

***Mame's Spirit:
Reparations and Romance***

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Griot Arts Program

Clarksdale, MS.

Some proceeds from the novel *Mame's Spirit: Reparations and Romance* will flow like the Sunflower River in **Clarksdale, MS. to the Griot Arts Program** in this small, historic town known as “ground-zero” for the Delta Blues. The after-school and weekend program identifies and supports youth in Coahoma County who want to learn and hone their life skills and creative opportunities to express their self-interests and passions. Youth from ages of 5-20s work as a collective to run the Meraki Coffee House and engage in creative arts. Griots are alive and well in the Delta.

Why Clarksdale, Mississippi?

The Griot Arts program is located on Sunflower Ave. running along the Sunflower River, an important river meandering through the Mississippi Delta hosting everything from “Born-Again” Baptisms to Blues Festivals to ancient canoe carving created by the native Choctaw people who occupied this land and river for over 10,000 years. History runs deep in Clarksdale. The **Quapaw Canoe Company** in Clarksdale on the Sunflower River keeps this historic art form alive and well. Clarksdale is the only small town in the US that has live Blues playing 356 days/year.

What's a “griot”?

Griot is a French word that means story-teller. The European term originated when the French colonized West Africa. Long before the Atlantic Slave Trade, **griots** were the second most important person in the

African village, tribe or nation. They were second in status only to the King, Queen, Prince or Princess. The griot had an advanced intellect as the keeper of the village history, culture, genealogy, myths, legends, historic and heroic events. He or she could remember without the written word the entire history of their people. They had a special gift, a *savant* capacity. They were the keepers of the past informing the present of who they are and the future of where they were going. **Griots matter!**

Griots are story-tellers, preachers, comedians:

No wonder Black American ministers are revered as great story-tellers, their sermons punctuated by rhythmic, melodic performances personified by Sojourner Truth, Rev. Jarena Lee, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., Rev. Al Sharpton, Rev. Julia A. J. Foote, Rev. T.D. Jakes, Rev. C.L. Franklin, AME Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie and even Barack Obama. They come from a long tradition of the West Africa griot brought to America under slavery. ***You can take the African out of Africa, but you can't take the Africa out of the African!***

They preserved and told their history by story-telling, music, dance, song, folklore, drama, pedagogy and comedy. Ever wonder why Black **comedians**, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Wanda Sykes, Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, are so profoundly popular? They are **griots**.

In the town of Clarksdale in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, **Leonette Henderson** is the executive director of the Griot Arts program teaching, inspiring, cultivating youth to appreciate their history and cultivating their innate talents. Griot Arts program partners with the **Meraki Roasting Coffee Co.** on Sunflower Ave. training young entrepreneurs in the skills and confidence to compete in the modern world, “Meraki” is a Greek word meaning “putting your entire heart and soul into your aspiration,” kinda-like grandma putting her foot into cooking soul food. Like grandma, the griot is all in.

Culture runs deep in Clarksdale:

Clarksdale is living, breathing America culture - home of Sam Cooke, Ike Turner, Early Wright, civil rights leaders Dr. Aaron Henry, Vera Pigea, SNCC Freedom House at 459 Yazoo Ave., the Delta Blues Museum and a multi-cultural community of Jews, Chinese, Lebanese and mostly African Americans all equally important creating a community known as “Ground-

Zero” for the Blues. In fact, **Rock & Roll (R&R) was born here in 1951** when natives Ike Turner, Jackie Brenston and the Delta Cats wrote and practiced the first R&R song, *Rocket 88*, in the basement of the Riverside (the Sunflower River) Hotel, then performed the song to Sam Phillips in Memphis to become the first R&R record. The hotel still functions today and was home to traveling Blues greats in the Delta. The Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith, died in this hotel after a terrible car crash just outside of Clarksdale on Highway 61 - the Blues Highway.

The Illinois Central Railroad runs through Clarksdale transporting Mississippi’s *white-gold* (cotton) to the North as well as millions of African Americans during the Great Migration seeking a freedom not offered in the Deep South.

But one of the most consequential stories of Clarksdale is the home of W.C. Handy and Robert Johnson in the early 1900s both of whom established the Blues as the music that would change the world.

W.C. Handy lived at 3rd & Issaquena in the first years of the 1900s. He was reared in a middle-class family in Florence, Alabama in the household of a prominent minister. He was a child-protege of sacred and classical music. Rather than follow his father into the church, he ventured out into the world as an itinerant musician to find his way.

One night, he was sitting on a train depot bench in Tutwiler, MS. waiting for the train to take him back to Clarksdale. He had been performing sacred music in a Tutwiler Black church. While waiting for the train, he was startled by a lonesome, guitar plucking Black man emerging out of the dark night along the railroad tracks (Illinois Central Rail Road) that ran through miles and miles of cotton plantations. The mysterious old man sat beside WC strumming his tattered guitar making an “awful sound and repeating the first and second line with the third line finishing a story of the first two lines”. In other words, the man was singing a story and playing what would come to be known as the Blues, of which WC Handy had never heard before. After several weeks of sleepless nights where WC could not get this new “Blue note” sound out of his mind, he sat down at his piano and scored the sound creating the Blues. The rest is history.

WC Handy had heard a *griot* and was struck by an ancient muse coming out of Africa but unbeknownst to WC. The music played and sung by the unknown itinerant was ancient African folk music.

The Crossroads African mystery:

Just as mysterious and momentous, Delta highways 49 and 61 run through Clarksdale and have come to be known as *The Crossroads*. As the West African legend would have it, the spiritual muse of *Papa Legba* would sit at crossroads between villages and markets strumming his guitar for the purpose of attracting women. This story, again, traveled from West African to the Delta becoming the mythical legend of Robert Johnson meeting the “Devil” at the crossroads in Clarksdale. The devil was the master-guitarist muse transporting talents to Mr. Johnson in exchange for his soul. Apparently it worked. Johnson became the world's most admired and prolific Blues guitarist and Devil took him away at the early age of 27. No wonder they call the Blues the “Devil’s music”.

African spirituality runs deep in the Mississippi Delta and in Clarksdale. The Blues is story-telling at its best. The griot tells the story. **The Griot Arts Program** is carrying on these West African traditions.

Which current Griot Arts student will become the next super-star *Straight Outta Clarksdale*? ***Mame’s Spirit*** supports Griots in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

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