

Born in Hazlehurst in 1911 (or 1912), Johnson is acknowledged in three churchyards in the Greenwood area—his death certificate simply stated “Zion Church,” leading to confusion about its location, as Zion was a common name for churches. An MBT marker titled **Robert Johnson** is located at the **Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church** on Money Road about three miles north of Greenwood. In the late '90s local resident Rosie Eskridge, who was a resident at the nearby Star of the West plantation where Johnson died, confirmed this as Johnson's burial place; she recalled her husband digging the bluesman's grave.

To reach the marker take Grand Avenue north across a bridge over the Tallahatchie River; on its southern end is a Mississippi Country Trail marker honoring one-time Greenwood resident **Bobbie Gentry**, whose hit *Ode to Billy Joe* referred to the “Tallahatchie Bridge”—the original bridge was located miles north of the marker and is no longer there.

On the way to Johnson's marker you'll pass the quaint headquarters of the radio station **WABG 960: “Awesome AM,”** which features mostly blues and some religious programming. Stop in and one of the deejays is likely to put you on the air.

Just north of the Little Zion church is **Tallahatchie Flats** ([www.tallahatchieflats.com](http://www.tallahatchieflats.com)), an alternative lodging facility with six restored “tenant houses” available. There's also a former plantation commissary building on the grounds that can be rented out for special occasions.

About seven miles north of the Johnson marker is Money, Mississippi, where a Mississippi Freedom Trail marker addresses the 1955 murder of **Emmett Till**, which brought international condemnation and galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.

## JAMES POE AND WABG: Blues, News, and Interviews

by Scott Barretta

Driving up Money Road from Greenwood to the MBT marker for Robert Johnson, you'll pass a little building set out in the fields with **WABG 960 AM** emblazoned on its side. It looks like a relic of the past, and many people comment on its resemblance to the 1920s era station in *O Brother Where Art Thou* (which was actually constructed for the film in Issaquena County). Tune in, though, and you'll hear a unique mix of blues ranging from Charley Patton to the latest soul-blues hits, interspersed with lively commentary and homegrown commercials.

James Poe, a native of Port Gibson who graduated from Jackson's Provine High School, operates the station. His love of radio stretches back to his preteens, when he was an ardent listener to Jackson's WOKJ. He was a fan of its pioneering R&B deejays Jobie Martin and Bruce Payne, but also admired the work of program director Joe “Soul Ranger” Shamwell and owner Zane Roden, who “controlled the pace of Jackson back in the 1970s.” Poe would later work for Shamwell at WACR in Columbus, Mississippi, located in “Catfish Alley.”

Poe Payne has worked with radio for 43 years, and says he was one of the youngest broadcasters to ever receive a First Class FCC License. He's the graduate of several broadcasting schools, and has degrees in air traffic control and management.

Like many radio professionals he's moved frequently over the years, with stops in Colorado, Missouri, Minnesota and West

Virginia, as well as Thailand and England. Along with veteran jocks Steve Ladd and George Hines, he helped revamp Clarksdale's WROX after the death of veteran blues and gospel deejay Early Wright.

In 2007 Poe, together with two investors, purchased WABG, formerly a country station, and the following year the format was changed to “Blues, News, and Interviews.”

“When I came to the Delta we had all the major formats—rock, country, hip-hop—but you didn't hear Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, or Muddy Waters. You didn't hear the artists who came from this region. And that's where I felt the void was, and that we needed more blues. Not to make money, but to perpetuate the music form and to reeducate the people on the blues.”

Prior to starting the station Poe traveled to blues events to interview artists for future use, and portions of these are featured alongside song selections. Another source of on-air material is interviews with visitors who drop by the station.

“The main thing that's unique about the station is the number of tourists, and the loyalty of tourists, who listen to the station. When they pass through the area ‘on the blues trail’ they stop by the station and we put them on the air live and record them for playback later.”

Potential visitors also listen online via the station's website ([www.awesomeam.com](http://www.awesomeam.com)).

“Our listenership overseas is substantial and loyal. They can find out what's happening in the Mississippi Delta in real time just by logging on to the station.”

He provides examples of a Japanese fan who discovered WABG via Facebook, and then made a pilgrimage to the station, and Czech fans who recorded an interview at the station and once back home e-mailed to request—successfully—a rebroadcast.

Back in the Delta the modest terrestrial radio signal stretches to Grenada, Lake Village, Arkansas, and Yazoo City. Poe shares the microphone with Bess Cook, who worked as a sales manager before starting earlier this year to deejay—a job that includes welcoming tourists and putting them on the air.

A small stage outside the station is the setting for occasional events including a Robert Johnson celebration several years ago, and a veterans appreciation event this past August.

James Poe and Beth Cook in the studio at WABG.



BILL STEBER



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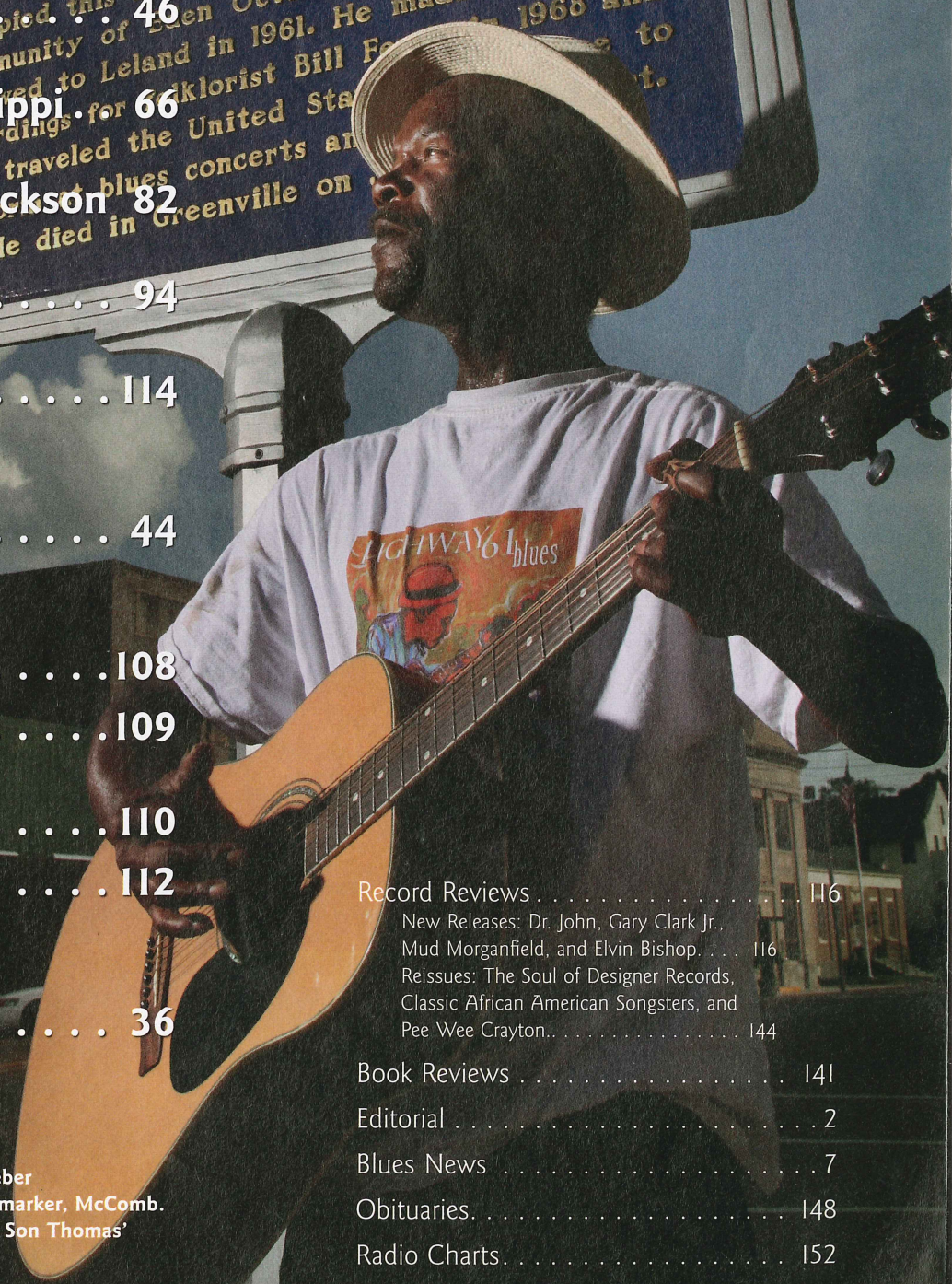
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