

**Garth Cartwright**, New Zealand born, South London-based, off' wandering, is an award winning journalist, occasional DJ, sometime World Service broadcaster and the author of *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians* (Serpent's Tail).

### **Praise for *Princes Amongst Men***

'Roma music is redolent with Gypsy lore, language, passion and personality. [Cartwright] found a vibrant, living musical tradition that is central to pan-European culture' *The Times*

'A valuable chronicle of their personal histories [Roma Gypsies] and musical development... He writes lyrically and builds steadily to create a sense of anticipation' *Times Literary Supplement*

'Funny, revealing and frequently moving' *Observer Music Monthly*

'Excellent survey of Roma musicians in the Balkans... What distinguishes Cartwright is his style, his verve and his wholehearted engagement with his subject' *Guardian*

'As Bulgaria and Romania creep on to the travel and property pages, this book about Balkan gypsy music could become an essential alternative guide... For anyone interested in the reality of Roma culture, or planning a holiday in the region, this is the perfect offbeat companion' Sue Steward, *Daily Telegraph*

'Insightful, energised and empathetic' *Time Out*

'Reminiscent of Jack Kerouac or Hunter S Thompson...the prose is carefully written and keenly observed' *New Internationalist*

'You don't have to be a fan of gypsy music to appreciate Cartwright's book... Part travelogue, part musical history, it's full of picaresque tales told in an appealingly off-beat and impressionistic style' *Uncut*

‘Cartwright is an observant and eloquent writer who demonstrates a strong understanding not just of how things are, socially and politically, in the Balkan states he’s visiting but of how things got to be that way. He neither condescends to his interviewees nor patronises the reader, and his love of the Roma, their music and the various countries they inhabit shines through on every page’  
*The Wire*

‘An insightful and poignant travelogue which should be handed out free to every *Daily Mail* reader’ *Big Issue*

‘This is a book about music by a man who has a bellowing and bizarre passion for Balkan brass. It is also about history, culture, tragedy, and, most definitely, joy. In short, it is about what it means to be a human being... In this work of enormous humanity Cartwright celebrates the power of music to transcend the most hideous suffering of a people’ *Leeds Guide*

# MORE MILES THAN MONEY

*Journeys Through American Music*

GARTH CARTWRIGHT



A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library on request

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To: Charlie Gillett, Chris Strachwitz  
and the indomitable spirit of Curtis  
Mayfield; three who, each in their own  
way, helped shape how I heard America

# Contents

Acknowledgements / ix

Prologue: Last Call at Lee's Unleaded / xiii

## INTO THE SOUTH-WEST

1. San Francisco: A Baptism in Sound / 3
2. Black Rock Desert: Ghost Dancing / 19
3. Las Vegas: Genuine, Justifiable Hope / 31
4. Tucson: The Shadow Land / 43

## CALIFORNIA SOUL

5. Hollywood: Everything Sings Except for a Buzzard / 65
6. East LA: Pure Mexican Fury / 77
7. Watts: Not in Raceriotland... / 97
8. Joshua Tree: Mojave Desert Shivers / 111

## RESERVATION BLUES

9. Navajo Nation: It is Done in Beauty / 121
10. Monument Valley: A Few More Nowhere Towns / 133
11. Santa Fe: Desperate Spiritual Outlaws / 147

## WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS

12. Truth or Consequences: American Death Trip / 163
13. Austin: Waving at the Train / 175
14. San Antonio: All Parts from Mexico / 187
15. Gruene: Honky-tonk Masquerade / 197

## BILLION-DOLLAR BAPTISTS

16. Nashville: Getting Ready to Go Crazy / 207

## Garth Cartwright

17. Nashville: Breakin' Broncos and Ridin' Bulls / 223
18. Memphis: The Beauty of Primitive Music / 237
19. Memphis: Give Out But Don't Give Up / 253

## MISSISSIPPI STATE OF MIND

20. Tunica: Ghosts of Highway 61 / 271
21. Clarksdale: No Time to Pray / 279
22. Greenville: King of the Chitlin' Circuit / 293
23. River Valley: I Just Shot Him in the Head / 303

## CHICAGO BREAKDOWN

24. Oh, We Had a Good Time / 317
25. Crazy Mixed-up World / 333

Epilogue: If of No Account Go Away from Home... / 349

Select Bibliography / 355

Discography / 359

Photograph credits / 365

Index / 367

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To friends international: many blessings!

Garth Cartwright

To my parents, who gave me my first taste of America with Mark Twain and westerns, your support – no matter how crazy my quests may seem – is always appreciated.

Last but not least: to Florence Arpin and Alexander and Ariane, who always make returning to South London a pleasure.

Since we don't know each other, I want to give you a complete picture of myself, why I'm interested in America, why I'm always occupying myself with America: because in America, there's the whole world. In Italy there's Italy, and in France there's France. The problems of America are the problems of the whole world: the contradictions, the fantasies, the poetry. The minute you touch down on America, you touch on universal themes. For better or worse, that's the way it is.

Sergio Leone

I always thought it was our America as much as anybody else's – circus people and carnival freaks, prisoners and music makers, troubadours, minstrels, hobos and poets and such, we can't let the goddamn country go down to politicians and corporate madmen and media people and college professors, run it over and ruin it all. It's ours, our goddamn country. We built the midway, didn't we? And we make the music that goes on the midway, from sea to shining sea. You know, goddamn, Ronald Reagan died recently and they flew the flag half-mast. Well, did they fly it at half-mast for Ray Charles? For Johnny Cash? Declare a national holiday? Yet these people, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, they moved and changed the daily lives more than any politician who are just grifters and scum. Wouldn't even let them in the goddamn midway. So let us now praise the real American heroes, the ones with heart and soul who changed things for the good.

Little Jack Horton



Gambling on a future: dice men, Mississippi, 1939

## Prologue: Last Call at Lee's Unleaded

*No moon illuminates our journey and the stars, why, they fear to shine.* A damp Saturday night. October's cruel winds now wane but something ominous, witchy even, remains in the atmosphere. I try and explain this to the driver. He nods, says, 'Uh-huh, urban voodoo.' Well, I think, that explains everything. Silence envelops us as we continue through Chicago's West Side. Considering this neighbourhood is dense with public housing the quiet is eerie, almost unnerving. I stare into the gloom: few street lamps and little sign of human activity. Get the sense of a city under siege; doors bolted, lights dimmed, movement suspended. At traffic lights a jeep pulls alongside, all eyes on us, driver and passenger, pale-skinned outsiders. The Cherokee trembles, subsonic bass patterns reverberating through its chassis, bass like a war dance, and I – *as ever* – recognise in the rhymes Atlanta's Goodie Mob.

*I'm tired of lyin'  
I'm sick of glorifyin' dyin'  
I'm sick of not tryin'*

I'm tired too. Bone weary and exhausted from pursuing an insane American quest. Lights change, jeep roars off, all fuel-injected rush. Our car splutters, barely idling. Pray silently: *please don't break down here.* A burnt-out tenement looms on our left, all shadows and ash, ash and shadows. Damn, how *did* I end up so deep in an urban cityscape few voluntarily venture into? I've felt more at home, safer, in North Africa, Pakistan even, than I do on these streets where we share a common language and culture. Chicago's urban decay reminds me of Guatemala City... edgy, broken,

*hostile*. Feel a twitch in my limbs. *Getting jumpy*. Strange how foreign one can feel in a cityscape that is very familiar. Mentally I've walked these streets across the decades: certain sounds from vinyl, images offered up in films, the sights and smells conjured by books, offered me what bluesman Big Bill Broonzy called 'the key to the highway'. This mythic key unlocking an America that exists beyond the McUSA we consume daily, allowing those who possess it to, as Americans say, cross the tracks. But who in their right mind wanders into black ghettos and Mexican barrios? Enduring eighteen chafing hours on a Greyhound bus just to get to Nashville? The red-eye exhaustion from driving for days on end solely to party in a honky-tonk? Or dancing in a Nevada desert sandstorm hoping for – *what!?!* – don't know... a 'vision', I guess. For near on two months now I've been constantly moving through America, an endurance test that recalls doomed Texan troubadour Townes Van Zandt singing

*Livin' on the road my friend  
Was gonna keep you free and clean  
Now you wear your skin like iron  
And your breath is hard as kerosene.*

To be as desperate and free as old Texan outlaws appeared attractive from a distance but, by now, I'm too weary, too beat, to get tripped up on romantic conceits. Restless. That's how I explain myself to others. 'Restless: 1. unable to stay still or quiet. 2. ceaselessly active or moving: the restless wind. 3. worried; anxious; uneasy.' *Collins English Dictionary* has my number. What else explains an adult life spent fleeing convention and regulation?

Growing up in Auckland, New Zealand, surely contributed to my sense of rootless unease. Aware you're existing at the bottom of the world, this sense of isolation enforced by most of the media we consumed: once heralded as Little England, post-WW2 NZ swapped British colonial influence for the embrace of everything American. Go to a movie, switch on the TV, tune into a radio station... we were sold American and, as fledglings, gobbled and

gobbled. Tennessee held greater mythic appeal than Taranaki while California appeared the promised land. The Americans colonised my subconscious and, in April 1990, I landed on US soil, whipper thin and naive as only a Kiwi youth could be, determined to follow Huck Finn's example and light out for the territory. Whatever that territory was. For six months a rusty \$600 Buick carried me through a land of some beauty and much disappointment, the imaginary America I inhabited in Auckland rarely coming in sight. After an extended sojourn in San Francisco I fled to London, a city so grey and unwelcoming my life till then appeared to have been lived in Technicolor. *Key to the highway?* First I needed to unlock my mind.

Tucked away in South London tower blocks across the nineties I realised how British politics and pop culture were immeasurably shaped by the USA – often by its worst elements – and felt no desire to return; Europe and Asia provided new sources of fascination. Instead, when American neocons ranted about 'Old Europe' refusing to join their 'war on terror' I despaired at what had become of the nation that once enchanted me. But after writing up a year in the Balkans among Romany Gypsy musicians, one replete with references to blues music and Beat poets, it became obvious I needed to look anew at the USA. Time, then, to try once again and find a key to American highways.

I returned to the USA unsure of what I would find. From London the rhetoric of Cheney and Rumsfeld suggested 'freedom' was twisted into covering for fear and repression while New Orleans, fabled city of song, now existed as an emblem for American decline and neglect. George Bush Sr was president when I was last here and now his namesake occupies the role; American military were in Iraq then and are again now. *The more things change the more they stay the same?* Let's find out.

*I found out:* kept finding and finding until the road heading south from San Francisco ran out in Chicago. South and West Chicago's bleak streets once served as a port of call for generations arriving from the Deep South; here almost a century ago the likes of

Louis Armstrong and Memphis Minnie made music that would prove a gash in Western consciousness. Many followed and their Chicago creations remain among the twentieth century's most influential: Mahalia Jackson developed a form of gospel vocal that now dominates popular song; Muddy Waters plugged in and the resulting electric shock can still be felt; Chuck Berry cranked out what came to be called rock 'n' roll music (*'it's got a backbeat/you can't lose it'*). These artists were teachers in the Sufi sense of the word, their wisdom travelling farther than simply that of musical influence.

The final night of this pilgrim's quest. And I'm so tired, so tired, so tired... haven't slept right since I don't know when. What better to do, then, than get in a ride and roll through Chicago's West and South Side? Here we are now, in search of destinations that may no longer exist, streets offering only abandoned buildings and the eerie quiet surrounding communities in collapse. We pull over, parking close to neighbourhood bars, and quickly exit the night into rooms full of sound and light where bands play on the floor or upon makeshift stages, small ensembles conjuring up the grooves that built Chi-town, singers talking in tongues, slippery rhythm sections, guitarists feeling for colour, music still capable of casting spells. Locals check us, two white men, but the driver's a familiar face and the focus rapidly returns to music and drinks and laughter, keeping the spirit flowing. We join the party, shot glasses held high, hips moving to the music. Again and again we do this, partying until instinct suggests we move on, casting long shadows beneath street lamps, slipping into darkness.

Last stop: Lee's Unleaded Blues Bar, way deep in the South Side. Shag carpet, heavy velvet curtains, fake marble bar, claret-coloured walls; Lee's offers *Superfly* chic, a loud, tough interior, hustler's paradise. Chicago is full of blues bars steeped in nostalgia but Lee's is unconcerned about tourist fantasies, no posters of Howlin' Wolf or Robert Johnson on these walls. Johnny Drummer leads the house band, a dapper, smiling man, his sound the Southern soul-groove black America now considers 'blues'. I order whiskey. A glass is placed in front of me but, as I turn to

observe Drummer, my drink gets lifted. On the South Side this is a minor affront, not something to make an issue of.

Order more whiskey and, this time, hold glass close. Johnny Drummer exits the stage and lush locals begin taking turns on the mic. A small, plump man in a fluffy Kangol hat, features impressively ugly, wrists heavy with gold, diamond-studded crucifix hanging round his neck – ghetto fabulous, indeed – starts singing of how all the girls love his hot dog. The tune's generic, limpid chorus and slick innuendoes fitting the post-midnight club vibe. 'Little Scotty!' someone shouts and many applaud. I've heard of Scotty; one-time pimp, sometime Sancho Panza to Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, noted South Side soul-blues singer. Scotty acknowledges his audience, wraps what appears to be a badly burnt hand around the mic, begins to sing, musicians locking behind him, and I fall back to philosophising: *could it be that right here, right now, I'm witnessing a requiem for American music?*

American music has done more for US standing than any politician or policy, touching lives, inspiring dreams. A crippled French Gypsy banjo player called Django, upon hearing Louis Armstrong for the first time, muttered 'Ach mouné' (Romany for 'my brother'). The Rolling Stones, when arriving in the USA in 1964, were asked what they wanted to see in the country. 'Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley,' they answered ('Where's that?' replied the credulous interviewer). Saharan nomads and Algerian rai singers, Soweto township dwellers through to Palestinian youths, all took inspiration from American music to carry their own native tongues forward. Zulus played jazz, Maoris sang soul, Japanese women mastered Ike Turner tunes, Slim Dusty employed a Texas twang when singing about an Australian town with no beer. And every nation has an Elvis impersonator. Even suburban brats raised on thousands of hours of junk US TV sensed in American music a mystery and longing that made the world infinitely more interesting. *Am-er-I-ca!* We loved that land even though we'd never set foot in it.

There's little popular American music today that spells out *Am-er-I-ca!* in all its eccentric, offbeat brilliance; instead contemporary American music has more in common with the

Mc franchises on every high street: heavy-metal crybabies, moronic rappers, over-emoting R & B divas, freeze-dried country singers, scholarly jazzers, indie-rock entropy... music, once so much a part of a community's character, is now shrill and banal, a tinny squeak of sound. I'm generalising, sure, but one thing is certain when listening to twenty-first-century American music: the thrill is gone. 'The buying and selling of music, what they've done to it, is a disaster on the scale of cutting down the rainforest,' cartoonist R. Crumb once suggested to me as we sat hypnotised by the sounds emanating from his 78s of the earliest American music. A musical rainforest that helped the world to artistically breathe and now deforestation is almost complete... better be careful or I'll end up crying into my whiskey. After thousands and thousands of miles cutting across the USA, was I, tired and emotional at journey's end, sensing a music, a *culture*, I had loved for so long now turning to dust before my eyes and ears? Such thoughts. The kind that carry their own psychic blues weight.

Johnny Drummer introduces himself, a gracious man, happy to talk about being raised in Alligator, Mississippi, right smack on Highway 61, enlisting in the services, cutting a blues 78 for Sam Phillips but getting recalled to the navy for Korea before he could build a Southern rep, resettling in Chicago and 'What a city Chicago once was! My *God*, son!' Playing drums in countless South Side bands over the decades, a pro until his house burnt down and car got stolen in the same week, then working a nine-to-five for the District School Board, occasionally releasing 45s on obscure labels, switching to keyboards because they are easier on you than drums ('as you get older'), Johnny's perseverance establishing him as a South Side veteran. He pauses, looks at whoever's tripping up on stage, the crowd getting messy, catcalling and laughing, says, 'Two things you couldn't give me: land in Mississippi and a bar in Chicago.'

'Lee's used to be such a fine place,' he adds. 'Back in the seventies you had Junior Wells, Son Seals, a lot of good people played here. Now, well, look what we got.' *Look indeed*: the latest singer to take the stage, Yard Dog, is missing a leg so balances on

crutches while singing ‘Slip Away’. A buxom black woman in a copper-coloured wig stands close, smiling and caressing him. Yard Dog, perhaps enjoying her attention too much, wanders off key. Still, he sings with feeling, giving the song a darker blues feeling than surely was originally intended, nodding and muttering ‘uh-huh’ as people shout affirmation. Gripping crutches, Yard Dog hobbles off stage. Copper Wig takes control of the mic, starts delivering a freak song, challenging every man in Lee’s with each salacious line. Johnny, whose theme song is ‘I Want to Get into Your Head Before I Get into Your Bed’, shakes his head – tiny, pendulum gestures – and focuses back on me.

‘I hear you been roamin’ ’round America?’

‘That’s it, listening out for good music and trying to take freedom’s pulse.’

‘You find it?’

‘The music or the freedom?’

‘I know ’bout the damn music. How’s the freedom?’

‘If constant movement registers as being free, sure.’

‘Uh-huh, that’s a very American kind of freedom.’

‘Travel?’

‘Naw. Restlessness. Thinkin’ you’ll find someplace better down the line apiece.’

*Down the line apiece:* I found ruin and beauty, openness and intolerance, despair and hope. All encountered across a territory they call America. Johnny’s watching me carefully, maybe expecting some smart-ass, white-boy answer. Me, an outsider just passing through, and him, a man who’s spent a lifetime learning exactly what America has to offer. The night fades. Copper Wig’s still singing about breaking bedsprings while church is only a few hours away. Sirens flood the air, lending a brief frisson to Lee’s, an edge to everyone’s lush consciousness, one that fades as police or paramedics rush past. I glance at Johnny and shrug, tongue too thick to offer any real insights right now upon my two score and ten American days and nights. He looks at me, gives another of those polite, sad shakes of his head, says, ‘This is it, son – end of the line.’



Sound and vision: Ed Lee Natay and Canyon records founder Ray Boley, Phoenix, AZ, 1951

# **INTO THE SOUTH-WEST**

San Francisco, Reno, Black Rock Desert, Las Vegas, Tucson,  
Phoenix

When you say 'America' you refer to the territory stretching  
between the icecaps to the two poles. So to hell with your barriers  
and border guards!

Diego Rivera

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth – you see  
me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's  
hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and  
the sacred tree is dead.

Black Elk



Lighting out for the territory:  
sharecroppers stalled on the way to  
California, 1937

## San Francisco: A Baptism in Sound

‘Everything cool?’ asks the Bishop. I glance up at the towering figure in long purple robes, features fierce yet benevolent, and answer yes, thank you, all is cool. Considering this is St John’s African Orthodox Church and the man addressing me is Ramakrishna King Haqq, aka Bishop King, founder of the only temple on earth dedicated to the worship of John Coltrane as a latter-day saint, things are most ricky-tick.

‘You know, I’m about to start a journey,’ I say to the Bishop, choosing words carefully, ‘a long journey, across a lot of the US. I can’t explain exactly what the journey is about ’cos it’s a quest of sorts. All I know is that I’m guided by music and, y’know, I want to search out the American music I love. But I’m scared of what I’ll find ’cos America is losing this music and... well, I think maybe losing its soul.’

‘I hear you,’ says Bishop King.

‘So what I’m trying to say is, I think I made the right decision to come here today.’

‘That’s the spirit calling, son.’

*The spirit calling. Why, yes, indeed.*

San Francisco, Sunday morning, and I woke feeling ragged, suffering from both jetlag and a Golden Gate Bridge-sized hangover. Do the right thing, go to church. But not just any church; the congregation of St John’s once worshipped Coltrane as God incarnate. I wonder what JC, being a humble type, would have made of this? In 1981 Alice Coltrane sued the church for the sum of \$7.5 million (‘Widow Of “God” Sues Church’, read

a newspaper headline) owing to its apparent misappropriation of her husband's image. Alice's lawsuit went nowhere but the resulting publicity helped attract attention: the African Orthodox Church – a popular storefront church in black neighbourhoods – approached King about joining the fold. This meant recognising Coltrane as a saint (not God) and adhering to the Scriptures instead of the psychedelic mish-mash of chants and prayers the One Mind Temple (as St John's was then called) recited. King took the leap, studying for a Doctor of Divinity degree in Chicago and, in 1984, set up St John's African Orthodox Church. St John's never became simply another outlet for Bible thumping: I last caught the church in 1991, a wild and woolly mix of homeless centre, impromptu jam session and black gospel church. All of which made some kind of sense in Haight Ashbury, the messianic preacher with a massive afro and saxophone recalling a time when the likes of Charles Manson and Jim Jones also courted followers from the 'hood's poor, lost and disaffected. The playing was raw – one cacophony had me thinking 'uh ohhh, punk jazz' – but big fun, life-enhancing, the kind of thing that gave the Haight its loose, wild vibe.

Rising rents evicted St John's at the end of the nineties. Yet anyone possessed with the conviction driving Bishop King wasn't going to fade away and I found St John's residing in a Lower Pacific Heights church. This nondescript neighbourhood of warehouses, office buildings, used-car lots and shapeless apartment blocks – the kind of place you might choose to live if only to deny your very existence – appears anathema to St John's spirit and I can only guess the congregation have been lent this violet-coloured temple. Upon entering I noted Coltrane's version of 'My Favourite Things' playing through the speakers. A tall black man in purple robes greeted me. The hair's greyer, shorter but, unmistakably, it's Bishop King.

'You came from London to be here?' He sounded pleasantly surprised. 'See, this proves my point that jazz is the ambassador for the United States. It calls people from all over the world to America and they come to us because John Coltrane has moved

something in them. So someone like you comes here to give praise and thanks. That's good. That's the spirit calling.'

Well, maybe. A long time's passed since I last attended a church service. Yet music expresses the transcendental, articulates stuff beyond words. Which, I guess, is what I've come to worship. So how did the Bishop develop the Coltrane cosmology?

'In 1965 my wife and I had to decide where to go to see some jazz. Back then there were a lot of jazz clubs in town. A lot. We decided to go to the Jazz Workshop in North Beach. Playing that night was the John Coltrane Quartet. The room was small, crowded, very smoky, and what I heard there I like to call a 'baptism in sound'. I grew up attending Pentecostal churches and the experience in the Jazz Workshop was comparable to what happened at church when the music and preaching built to such a level the congregation felt a direct connection with God. The old folks called it 'the Holy Ghost falling on the people'. It manifested in different people in different forms. Some people would dance, some people would cry, some people would rejoice, some people would speak in other tongues. But for that moment, that period, time was arrested, so to speak. You were obeying the Holy Spirit. And, son, that's the feeling I got that night listening to the Coltrane Quartet. They played with a intensity beyond entertainment. A intensity that went beyond jazz musicians trying to push the envelope.

'Jimmy Garrison, he was the Quartet's double bassist, played a solo and it was like nothing I've ever heard. The man was lost in the music and where it was taking him. So much so, drool was hanging out of his mouth. He was gone with the music, way, way out there! I realised right then the music of John Coltrane was representative beyond culture. He was making music that wasn't just a cultural or ethnic thing. There was a higher calling to his art. I began to see God in the sound. This was a point of revelation. Not that I immediately went away and set up the church. More Coltrane's music allowed an evolution, or a transition, to begin. The consciousness level began opening, evolving. You understand now what I say about a baptism in sound?'

Uh-huh. At least, I think so. Not that I've ever felt a particularly religious impulse towards anything. But a baptism in sound... well, sure. Music talks in tongues I don't try to understand, speaking to the intuitive and primal, one of humanity's greatest resources to share and communicate with. Bishop King looked on as I mentally chewed this through. 'Everything cool?' he asked.

I'm early so kick back in a pew, thinking about JC, while the Bishop and his musicians set up. *The sound of John Coltrane*: thick yet swift and tending to coil and coil until exploding with power and tension. Not the warmest of saxophone tones – when my teenage self first heard Coltrane playing alongside Cannonball Adderley on Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* I preferred Adderley, his soulful blues tone more appealing than Coltrane's mercurial solos – but one that's come to signify an unswerving artistic discipline, Coltrane being to post-war jazz what Che Guevara was to Latino revolution. Indeed, JC came to represent a jazz pilgrim's progress: the saxophonist as seeker of spiritual and musical enlightenment. Coltrane was a romantic modernist, believing art must forever be an act of radical renewal, that creativity enabled communion with the cosmos. His excessive appetite for drugs and alcohol ended after Miles Davis fired him (and punched 'Trane out: for nodding off on the bandstand) and he turned to the disciplined pursuit of nirvana as practised by Hindu ascetics. The kind of intensity that goes with such beliefs energised Coltrane across the sixties, his music constantly evolving, challenging all others to challenge themselves, reaching apotheosis on 1965's *A Love Supreme*, the album's expansive title and sonic rush hinting at what a generation of seekers were searching for. Coltrane seemed to channel the decade's *zeitgeist*, an icon to Black Power and psychedelic rockers. Today Coltrane's sound still casts giant shadows across a very tame jazz scene but, just as agitprop and lysergic guitar solos failed to usher in a post-Woodstock utopia, the sheets of sound JC pushed forth post *A Love Supreme* register only as skronk. Coltrane belatedly realised this and hoped to



Meditation: Coltrane contemplates his tools

collaborate with sitar minimalist Ravi Shankar but liver cancer stole him away in July 1967.

I think of how Cannonball Adderley went on to pioneer soul-jazz and enjoy pop success, unhindered by Coltrane's excesses. I think of Miles asking JC why he soloed excessively, the reply being he didn't know how to stop, Miles saying 'you take the horn out of your mouth, John.' I think of Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda* and how she turned the harp into a fluid instrument for surfing the jazz cosmos. I think about— 'We serve food after the service but please make yourself at home,' says a young black woman who I hadn't even noticed approaching me. Food? OK, she's thinking I'm homeless and have come for the free food they serve after the ceremony. Only away from London two days and already considered a hobo. Bloodshot eyes and drawn features, I guess.

By 11 a.m. people are trickling in: smartly dressed black families, a smattering of fellow tourists, two youths with long hair and

instruments and several homeless men (who sit way down back). Bishop King begins the service with a Bible reading that he intersperses with thoughts on America today, at one point favourably quoting Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan. A long, silent prayer meditation follows. Several women start singing a psalm, loose and gospel-flavoured. Then the band kick in – keyboards, electric bass, drums, two saxophones, clarinet – the sound strong and full, rhythm section locking, keyboards providing a melodic bed, Bishop King blowing big, fat Coltrane-notes out of his saxophone while the clarinet player dances around him, looping notes like he's lacing shoes. Other members of the congregation start banging tambourines, the female choir wailing and howling. Two black kids, dressed for church, try to find some space to join in on trumpet. Not easy as the Bishop and a dreadlocked sax player are ripping great solos, but the boys' stifled squalls suit the atmosphere, slipping bum notes into proceedings, hungry to engage with this big loud ritual. A man carrying a pair of bongos arrives, sits, finds a rhythm, joins the jam. The rockers in the congregation clutch saxophones and listen intently until one starts to blow. Ouch! He stops, breathes, blows again. *Parpppp!* A little girl, obviously bored by proceedings, looks on with disgust: *the adults get to have fun but no one plays with me!* A homeless guy, hair sprouting in every direction, ambles forward, pulling notes out of his harmonica, dancing a little shuffle. He's not in the same key, maybe not even in the same dimension, as the band. But spiritually, sure, he's continuing the Haight vibe.

'John Col-trane': I recall proto-rappers the Last Poets snapping those three syllables over a beat while offering praise to a musician they considered a fellow militant, and this gets me imagining Bishop King, back in the day, surely positing JC as a proto-Black Panther, sax in one hand, shotgun in another, *A Love Supreme's* scratched vinyl blasting through huge speakers, brain on fire with revolutionary dreams. Not that there's any sense of violent uprising in the air this morning; no, today's ceremony is about spiritual uplift via galvanic musical overload. I mean, this place is jumping as people dance and sing and play

and throw themselves into Coltrane's cosmic blues. Just like they did when jazz first announced its miscegenated self to America and the world around a century ago. Myself, I date the twentieth century's birth to 26 February 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jass Band entered Victor studios in New York to cut the first jazz recordings. The ODJB weren't particularly talented – five white New Orleans musicians who'd copped licks from playing alongside their black neighbours (soon to become a familiar story) – but once Americans (and then the rest of the world) got to hear their primitive riffing and barnyard stomp the century caught fire: this wild Southern sonic hybrid, a new music shaped in Louisiana and Mississippi, Texas and Tennessee, kin to what was developing in Cuba and Haiti, Brazil and Jamaica, a blend of African and Spanish, Jewish and Gypsy (and African), Anglo-Irish and French (and African), sent a rush of blood to everyone's head. And would continue to for most of the century. In St John's it still does: the joint is rockin', hot jazz, music that starts in the groin, demands the hips shake, engages the soul, *hoo-doo voo-doo*. The congregation's fired up, spirit calling, responding.

Jazz today: too often bloodless and cerebral, seemingly comfortable as a quasi-classical music. Witnessing Wayne Shorter, a sax-playing descendant of Coltrane, in London a few years past, I had to flee the concert hall, so stuffy and precious was the playing. Some might say Shorter was playing jazz but I only heard noodling. Coltrane's finest music has an earthiness – *native bloodlines* – that establishes it as among the USA's most potent twentieth-century musical creations. And there's very little in this world that rewards engagement quite like great American music. Sure, Pablo Picasso was no asshole, a great movie engages many senses, certain poems and novels resonate and many a life-enhancing invention, from combustion engines to instant noodles, has lead humanity forward. But American music, specifically the stuff made by the nation's most marginal citizens, celebrates the twentieth century's inclusive genius, the people's spirit, like nothing else. In 1977 the USA sent the Voyager spaceship to the farthest reaches of the universe and on

it, alongside Bach's Brandenburg Concerto, Senegalese percussion and Indonesian gamelan, is Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was The Night' and Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode'. Lucky ET.

Yakety-yak! A sax is chattering and St John's jumps and the whole place is convulsive with sound and sweat and good vibes and if a noise approximating a field holler (or maybe it's just a hungry drunk) arises from the back pews, well, why not? All around the honkers and shouters push things forward, building a trance state. And I'm feeling fresh; a Coltrane blast clearing my hangover. The music continues to build, atmosphere casual but intense, Bishop King blowing serpentine sounds that caress and tease and murmur about places, experiences, full of colour and light, of humanity, how we rise and fall, blues and good news, mercurial stuff, not easy but startling, asking only absolute concentration, and the dread picks up a clarinet, starts blowing thin, beautiful shrieks while a sax player jumps on drums (the drummer now settled on keyboards) and the bassist, a young woman with a bright smile, keeps thumping that tough, liquid rhythm out, no drool but Jimmy Garrison's spirit lives, and the sound... loose, free-form (but not free jazz), churning, choir shrieking and shaking, congregation shouting encouragement, kids dancing, rockers and bongo and harmonica all throwing themselves in deep, chasing 'Trane's wild, mercurial sound far, far out. *Bam! Bam!* Recall Ralph Gleason writing of Cannonball Adderley's live North Beach set 'at times the atmosphere of the Jazz Workshop resembled a church as much as jazz club', and think, *yes!* Legend has Buddy Bolden, mythic New Orleans jazz pioneer, putting trumpet to lips and 'calling the children home'. Bishop King's blowing, music calling us to this temple of sound in the Frisco wastelands. The right place to start my American music quest? *Everything cool!*

San Francisco, golden city of utopian dreamers, is where my previous American sojourn finished in early 1991. I always imagined I'd make it back some day and after ruining my health riding ancient Balkan roads the idea of the New World held

a lot of appeal. When Greg, a Frisco friend and fellow musical traveller, mentioned joining his posse to attend the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert I got to thinking about what else America might have on offer. One festival, no matter how unique, couldn't justify a US visit. But to use Burning Man as a springboard to follow up a lifelong passion for American music, music created by communities in specific locations? Well, as the Arabs say, I could feel the breeze beneath my nostrils. Before fleeing the USA for Europe last century I lived in Haight Ashbury, working menial jobs – digging ditches, washing plates, care work – available to those who didn't hold Green Cards. The pay was lousy but the Haight offered cheap rent, cheaper drugs and plentiful live music. A good time could be had, yes indeed. Even if I never fell for the Grateful Dead tie-dye and acid culture many of my neighbours embraced I liked the 'hood's vibe, the sense that the Haight remained an outpost of American outlaw culture. Fifteen years on and the dotcom boom has flattened San Francisco. Capitalism takes no prisoners and the Haight I wandered post-church was, while little changed architecturally, a place transformed. Only the addition of Amoeba Records, a vast second-hand music emporium, wins approval. Once-plentiful live music venues have vanished. As has the grungy character that fired the neighbourhood's raw brio. A few youths in Dead T-shirts linger, hoping for some hint of halcyon days, but the spirit is long gone, replaced by Gap, Starbucks and the chain stores that take the high out of high streets everywhere.

I wander along Upper Haight – still home to a few second-hand soul-record shacks and a majority black populace – but even here things are in flux: the 'Californian master race' Bay Area punk icon Jello Biafra once jested about making their presence felt with vegan organic cafés. I grab a bus uptown to North Beach. Italian cafés serving huge latte bowls and expensive cheesecake sit alongside City Lights, publishers of Ginsberg's *Howl* and the finest bookshop on the planet. The climate's humid, overcast, seagulls buzz overhead and a certain kind of tension hangs in the breeze. Can't put my finger on it, some uneasy energy still lingers. Yet for

what? The restless, intuitive vibe that once inspired Jacks London and Kerouac, Lenny Bruce and the finest West Coast jazz clubs, to take up North Beach residences is long extinguished. It's not just jazz that's faded, San Francisco's music scene has been a flatliner for many years – Counting Crows, a band who serve microwaved 'classic rock', and Green Day (ditto for 'classic punk') are the last Bay Area acts to gain real prominence. The city's musical energies have decamped north to Portland, Oregon, a college town where grungy alt.rock dominates. Cartoonist Joe Sacco – a Portland resident – has satirised his home town's preening musical narcissists, youths wilfully oblivious to the waning creative (if not commercial) energies now generated by rock.

Taking a Bart train across the Bay to El Cerrito, I arrive at Down Home Music, a vast emporium of American roots music and base for Arhoolie Records, the independent label founded in 1960 to record and reissue regional American music forms. Arhoolie founder Chris Strachwitz is responsible for uncovering a fabulous wealth of American and Mexican vernacular music; I figured I'd soak Chris for advice on my forthcoming journey but he groans when I mention Burning Man – his former documentary-making partner Les Blank is, apparently, now focusing on filming the festival's 'art cars' (neo hot rods) – and shrugs as to what I might expect to find across a USA where he once uncovered the likes of bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins and zydeco king Clifton Chenier.

'After World War II this raw energy was out there and the working class got factory jobs and pretty good money and they could support bands out of that. You didn't have the huge difference between rich and poor, people made good wages, unions were strong. Now... now it's almost like slavery, it's disgusting, people working so hard just to earn a living wage and they've got them hooked on all this crap they want to sell them. And that kills music. The Anglo world is totally the same everywhere. San Francisco and Chicago are still unique because people live in them but Houston and Dallas and cities like that are awful, completely deserted, people go and huddle in their yuppie areas

# Index

**Bold** page numbers refer to photographs; *italic* page numbers indicate entries in the Discography

## A

Abbey, Edward 46, 48, 55–6  
Ace Records 307  
Acosta, Oscar Zeta 157  
Acuff, Roy 215, 232  
Adams, Ryan 182  
Adderley, Cannonball 6, 7, 10  
Alabama 215, 286  
Alamo 188–9, 197, 201  
Alba, Jessica 29, 66, 201, 322, 347  
Albini, Steve 319  
Albuquerque 148–9  
Alexander, Lindsey 341  
Alice Cooper 47  
Allen, Terry 362  
Alligator Records 323–4, 325,  
343, 352  
Anderson, John 225  
Appalachians 319  
Arhoolie Records 12, 189, 191,  
352, 364  
Arizona 46–7, 50, 55, 78,  
116–18, 124, 135–8; *see also*  
Phoenix; Tucson  
Arkansas 71, 205, 210, 281–3, 286  
Armstrong, Louis xvi, xvii, 199,  
209, 276, 277, 317, 325, **354**,  
359  
Aryan Nation 57, 248, 258  
Atlantic City 152

Auckland xiv–xv, 107, 172, 184  
Austin 170–71, 173–5, 177–8,  
181, 183–5, 188, 203–4, 207,  
217–18, 319

## B

Bad Brains 51  
Baldwin, James 119  
Ballard, Hank 72  
Band, The 52  
Banner, David 295  
Bare, Bobby 233  
Barksdale, Chuck 334–40  
Barnes, Booba 309  
Barraclough, Nick 223  
Barrow, Clyde 260  
Bataan, Joe 39  
Beach Boys 65, 66, 70, 139  
Beastie Boys 36, 305  
Beatles, The 262, 263, 339  
Becket, Welton 65  
Bedford, Nathan 211  
beer 143, 171–2, 197, 251, 286  
Beltran, Lola 157, 163, 195  
Belvin, Jesse 103  
Berry, Chuck xvi, 10, 110, 147,  
298, 318, 337, 364  
Berry, Shawn 258  
Beuys, Joseph 53

## Garth Cartwright

- Beyoncé 277  
Biafra, Jello 11  
Big Star 251  
Big T 287, 288–91, 352  
Billy the Kid 50, 163  
Biloxi 266  
Black, Bill 262  
Black, Clint 216  
Black Elk 1  
Black Flag 51, 323  
Black Panthers 8, 86, 88, 107  
Bland, Bobby ‘Blue’ 113–14, 115,  
296, 300, 363  
Blank, Les 12  
Blasters, The 68  
Blige, Mary J. 238  
Bloodshot Records 318, 351  
Bloomfield, Mike 318, 343  
Bluebird Records 318, 323  
Bolden, Buddy 10  
Boley, Ray xx  
Bonnie and Clyde 260  
Bono 114, 305  
Booker T & The MGs 74, 238, 363  
*Border, The* (film) 265  
Border Patrol agents 45, 56–8  
border radio stations 166–7, 194,  
199  
Bourne, Randolph 158–9  
boxing 21–2  
Branch, Billy 342–3, 344  
Braunhut, Harold von 248  
Brewer, Lawrence 258  
Brinkley, Doc 166  
broadcasting deregulation 167,  
221, 227, 247–8  
Brock, Big George 362  
Brooks & Dunn 221  
Brooks, Garth 216  
Broonzy, Big Bill xiv, 323  
Brown, James 17, 72, 102, 105,  
215, 339, 340  
Brown, Junior 229  
Brown, Shirley 300–301  
Browne, Jackson 68, 139  
Bruce, Lenny 12, 155  
Buffalo Springfield 66, 176  
Buffett, Jimmy 307  
Bukowski, Charles 155  
Burnett, Charles 109  
Burning Man festival 11, 12, 18,  
19, 23–30, 25, 347  
Burns, Joe 52  
Burnside, R.L. 304–5, 308, 320, 363  
Burroughs, William 53, 54, 198  
Bush, George Sr xv  
Bush, George W. xv, 57, 102, 113,  
135, 158, 169, 177, 183, 184,  
203, 207, 349  
Bussard, Joe 293  
Butler, Jerry 333  
Butterfield, Paul 318, 343  
Byrd, James Jr 258  
Byrds, The 52, 66
- C**  
Caldwell, Charles “Cadillac” 307  
Cale, John 351  
Calexico 52  
California 15, 20, 22–3, 26, 29,  
55–6, 78, 179–80; *see also*  
Los Angeles; San Francisco

- Cannibal & The Headhunters 87  
 Canyon Records 46, 121, 352  
 Capitol Records 65, 68  
 Capone, Al 318  
 Cardinal Caesar and The  
     Romans 104  
 Carey, Mariah 124, 350  
 Carr, James 363  
 Cars, The 166  
 Carson, Kit 124-5, 163  
 Carter, Clarence 301  
 Carter, Jimmy 194  
 Carter, Johnny 337  
 Carter Family 199, 209  
 Case, Neko 52  
 Cash, Johnny xi, 68, 201, 215,  
     223, 231, 233, 258  
 Cassidy, Neal 54, 201, 320  
 Castor, Jimmy 35-41, **36**, 43, 351,  
     360  
 Chandler, Gene 333  
 Chandler, Raymond 66  
 Chaplin, Charlie 214  
 Charles, Ray xi, 70, 75-6, 103,  
     298, 308, 337, 363  
 Chavez, Cesar 86, **180**  
 Cheney, Dick xv, 57, 149, 203, 349  
 Chenier, Clifton 12  
 Chess, Leonard 307, 338, 339  
 Chess Records 307, 323, 328, 329,  
     333-4, 337-9, 343  
 Chicago xiii-xiv, xv-xvii,  
     xviii-xix, 12, 315, 317-26,  
     331, 333-6, 340-47  
 Chicago (band) 318  
 Chilton, Alex 251  
 chitlin' circuit 297-300, 336  
 Cintas Acuario  
     (record label) 90, 91  
 Cisneros, Sandra 199  
 Ciudad Juarez 168-9  
 Civil War, American 163, 211,  
     223, 249, 281, 297, 306  
 Clapton, Eric 275  
 Clark, Dick 104  
 Clark, Guy 362  
 Clarksdale 102-3, **270**, 273-80,  
     286-91, 293, 319  
 Clay, Otis 244  
 Clear Channel  
     Communications 167, 248  
 Cline, Patsy 156, 197, 215  
 Clinton, Bill 55, 98, 167, 194  
 Clinton, George 40  
 Coasters, The 336  
 Cobain, Kurt 177  
 cocaine 39, 67, 100, 109, 147, 215,  
     244, 302, 320, 322, 326, 352  
 Cochran, Eddie 223  
 cockfighting 150  
 Cody, Radmilla 121-30, **122**, 133,  
     134, 148, 352, 361  
 Coe, David Allan 233  
 coffee 68-9, 202  
 Cohen, Leonard 318  
 Cole, Nat 'King' 65  
 Collins, Albert 200, 323  
 Coltrane, Alice 3-4, 7  
 Coltrane, John 3-10, 7, 359  
 Common 319  
 Convertino, John 52  
 Cooder, Ry 67, 265

## Garth Cartwright

Cooke, Sam 38, 72, 278  
Cortez, Manuel J. 192  
Cosby, Bill 104–5  
Counting Crows 12  
Country Music Hall of  
Fame 213, 238  
crack *see* cocaine  
Cray, Robert 299, 304  
Creedence Clearwater  
Revival 52  
Crumb, Robert xviii, 293  
crystal meth 125, 147–8, 150, 352  
Cuba, Joe 39  
Cummings, Joe 161  
Cypress Hill 77, 93

## D

Dallas 12, 177, 209, 260, 261  
D'Angelo 238  
Danko, Rick 277  
Davis, James B. 207  
Davis, Miles 6, 7, 65, 106, 263  
Davis, Tyrone 287, 298, 299, 333  
de la Campa, Roman 63  
Dells, The 318, 333–40, 335, 352, 364  
Delmark Records 323, 343–4, 352  
Dement, Iris 220  
Depp, Johnny 53  
Detroit 71–2, 107, 318, 319, 333  
Detroit Cobras 319  
DeVille, Willy 364  
Dickens, Little Jimmie 220  
Diddley, Bo xvii, 149, 298, 318, 364  
Dillinger, John 53–4, 55, 340  
Dixie Chicks 225  
Dixie Hummingbirds 207, 224

Domino, Fats 298  
Donner Pass 20  
Doors, The 66, 210  
Dorsey, Thomas 318  
Dr Dre 109  
Drifting Cowboys 226  
Drummer, Johnny xvi, xvii,  
xviii–xix, 345, 363  
Dunlap, Melvin 102  
Dusty, Slim xvii  
Dyke & The Blazers 47, 104  
Dylan, Bob 187, 246, 266, 272–3

## E

Eagles, The 68, 225, 226  
Earle, Steve 217  
Eastside Connection 87  
Eazy-E 108  
*Ed Sullivan Show* 263  
Eddy, Duane 46–7  
Edwards, Dennis 135  
Edwards, Honeyboy 205, 325–31,  
327, 346, 352, 363  
El Paso 164, 168  
Eliot, T.S. 157  
Ely, Joe 177, 181, 202, 227, 362  
Eminem 319  
Erickson, Roky 188  
Escovedo, Alejandro 68, 175–83,  
176, 189, 318, 351, 359  
Escovedo, Coke 175–6  
Escovedo, Pete 175–6  
Everett, Betty 333, 337

## F

Fabulous Thunderbirds 177

## More Miles Than Money:

- Farmer, Johnny 308, 363  
Farrakhan, Louis xvii, 8  
fast-food 187  
Fat Possum Records 304–5,  
307–8, 323, 352  
Faulkner, William 266, 295, 297,  
309–310, 311  
Fela Kuti 106  
Fender, Freddy 68, 190  
Fergie 350  
Ferlinghetti, Lawrence 154  
Ferril, Thomas Hornsby 158  
Fields, W.C. 214  
Fisk Jubilee Singers 214  
Fitzgerald, F. Scott 310  
Flagstaff 117, 121  
Flying Burrito Brothers 215  
Foley, Blaze 183  
Foley, Red 156  
Fonda, Henry 113, 135, 136  
Ford, T-Model 303–4, 305,  
307–8, 363  
Frank, Michael 326, 331  
Franklin, Aretha 72  
Freed, Alan 104  
Freeman, Charlie 264  
Freeman, Morgan 274, 278, 291  
Friedman, Kinky 215  
Frizzell, Lefty 156, 157, 201, 225, 362  
Frost, Robert 30, 207  
Funches, Johnny 337
- G**
- Galahads, The 104  
gambling **xii**, 32–3, 35, 148, 266, 271  
gangs 34, 37, 55, 57, 86, 88–9,  
93–4, 107, 125–6, 320  
Garrison, Jimmy 5, 10  
Gaye, Marvin 334  
Gehry, Frank 79, 340  
Gelb, Howe 46, 47–54, 112, 352  
Gelb, Sofie 49, 51, 53  
George, Lowell 84, 147  
Gere, Richard 29, 305  
Germano, Lisa 52  
Giant Sand 47–53, 112, 359  
Gibbons, Billy 166  
Giger, H.R. 136  
Gillett, Charlie 355  
Gilmore, Jimmie Dale 177  
Ginsberg, Allen 11, 256  
Gleason, Ralph 10  
Goodees, The 250–51  
Goodie Mob **xiii**, 361  
Goodman, Steve 318  
Gordon, Roscoe 300  
Gordy, Berry Jr 39, 70, 71, 73–4,  
75, 246  
Gories, The 319  
Graceland 253–4, 340  
Graham, Joanne 345  
Grand Canyon 117–18, 121, 136  
Grand Ole Opry 214–16, 220,  
224, 228  
Grants, New Mexico 142–5  
Grateful Dead 11, 28  
Green, Al 237, 241, 243–4, 247,  
253, 298, 308, 362  
Green Day 12  
Green On Red 68  
Greenville 302–4, 307–8

## Garth Cartwright

- Grey, JJ 362  
Greyhound buses 20, 42, 43-6,  
48, 58-9, 82, 207-212  
Gruene 201-3, 204  
Gun Club, The 51, 68, 359  
Guns N' Roses 65, 70  
Guthrie, Woody 68, 177, 317  
Guy, Buddy 299
- H**
- Hadad, Astrid 189  
Haggard, Merle 68, 174, 225, 231,  
362  
Hall, Tom T. 169, 231, 233  
Hancock, Butch 177  
Hancock, Wayne "the Train" 15-16  
Handy, W.C. 245-6, 277, 354  
Hanson, Victor Davis 55-6  
Harlem 37-8, 39, 215, 336  
Harmon, Mark 53  
Harrington, Alan 54  
Harris, Wynonie 299  
Harvey, Illinois 334-5, 336, 342  
Harvey, Polly 52  
Hayes, Isaac 74, 238, 248, 250,  
262, 352, 363  
Hayward, Leon 104  
Hazeldine 149, 362  
Hazelwood, Lee 46-7, 68  
health insurance 178-9  
Helena, Arkansas 281-3  
Hemingway, Ernest 231, 310  
Hendrix, Jimi 39, 298  
Henson, Jim 305  
Herenton, Willie 243  
Hiatt, John 67  
Hickey, Dave 32, 35  
Highway 61 266, 272-3, 276  
Hill, ZZ 287  
hitchhiking 148  
Holiday, Billie 65, 70, 71, 277  
Hollywood 65-70  
Holmes, John 67  
honky-tonks 170-73, 184-5, 202,  
203-4  
Hooker, John Lee 262, 278, 304  
Hopkins, Lightnin' 12, 155, 187  
Horton, Little Jack xi  
House, Son 275, 310  
Houston 12, 177  
Howlin' Wolf xvi, 258, 329, 338,  
342, 343, 364  
Hurston, Zora Neale 269  
Hüsker Dü 51  
*Hustle & Flow* 241
- I**
- Ice Cube 108, 109  
Iglauer, Bruce 323-4, 325, 340,  
341-3  
immigration 55-6, 69, 78, 90,  
97-8, 159  
Impressions, The 333, 364  
India 29, 302  
Infante, Pedro 93, 195  
Inner City 318  
Iraq War 15, 24, 115, 134, 203, 211,  
226  
Isley Brothers 298, 339
- J**
- Jackson, Al Jr 238

- Jackson, Jesse xvii  
 Jackson, Mahalia xvi, 276, 318  
 Jackson, Michael 298  
 Jackson, Millie 301  
 Jackson, Sandra 250–51  
 Jackson, Wanda 68  
 Jae-P 93, 360  
 James, Elmore 262, 329, 342, 363  
 James, Etta 101, 333  
 James, Skip 310  
 Janson, Chris 228  
 Jasper, Texas 258–9  
 Jayhawks, The 68  
 Jefferson, Wesley ‘Junebug’ 279–  
 87, **280**, 310, 352, 363  
 Jeffries, Jim 21  
 Jelly Roll Kings 288, 363  
 Jemez Pueblo 150  
 Jennings, Waylon 139, 177, 228,  
 233  
 Jim Crow laws 224, 281, 317  
 Jimenez, Flaco 360  
 Jimenez, Jose Alfredo 195  
 Joel, Billy 225  
 John, Little Willie 70, 72–3  
 John, Mable 69–76, **71**, 239, 351,  
 362–3  
 Johnson, Blind Willie 10, 116  
 Johnson, Jack (boxer) **21–2**, 98, 317  
 Johnson, Jack (musician) 288, 340  
 Johnson, Lonnie 275  
 Johnson, Mathew 304–5, 307–9,  
 349  
 Johnson, Robert xvi, 43, 199,  
 275–6, 281–2, 288, 294,  
 329–30, 362  
 Johnson, Syl 244, 298  
 Johnson, Tommy 310, 329  
 Johnston, Daniel 177  
 Jones, Diana **216–21**, 352, 359–60  
 Jones, George 215, 225, 362  
 Jones, Jim 4  
 Jones, Norah 223  
 Jones, Paul “Wine” 307  
 Joplin, Janis 155, 157  
 Jornada del Muerto 165  
 Joshua Tree 111, **112**, 113–14  
 Jourgensen, Al 319  
 Juarez 168–9  
 juke joints 98, **270**, 286–7, 291  
 Junior, Marvin 334–40
- K**
- Katrina, Hurricane 20, 158, 239,  
 256, 265, 266, 297, 303,  
 308–9  
 Kazan, Elia 66  
 Keith, Toby 221  
 Kennedy, John F. 180, 195, 261  
 Kent, Willie 341, 352  
 Kerouac, Jack 12, 44, 45, 54, 59,  
 98, 145, 155, 163, 198, 201,  
 310, 320, 325  
 Kesey, Ken 25  
 Kimbrough, Junior 305, **306**,  
 307, 308, 363  
 King, B.B. 246, 300, 305, 308  
 King, Ben E. 40  
 King, Bishop 3–6, 8, 10  
 King, John 258  
 King, Martin Luther Jr 239, 250,  
 312–13, 325, 340

## Garth Cartwright

- Knight, Curtis 39  
Koester, Bob 323, 343-4  
Koresh, David 233  
Krauss, Alison 220  
Kristofferson, Kris 227-8, 231, 233  
Ku Klux Klan 211, 241, 248, 277
- L**
- Lange, Dorothea 217  
Las Vegas 30-35, 43-4, 178  
Lassen, Peter 22  
Lee, Bonnie 341, 352  
Leibovitz, Annie 305  
Leigh, Brennen 203, 204, 360  
Leone, Sergio xi  
Lewis, Barbara 337  
Lewis, Furry 252, 255-6, 363  
Lewis, Jerry Lee 258, 262  
Limbaugh, Rush 167  
Linklater, Richard 177  
Lisle, Andria 355  
Little Feat 307  
Little Milton 246  
Little Richard 38, 298  
Little Scotty xvii  
Little Walter 329, 338, 346, 362  
Lomax, Alan 269, 286-7, 329, 350-51  
London xv, 107, 130, 177, 219, 225  
London, Jack 12, 21  
Lopez, Isidro 198, 360  
Lopez, Jennifer 124  
Lopez, Trini 261  
Los Alamos 151, 165  
Los Angeles 59-61, 64, 65-70, 77-95, 97-101, 103-4, 106-111, 319  
Los Illegals 87  
Los Lobos 51, 68, 77  
Los Lonely Boys 180  
Los Super Seven 360  
Loudermilk, John D. 223  
Louis, Joe 317  
Louisiana 9, 13, 71, 150, 262, 286, 303, 319; *see also* New Orleans  
Louvin Brothers 203, 215  
Love (band) 66, 176  
Lymon, Frankie 38  
Lyndell, Linda 60, 240, 241-2  
Lynn, Loretta 215
- M**
- McCoy, Joe 265  
McGill, Mickey 334-40  
McInerney, Jay 305  
Macon, Uncle Dave 209  
McRae, Larry 341  
Magic Slim 341-2  
Malcolm X 39  
Mamas & The Papas, The 66  
Manilow, Barry 37  
Manson, Charles 4, 86, 112  
Mar-Keys, The 262  
mariachi bands 13, 14-15, 16, 86-7, 199-200  
Marsh, Dave 355  
Marvelettes, The 73  
Mayfield, Curtis 318, 333, 334, 339, 364  
Meat Puppets 47, 51

- Memphis 74-5, 205, 211, 237-51,  
253-4, 256-8, 262, 265-7,  
286, 291, 311-13, 319, 333
- Memphis Jug Band 329
- Memphis Minnie xvi, 265-8,  
277, 317, 329, 353, 363
- Mendoza, Lydia 157, 182, 189-95,  
**193**, 198, 199, 204, 339, 351,  
360
- Meredith, James 309
- meth, crystal 125, 147-8, 150, 352
- Mexico 55, 78, 90, 98, 107, 164,  
166, 168-9, 188-9, 319, 352
- Miami 14, 319
- Miller, Bill 337
- Miller, Henry 145, 208
- Miller, Rice 281-2, 329
- Minutemen, The 51
- Mississippi 9, 20, 103-4, 110, 156,  
245, 266, 269, 271-2, 275,  
283-6, 293-7, 305-311; *see*  
*also* Clarksdale; Greenville
- Mitchell, Joni 68
- Mitchell, Willie 237-8, 239, 243,  
247, 262
- Mofro 362
- Mojave Desert 111, 113-15
- Momaday, N. Scott 128, 139
- Montes, Antonio 193
- Montier, Patrick 355
- Monument Valley 135-8
- Morrison, Jim 66, 166
- Morrison, Van 66, 147
- Morton, Jelly Roll 98
- Mosley, Walter 109
- Mothers, The 264
- Mötley Crüe 70
- Motown Records 73-4, 75, 333-4
- MTV 319, 350
- Muhammad Ali **252**
- Murrieta, Joaquin 15
- Musselwhite, Charlie 323, 343-4
- N**
- Nakai, R. Carlos 46, 361
- Nashville 170, 173, 209, 211-21,  
223-9, 233, 235, 319
- Natay, Ed Lee **xx**, 361
- Native Americans 22, 26, 27-8,  
46, 88, 134, 148, **149-50**,  
164-5, 219, 223, 266, 272
- Navajo Nation Reservation **118**,  
119, **120**, 121-31, **127**, **132**,  
133-4, 148
- Nelson, Willie 136, 177, 225, 228,  
231, 233
- Nevada 20-23, 24-5, 31; *see*  
*also* Las Vegas
- New Mexico 78, 124, 125, 140-52,  
**146**, 164-6
- New Orleans xv, 9, 13, 20, 101,  
109, 145, 158, 198, 220, 246,  
303, 319
- New York 14, 39-40, 65, 319,  
324; *see also* Harlem
- New York Dolls 176, 251
- New Zealand xiv-xv, 43, 148
- Newman, Randy 68
- Newton, Huey 88
- Nichols, Cannonball 170
- Nighthawk, Robert 278
- Nixon, Richard 166, 244, 257

## Garth Cartwright

NOFX 323  
North Carolina 162  
Northern Migration 318  
Nuns, The 176  
NWA 107–8, 361

### O

Oates, Warren 53  
Obama, Barack 349  
obesity 213, 227, 255, 257, 322  
O'Jays 102  
Ol' Dirty Bastard 308  
Old Crow Medicine Show 220  
Oñate, Juan de 164  
Oppenheimer, Robert 151  
Opry, Grand Ole 214–16, 220,  
224, 228  
Orange County 102  
Original Dixieland Jass Band 9  
Otis, Johnny 72, 101  
Outkast 246  
Oxford, Mississippi 309–310

### P

Palmer, Robert 304  
Pantera 144  
Parker, Charlie 65  
Parker, Colonel Tom 248, 257  
Parker, Deanie 236, 239–43  
Parliament (band) 40  
Parsons, Gram 68, 114, 215, 362  
Parton, Dolly 219, 225  
Patton, Charlie 297, 329, 362  
Pearce, Richard 300  
Peckinpah, Sam 15, 155–6  
Peebles, Ann 244

Penn, Dan 257  
Pennsylvania 50  
Perry, Lee 'Scratch' 58  
Pete Z 112  
Pharaohs, The 255, 261–3, 362  
Phillips, Sam xviii, 256, 258  
Phillips, Utah 351  
Phoenix 45–7, 48, 49–50, 50–51,  
58–9, 178  
Phoenix, River 66, 173, 217  
Pierce, Jeffrey Lee 68  
Piestawa, Lori 134  
Pink Floyd 226  
Pioneertown 112–13  
Platters, The 38  
Pomus, Doc 33, 255  
Pop, Iggy 14, 308, 323  
porn 67  
Porter, David 74, 250  
Portland, Oregon 12, 319  
Presley, Elvis 33, 213, 238, 246,  
250, 253–6, 257–8, 340, 363  
Presley, Lisa Marie 248  
Price, Ray 156  
Prince 35, 176, 298  
Prine, John 318  
prisons 57, 84, 85–6, 125  
Prophet, Chuck 68  
Ptacek, Rainer 52–3  
Public Enemy 299  
Puente, Tito 39  
Pynchon, Thomas 99

### R

R. Kelly 319  
radio: border radio stations 166–

- 7, 194, 199; broadcasting  
deregulation 167, 221, 227,  
247-8
- Raelettes, The 75
- Raiders, The 223
- Ramones, The 141-2, 364
- Rank & File 51, 68, 176, 182
- Rawlings, David 217, 220
- Ray, Stevie 177
- Reagan, Ronald xi, 66, 103, 244,  
303
- Red Hot Chili Peppers 65
- Redding, Otis 105, 198, 238, 240,  
241-2, 247, 265, 299, 334,  
363
- Reed, Jimmy 262
- Reno 20-21
- Rivera, Diego 1
- Rivera, Jenni 92
- Rivera, Lupillo 89-90, 92-3, 352,  
361
- Road to Memphis* (film) 300
- Robbins, Marty 46
- Robertson, Kell 152-9, 188,  
189-90, 192, 320, 351, 362
- Robey, Don 247
- Rodgers, Jimmie 199, 209, 232,  
246, 254, 276, 362
- Rodia, Simon 100-101
- Rodriguez, Luis 77-95, 79, 97-8,  
99-102, 110, 315, 322, 339,  
352, 361
- Rolling Stone* 85, 157
- Rolling Stones xvii, 111, 147, 198,  
255, 275, 323, 339
- Romero, George 245
- Ronnettes, The 38
- Ronstadt, Linda 47
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. 303
- Ross, Diana 277
- Route 66 115, 117, 140, 142, 147,  
152, 331, 340
- Royal Studios 237-8, 243-4
- Rubin, Rick 65
- Ruby, Jack 261
- Ruffin, David 39
- Rush, Bobby 296, 297-301, 299,  
352, 360
- S**
- Sacco, Joe 12
- Sahm, Doug 177, 181, 361
- Salazar, Ruben 85
- Saldivar, Yolanda 199
- Salt-N-Pepa 241
- Sam & Dave 72, 238, 363
- Sam the Sham 67, 255, 258-65,  
259, 266, 352, 362
- Sampson, Tim 239, 249
- San Antonio 188-9, 192, 197-201,  
319
- San Francisco 3-5, 10-18, 29, 157,  
319, 324
- Sanchez, Chalino 90-92, 91, 93,  
198, 361
- Santa Fe 142-3, 151-2, 155
- Santana, Carlos 16
- Sayles, John 53
- Scorsese, Martin 300, 308
- Scott, Patricia 341
- Seals, Son xviii, 323
- Seattle 319

## Garth Cartwright

- segregation 13, 82, 215, 224, 242,  
281, 290–91, 295, 298, 313,  
317, 325
- Selena 196, 198–9, 361
- Sex Pistols 176
- Shakur, Tupac 33–4, 41, 54, 92,  
275
- Shaver, Billy Joe 229–35, 230,  
352, 361
- Shaw, Marlena 63, 333
- Sheila E 176
- Shepherd, Jean 220
- Shields, The 104
- Shines, Johnny 265–6
- Shorter, Wayne 9
- Shuman, Mort 255
- Simone, Nina 306
- Sinatra, Frank 33
- Sinatra, Nancy 47
- skateboarding 49–50
- Sledge, Percy 152
- Smashing Pumpkins 318–19
- Smith, Bessie 199, 209, 276–8,  
363
- Smith, Harry 208–9
- Smith, Warren 257
- Snoop Doggy Dogg 65, 109
- soul food 257, 298
- Soulja Slim 291
- Soulsville 238–9, 351
- Spice Girls 36–7
- Staple Singers 246
- Stax Records 74, 75, 107, 237, 238,  
239–43, 246–7, 250–51, 301,  
333, 351, 355
- Steinbeck, John 147
- Stepney, Charles 337
- Stolle, Roger 274–6, 279, 290–91,  
355, 359
- Stone, Sly 39, 109, 114, 361
- Stooges, The 176
- Strachwitz, Chris 12–13, 192, 364
- Sublette, Nick 356
- Sumlin, Hubert 141
- Sun Studios 237, 254, 257–8, 328
- Sunnyland Slim 328
- Superman (DJ) 256–7
- Supremes, The 74
- Swann, Bettye 104

## T

- Tahoma, Quincy 128
- tamales 294
- Tamla Records 73
- Tampa Red 323
- Taylor, Carl 100
- Taylor, Hound Dog 316, 323,  
363–4
- Taylor, Jesse 225, 235
- Taylor, Koko 323, 364
- Taylor, Larry 345
- Taylor, Larry Joe 202, 204
- Teenagers, The 38
- Telecommunications  
Act (1996) 167, 221
- Temptations, The 39, 74, 135, 335–6
- Ten City 318
- Tennessee 9, 20, 211, 218, 223–4,  
266; *see also* Memphis;  
Nashville
- Terrell, Tammi 39
- Tex, Joe 75

Texas 9, 13, 20, 55, 78, 167–70,  
177, 179–80, 188–9, 201,  
226, 233, 258–9; *see also*  
Austin; Dallas; Houston;

San Antonio

Texas Jewboys 215

13th Floor Elevators 177

Thomas, Rufus 363

Thompson, Hunter S. 85, 157

Thornton, Big Mama 254

Three 6 Mafia 241

Thurman, Uma 305

Tierney, Lawrence 53

Till, Emmett 284

Tombstone 50

Tortoise 319

trains 317, 329

True Believers 176

Truth or Consequences, New  
Mexico 165–6

Tubb, Ernest 157, 184, 213–14

Tucson 48–9, 50–51, 53–6, 147, 319

Tucumcari 147

Tunica 266–7, 271–2, 278, 286,  
297

Tupac 33–4, 41, 54, 92, 275

Turner, Ike xvii, 278, 298, 300

Turner, Tina 298

Turquoise Trail 163

Twain, Mark 24–5, 56, 130, 279,  
281, 285, 353

Twain, Shania 225

Tweedy, Jeff 318

## U

U2 114

Uncle Earl 220

Utah 24, 124, 138–40

## V

Valens, Ritchie 87

Van Zandt, Townes xiv, 155,  
177, 181, 183, 186, 187–8,  
201, 362

Vaughan, Stevie Ray 177, 184,  
198, 362

Vee-Jay Records 333–4, 337,  
338

Venkatesh, Sudhir 315

Ventura, Michael 254, 355

Vietnam War 85, 263, 265, 338

Vincent, Johnny 307

Visconti, Tony 351

## W

Waco 233

Wagoner, Porter 220, 352

Wald, Elijah 356

Walker, Jerry Jeff 177

Wallace, George 215

War (band) 103, 106, 107, 361

Washington, DC 319

Washington, Booker T. 214

Washington, Dinah 73, 325, 335,  
337

Waters, Muddy xvi, xvii, 325,  
329, 338, 339, 343, 364

Watson, Dale 170–74, 171, 184,  
203–4, 276, 352, 362

Watson, Johnny “Guitar” 103

Watts 96, 98–101, 103–4,  
106–110, 361

## Garth Cartwright

- Watts 103rd Street Rhythm  
Band 101, 102, 104–6, **105**,  
108, 110
- Watts Prophets 107, 361
- Wayne, John 135, 136
- Welch, Gillian 217, 220, 361
- Wells, Ida B. 247, 340
- Wells, Junior xviii, 342, 343, 344,  
362
- Wells, Kitty 156
- Wells, Mary 73
- West, Kanye 319
- westward migration 2, 20, 22–3,  
24–5, 35, 36, 46, 68
- White, Barry 103
- White, James 184
- White Stripes 319
- Whittier 85–6
- Wilco 318
- Williams, Andre 265, 337, 340,  
362
- Williams, Big Joe 328, 329, **343**,  
344, 363
- Williams, Hank xi, 16, 156–7,  
170, 188, 201, **206**, 212, 214,  
215, 225, 226, 228, 232, 362
- Williams, Lucinda 52, 68
- Williams, Stanley ‘Tookie’ 126
- Williams, Victoria 52, 68
- Williamson, Sonny Boy I 320,  
323, **362**
- Williamson, Sonny Boy II 281–  
2, 329
- Willie Kent & The Gents 341, 352
- Wills, Bob 184, 201
- Wilson, Brian 70, 188
- Wilson, Gretchen 225
- Wilson, Jackie 72, 333, 339
- Withers, Bill 102, 105–6, 129, 363
- Wolf, Howlin’ xvi, 258, 329, 338,  
342, 343, 364
- Wolfman Jack (DJ) 167
- Wovoka 27–8
- Wright, Charles **101–110**, **105**,  
351, 360–61
- Wright, O.V. 108, 244, 246–7,  
298, 299, 362
- Wynette, Tammy 215
- X**
- X (band) 51, 68
- X radio stations 166–7
- Y**
- Yard Dog xviii–xix
- Yoakam, Dwight 68
- Young, Neil 52
- Young, Steve 43, 68
- Younge, Gary 355
- Z**
- Zappa, Frank 99, 264
- Zevon, Warren 68, 318
- Zinn, Howard 161
- Zoom, Billy 51
- ZZ Top 43, 65, 166