



EDUCATOR'S COLUMN

“Outside Influence”

By Brian Lucas, UW-Whitewater

It was the third weekend in April and I was in Clarksdale, Mississippi for the seventh annual Juke Joint Festival. If you like blues music, I highly recommend this festival. The food is more than satisfying, southern hospitality is abundant and the music will keep you moving all night long.

I had been to Clarksdale numerous times before this weekend, but the one thing I had yet to see is the WROX Museum. It had always been closed when I was in town.

WROX is an A.M. station located in Clarksdale and it was the home to Early Wright, a.k.a. The Soul Man. Early Wright was the first black radio announcer in the state of Mississippi. He was hired in 1947 and worked at WROX for 52 years. Various musicians stopped by the studio during his tenure, for interviews and to play on his show. This list includes, but is not limited to, Muddy Waters, Charlie Pride, Elvis, B.B. King, Rufus Thomas (also a long time WDIA disc jockey in Memphis) and many other influential artists. Early is also responsible for hiring a young janitor at the station by the name of Ike Turner.

Weeknights from 7 pm until 11 pm, Early Wright shared his wisdom, personalized advertisements, and built a strong bond with his listening audience. He helped people understand each other through music. His reach wasn't limited to Clarksdale. He had an impact on blues lovers all over the world.

This was my lucky year, not only was the museum open but they were also dedicating a Mississippi Blues Trail Marker for the WROX. These historic trail markers are located throughout Mississippi and provide some history about blues music and the people and places that help create it. I love blues music and this was the best of both worlds.

The museum is a previous WROX studio that is located in downtown Clarksdale. The furniture is still intact, although a few of the studios have seen better days. Entering the museum was like stepping in to a time machine. Old microphones, turntables and reel-to-reel machines still occupy space in this historic building. I'm so glad that I was finally able to step inside the old WROX studios. Although I didn't get to talk to Bubba, the man who runs the museum, I thoroughly enjoyed my tour and look forward that opportunity next year.

As I was driving home from Mississippi, I began to think about the positive impact that WROX has had on its community. I thought about Early Wright and people like Rufus Thomas, who had a big impact on listeners in the Mississippi Delta. Then I began to think about the impact my station has on it's community. This experience gave me a deeper level of appreciation for what I do and what my students are doing at our radio station.

We, as broadcasters, touch people lives everyday. We make people smile. We entertain our listeners through stories; news, sports and otherwise. We provide sense of community not just through music, but also through our personalities. The Wisconsin Museum of Broadcasting is another reminder of that. I suggest revisiting the museum's website once in a while to remind yourself of the great work that has been done by our predecessors.

It's fun to find inspiration and understanding from unsuspecting places. I went to the Juke Joint Festival to play music and see other bands. I love blues and going to land where the blues began is special to me. I didn't realize that this trip would give me a greater appreciation for the work that I do.

One more thing, if you ever make the pilgrimage to the Juke Joint Festival, make sure you take time to see the monkeys riding dogs. It's highly entertaining.