed from Appalachia to the hills of Tennessee and was fast becoming an industry attracting the hears of most Americans, and he heard the influences of ragtime in St. Louis.

Ragtime music, however, was limited to the places that could afford a piano, the sheet music, and the literacy of the musicians who might be able to learn all those confounded notes.

But the 'delta blues' had his attention the most. He knew there would come a time when he would get to hear these sounds but he didn't know how hard it would be to track down the source of such music. It wasn't recorded on phonographs. It wasn't available in most cities. There was a smattering of musicians who could attempt the style but it never came out as he'd heard it should sound.

It was purely by chance (for unbelievers who believe in chance) that he'd been on the Southern Railway headed through Clarksdale, Mississippi when he decided to put off for and take dinner in the city. With the next train running at noon the following day, he had plenty of time to scout the area for the mystery of the '12 bar blues.' As to how the city may handle a white man looking for this music was a nother issue altogether.

Not more than a hundred yards from the train station, a group of small children, 'black as night,' Pullen thought to himself, surrounded him as if they were taking the streamers of a maypole. Pullen was taken by the beautiful children. He couldn't help but smile at their welcoming curiosity even though they were giving him looks as if the dead had risen and were walking in the streets or if oil had suddenly sprouted out of the dirt roads.

"Mista! Where you from?" One was finally able to break the grinning silence barrier and speak. It was odd to Pullen that there children were both unaccompanied by parents and not sitting in a schoolhouse at this time of day. But it didn't matter. They were precious.

"I'm from a great distance from here, dearest child, from a country called England. Have you heard of it?" And as he spoke, he reached out a hand to rest on the boy's shoulder.

"That near Coahoma? I gots an uncle dat lives in Coahoma. You from Coahoma?" The little's boy's eyes were wide with excitement at the event of speaking with a stranger – and a huge white stranger at that.

Pullen smiled into the eyes of innocence.

"I think I have not. Would you tell me where it lied from here?"

The boy was beside himself with excitement. Pullen's British accent was as foreign to him as paper money or a handful of good candy.

"You talkin' too funny! I caints unerstaint you!" Another child yelled out with frustration and surprise at their newfound fat, white friend. "Where Eng-laind's be?"

Pullen was beyond holding back his joy. Who are these wonderful darlings? They're so precious! No wonder Saviour would not have them held back from Him. Their skin is so dark yet they are not as the Africans he'd seen. Theirs was a different look, a curious grin that he had seen the world over, a way of dressing that reflecting the slavery and the poor conditions of the area and yet, smiles that warmed every part of his heart.

Children. Yes. That was what he'd always missed.

"I fear my explanation may take some time! Perhaps we should all sit and have a beverage as we talk?"

With this, the children were entirely his. Of the five that surrounded him, all were now holding onto him. He moved with the children and his suitcases as an overloaded stage coach might appear toward a general store only a few years away.

“You buys us a soda?” The tallest of the children screamed, “Will ya?”

“That, I shall.” And with this confession came screams of delight from all the children. “Sodas for all!” Pullen couldn’t help it. Such joy, and after all, is not joy our strength when all else is gone?

It must have been a strange sight for anyone walking by. There on the wooden porch of the general store, sat a large, well-dressed white man with a soda in each hand and a grin on his face as he looked over the five boys walking around him and on one of his knees.

“Slowly! Drink slowly! I’d fear that you may contract a headache otherwise!” Pullen warned but they weren’t listening. They were trying to take in the honor and novelty of being able to actually enter the general store, since accompanied by this white patron, to be able to sit on its porch leisurely, and to drink one of the all-too-foreign soft drinks of the day. To actually consider doing this more slowly, as their new friend commanded, was all but impossible.

“Isaiah, from whence comes your name?” He was the tallest and a natural-born leader of the five.

“Whad you say?” Isaiah was just not ready to hear the English language spoken quite this way. Pullen thought how foolish he must sound compared to the southern dialect he’d heard so far.

“I’m sorry. What I meant to ask is: how did you come about your name?” At first, one could tell that Isaiah was searching for the appropriate answer. ‘Come about my name? Come about it? Who ‘comes about’ anything? How do you ‘come about’ something? Is that similar to ‘coming down with something?’ Isaiah would have to give this some thought. A name is nothing to be taken lightly. After all, it was his name – no other boy in Clarksdale or the whole world had his name - and his Momma had always told him that he had a ‘vury impot-unt name’ thought he never really knew why. He’d even heard the preacher mention his name from the pulpit. This always got his attention. He didn’t understand what the man would be talking about, but he knew his name when it was mentioned on Sunday mornings in front of the whole congregation. There could be no greater honor. Louis never had his name said from the pulpit. Neither did Mattie or Ezell. But Isaiah came out pretty often from up there behind the preacher’s stand.

In the end, a boy must answer from what he knows best: that being what his Momma has brought him up on.

“Cause me Momma calls me dat.” It was the best he could do. Simple things are just that – simple things. He’d always been Isaiah and he always would be. What kind of man asks where your name comes from anyhow? Is this what white people sit around and talk about in their houses? Is there not more to life – such as soda pops and baseball – than to talk about where your name comes from?

Pullen thought about the response and then grinned with pleasure. It was a foolish question. Literacy was rare here in the south. He wouldn’t know his old testament reference or many years if he ever learned. His parents had undoubtedly heard the preaching and liked the way the name flowed. But as Pullen looked at Isaiah’s big, curious eyes, he began unconsciously praying that his little friend would eventually become a prophet of Mississippi. That he would lead others to the God from whom his name accompanied. That he would speak the words of Saviour to all who would hear. That none should go without knowing Saviour’s love.

“Isaiah, do you go to church?”

“I doooooo.”

!” It was Lamar, one of more quiet of the five but as he proclaimed his attendance, the others were all chanting ‘yaaeessss’ in unison.

“Of course,” thought Pullen, “Church is their everything. How foolish of me to think otherwise.”

“Do you like the singing in church?”

“Yaaeessss,” again, in unison. They were answering questions now as if their Sunday School teacher was drilling them.

“I like the preachin!” It was Isaiah again.

“You do?”

“Yaees, cause my uncle’s da preacher!”

“Is that so?”

“Yaaes, and he got two suits!”

“No!” It was sarcastic unbelief.

“He do! He got a black one and he got a blue one!”

“Whatever does a man require of two suits?” Pullen smiled as he inquired?

“Whhaaa?”

The accent and word choice was too much for the children. They were not accustomed to Pullen manners at all. This was the highlight of their summer. Not only did he talk funny but look how big he is! How did a white man get so fat!