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BLUES TRAIL EXPANDS WITH COMO MARKERS

Jackson, Mississippi (August 27, 2009) – For people whose travel decisions are based solely on their love for the Blues - now is the time to follow that passion for music as Mississippi continues to expand the Blues Trail Saturday, August 29 at 11 a.m. with dedication ceremonies in downtown Como in honor of the late fife and drum musician Otha Turner.

“The ceremony is being dedicated in tandem with the annual fife and drum picnic and goat roast held on Turner’s property in nearby Gravel Springs, said D. Craig Ray, director of tourism for the Mississippi Development Authority.” The unveiling will include performances by Jimbo Mathus, Mark Massey, and the Rising Star Fife and Drum band, featuring Turner’s granddaughter Sharde Thomas on fife and vocals. Visitors to the marker ceremonies are invited to attend the picnic later in the day.”

Turner (ca. 1908 – 2003) was the most famous exponent of the north Mississippi fife and drum tradition, which was first documented by folklorist Alan Lomax in 1942. Although the local fife and drum tradition is often described as sounding “African,” its origins likely stem from African American musicians transforming the Euro-American military fife and drum tradition with African and African-American musical influences. The local tradition is thought to have started shortly after the Civil War. Unlike the military groups, the north Mississippi fife and drum bands played mostly at social events, often picnics held around the 4th of July and Labor Day. The groups’ repertoires included spirituals, instrumentals, minstrel songs, and blues, such as *Sitting On Top of the World* and *My Babe*.

Otha Turner (his name is sometimes spelled Othar or Other) was born in Rankin County, but moved as a small child to north Mississippi. He received his first fife from a neighbor as a boy, and was soon making his own instruments, using a heated metal rod to bore out a piece of cane and create mouth and finger holes. Turner worked as a farmer for most of his life, and for many years hosted annual fife and drum picnics and goat roasts on his property in Gravel Springs. For many years he played drums together with fife player Napolian Strickland, and later formed his own group, which featured members of his family including his daughter Bernice Turner Pratcher and granddaughter Sharde Thomas. Turner was first recorded in the late ‘60s, and in the 1990s recorded two CDs under his own name, *Everybody Hollerin’ Goat* and *Otha Turner and the Afrosssippi Allstars*, both of which were produced by Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars.

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In the early 1970s Turner was profiled in the short documentary *Gravel Springs Fife and Drum*, and he later became a regular performer at events including the Delta Blues Festival and the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival. In 2003 Turner was featured in the Martin Scorsese blues film *Feel Like Going Home*, and his music was also used in Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*. Upon Turner's death in 2003 his then thirteen-year-old granddaughter and protégé Sharde Thomas took over leadership of his Rising Star Fife and Drum Band.

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 80 sites around the state.

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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