



Contact: Sandy Bynum, Tourism Division
sbynum@mississippi.org

601.359.3297

UNION COUNTY CELEBRATES LIVES OF LOCAL LEGENDS ON THE MISSISSIPPI BLUES TRAIL

Jackson, Mississippi (October 23, 2009) – Governor Haley Barbour today announced that a new Mississippi Blues Trail Marker will honor the down-home gospel sounds of renowned Union County musicians Elder Roma Wilson and Rev. Leon Pinson with installation of a marker in New Albany on the corner of East Bankhead and Watson streets, Monday, October 26th at 1 p.m.

"These two gospel pioneers are greatly deserving of this honor on the Mississippi Blues Trail," Governor Haley Barbour said. "Rev. Pinson and Mr. Wilson were truly great musicians and an inspiration to Mississippians."

Wilson (b. 1910) and Pinson (1919-1998) won many admirers among blues and folk music audiences, although they were evangelists rather than blues artists. Partners early in their careers, they performed at a number of festivals after reuniting in 1989. Wilson, who formed one of the first African-American gospel harmonica quartets in the 1940s, was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship in 1994. Wilson's virtuosic harmonica technique and Pinson's down-home guitar work were so close to the sounds of the blues that several blues festivals invited the duo to perform. But the lyrics of their songs were sacred, not secular, and both Wilson and Pinson steadfastly adhered to their religion and claimed that they never played the blues. Historians and musicologists have sometimes referred to such music as "holy blues" or "gospel blues." But Elder Wilson told author Alan Young, "I don't have the blues. I only have joy. Got no blues, but we got respect for them – if people want to play 'em, that's their business." The Reverend Pinson said, "I hear some people say I'm singing the 'gospel blues.' Gospel blues! Ain't no blues in gospel . . . You don't have no need of the blues if you're saved."

With nearly 100 markers scattered statewide, the Mississippi Blues Trail starts at the first official marker in Holly Ridge, the resting place of the blues guitarist Charley Patton. The trail then winds its way to sites honoring B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Son House and more.

The Mississippi Development Authority Tourism Division Heritage Trails Program, the Mississippi Blues Commission and the City of New Albany with support from the Union County Heritage Museum are contributors to the New Albany installation and marker ceremony. The Mississippi Blues Trail is funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and by support from the Mississippi Department of Transportation, Delta State University and the Mississippi Development Authority.

For more information, visit the Mississippi Blues Trail on the web at msbluestrail.org or the official MDA Tourism site visitmississippi.org.

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