

# Delta Sources and Resources

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## King Biscuit Blues Festival

Helena, Arkansas

by LaDawn Lee Fuhr

The Delta is rich with musical heritage. One of the most beloved and revered music festivals, the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, Arkansas, will be celebrating thirty-three years of good music when the 2018 event opens to the public October 3–6, 2018. The King Biscuit Blues Festival is world renowned for celebrating and spotlighting the blues. Since its inception in 1986, the festival has grown into a four-day fall extravaganza, held on the levee of the Mississippi River, and attracting as many as one hundred thousand fans from all around the world. Additionally, the King Biscuit Blues Festival provides an economic boost to historic Helena, a home to the blues and many musical artists.

The King Biscuit Blues Festival is an homage to the *King Biscuit Time Radio Show*. *King Biscuit Time* is the longest running radio show

in history, debuting in 1941 and still airing daily on KFFA-AM 1360 in Helena. The show, which won a Peabody Award in 1992, began when the amazing bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson II needed a platform for live on-air performance. He and Robert Jr. Blackwood, the stepson of legendary bluesman Robert Johnson, were the featured performers and were told they could perform if they had fiscal support. The King Biscuit Flour Company agreed to sponsorship in exchange for product endorsement from the artists and the rest is indeed musical history. The show still features live studio performances.

The longtime host of *King Biscuit Time* was Sonny “Sunshine” Payne, who began hosting the show in 1951. During his long tenure, he played host to many notable musicians, like Robert Plant, Elvis Costello, Muddy Waters, and Jimmy Rogers to name a few. Sonny passed away in February 2018 at the age of 92, leaving a broadcast legacy of over 18,000 radio shows, opening the show with the line “pass the biscuits, ’cause it’s King Biscuit Time.” The music



“Sunshine” Sonny Payne.  
Photo courtesy of King Biscuit Blues Festival.



Photo courtesy of King Biscuit Blues Festival.

was key in these broadcasts as *King Biscuit Time* was the first radio show to air live blues performances. The legendary B.B. King recalled listening to “The Biscuit” every day as he worked the fields. *King Biscuit Time* influenced future blues greats who later played the festival.

King Biscuit Time was a natural platform to present Helena as the unmitigated blues capital of the Mississippi Delta. Sitting less than one hundred miles from Memphis, the 1930s and 1940s saw Helena filled with juke joints and bluesmen. The musicians who played in the area during this time included Memphis Slim, Sunnyland Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, and Robert Johnson. The music clubs were located in the downtown area of Elm, Phillips, Walnut, and a section of Cherry Street. The sidewalks were also populated with performers and live blues music.

The location for the King Biscuit Blues Festival is a perfect showcase for music legends to return to their own roots and perform. The first headliner for the inaugural festival in 1986 was Helena native and bluesman Lonnie Shields.

The first artist to take the stage that year was the late CeDell Davis who manipulated his guitar in such a unique fashion *New York Times* music critic, musician, and Arkansas native Robert Palmer, who accompanied Davis on clarinet during that performance, said his guitar sound was “a welter of metal-stress harmonic transients and a singular tonal plasticity.” Davis, who had been stricken with polio as a child, used a butter knife to play and create sounds similar to a slide guitar. Other notables to have performed on the King Biscuit Blues Festival stage through the years include Arkansan Levon Helm, Bonnie Raitt, B.B. King, Albert King, Sonny Burgess and the Legendary Pacers, Warren Haynes and Gov’t Mule, Buddy Guy, Pinetop Perkins, and many more.

And, even with the excitement of hearing the blues, no one had been talking about the blues until 2011 when the festival added the “Call and Response Blues Symposium.” Spearheaded by blues guru Roger Stolle, of Clarksdale, Mississippi and Don Wilcock of Scotia, New York, both notable blues writers and

preservationists, the “Call and Response” Blues Symposium occurs on the morning of the final day of the King Biscuit Blues Festival and includes scholarly talks among likeminded individuals and heritage music enthusiasts. The 2018 symposium will take place on Saturday, October 6th in the Malco Theatre on Cherry Street in Helena.

The 2018 King Biscuit Blues Festival lineup boasts many repeat performers who see the festival as a rite of passage. The festival occurs across many stages with more being announced in the near future. Main Stage headliners include festival regular and Traditional Blues Grammy winner Bobby Rush on Thursday night. Rush, along with Memphis music icon Reba Russell, will lead a tribute to CeDell Davis. Southern Rock and Country band Blackberry Smoke from Atlanta, Georgia will headline on Friday night with Mississippi raised singer-songwriter Paul Thorn, a festival stalwart, preceding them. Saturday will see many excellent musical artists gracing the main stage including Texas blues artist Carolyn Wonderland who has just added being the only female guitarist to ever perform in any of John Mayall’s blues bands to her list of accomplishments. Wonderland, like Thorn and Rush, is also a returning favorite and will perform prior to Festival Headliners Dave Mason and Steve Cropper.

King Biscuit Blues Festival Saturday night headliners Dave Mason and Steve Cropper are both music legends. Mason is known for his hits “We Just Disagree,” and the often-covered mega-hit “Feelin’ Alright,” along with his own cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower.” He has performed with artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, Leon Russell, David Crosby, and many more. A 2004 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee as founding member of the band Traffic, Mason also had a stint with Fleetwood Mac.

Steve Cropper is a guitarist, songwriter, producer, and was a member of the Stax Records house band, Booker T. and The M.G.’s. They

backed Stax artists such as Sam and Dave, Rufus Thomas, Otis Redding, and Carla Thomas. Cropper was also in the Blues Brothers Band and played guitar on every Stax/Volt Record from the 1960s. A bonafide guitar legend, he was named second greatest guitarist of all time (second only to Jimi Hendrix) by England’s *Mojo* magazine and number thirty-nine on *Rolling Stones’* list of top one hundred guitarists of all time. As a songwriter, Cropper co-wrote many major hits including “Knock on Wood,” “In the Midnight Hour,” and “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay,” which went to number one. Mason describes this collaboration with Cropper as a “rock and soul review.”

The 33rd Annual King Biscuit Blues Festival will take place October 3–8, 2018 on the banks of the Mississippi River in historic Helena, Arkansas. Helena was just named one of twelve best music cities outside of Nashville by *Fodor’s*. For more information about the festival, including a complete list of artists, events, ticket price, and lodging or the Call and Response Blues Symposium visit the website at [www.Kingbiscuitfestival.com](http://www.Kingbiscuitfestival.com), Facebook, or by contacting Munnie Jordan, Executive Director at [munnie@kingbiscuitfestival.com](mailto:munnie@kingbiscuitfestival.com). The King Biscuit Music Festival office can be reached at 870-572-5223. Follow the King Biscuit Blues Festival on Twitter @kingbiscuitfest and Instagram as KingBiscuitBluesFestival. ▲▼▲