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BLUES TRAIL EXPANDS IN NATCHEZ

Jackson, Mississippi (September 1, 2009) – Music lovers are invited to soak in the sounds of the blues at the unveiling of Natchez’s second Mississippi Blues Trail marker on Friday, September 4 at 6:30 p.m. in Jack Waite Park on McCabe Street. The marker honors Alexander “Papa George” Lightfoot, who was a Natchez ice cream peddler by day and a blues man by night.

“Papa Lightfoot played a very important role in the formative years of Mississippi blues,” Governor Haley Barbour said. “Mississippi’s blues heritage was influenced by his legacy and this marker will keep that story alive.”

Lightfoot, born in 1924 and reared on Franklin Street, is credited for reviving the blues in the late 1960s following the release of his breakout album, “Natchez Trace.” Lightfoot began recording as a session man in 1949, and was well known among his peers for his mastery of the harmonica. He died in 1971.

The African American community of Natchez has long been renowned for its achievements in education, business, arts, and entertainment. The rich legacy of blues, jazz, and gospel in Natchez, however, has often been obscured by the tragic shadow of the notorious Rhythm Club fire that claimed some 200 lives here in 1940. As the Bluff City began to recover from the devastation, the musical tradition resumed. The Library of Congress recorded several local blues and gospel singers some months after the fire, and another Natchez bluesman, Alexander “Papa George” Lightfoot, became one of the foremost harmonica players of the post-World War II era, appearing on national radio broadcasts and recording for several record companies around the country. Lightfoot made some of his earliest recordings for the Sultan label, a company formed by an interracial Natchez partnership in 1950. Sultan may in fact have been the first record label founded in Mississippi. One of the partners, Jack Davis, also recorded with his Blues Blasters band, which included James Rowan on trumpet and Joe Frazier on drums. Rowan, now 83, still lives in Natchez, and one of the city’s public schools is named after Frazier.

Among other Natchez blues musicians featured on the marker is Jimmy Anderson, who recorded several “swamp blues” classics in Louisiana and returned to Natchez to broadcast on the radio under the moniker of “Soul Man Lee.” Hezekiah Early, Elmo Williams, Geeshie Wiley, Bud Scott, and others are also mentioned in the marker text.

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The scope of Natchez' musical history is so wide that the Mississippi Blues Trail is devoting several markers to the topic. The first, dedicated in 2007, commemorated the Rhythm Club fire. Future markers will honor the Ealey brothers Theodis, Y.Z., David, and Melwin and others.

Mississippi is a destination for music lovers. Gov. Haley Barbour created the Mississippi Blues Trail to recognize the talents of the state's countless musicians in the Birthplace of America's Music. Since December 11, 2006, the Mississippi Blues Commission and the Mississippi Development Authority have erected and celebrated the heritage of over 83 sites around the state.

Craig Ray, tourism director for the Mississippi Development Authority, said 180 markers will be scattered throughout the state by year's end. Beginning in January, each marker will be outfitted with audio and video to enhance the trail.

The Mississippi Blues Trail markers are funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and by support from the Natchez Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Mississippi Department of Transportation, Delta State University and the Mississippi Development Authority.

For further information on the Mississippi Blues Trail, go to www.msbluestrail.org or visitor information at the official tourism website www.visitmississippi.org.

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