

M I S S I S S I P P I

C R O S S R O A D S

AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE BLUES AND THE DELTA'S WILDEST REACHES,
ONE SOULFUL PADDLER HOLDS THE KEYS TO THE RIVER'S SALVATION

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FROM OUR CAMP ON ISLAND 64, deep in what he calls the Muddy Waters Wilderness, John Ruskey is lost in his version of *61 Highway Blues*. He puts down his glass slide and his guitar and grabs a stick. Thousands of migrating geese in sprawling V-shaped mobs fill the pale morning sky. Below a row of deer tracks, he begins to carve a twisting line in the sand. Ruskey constantly finds such inspiration in the deep flow of the river. It leaves the five of us, who are sharing a giant handcrafted canoe with Ruskey on a 100-mile voyage through the Lower Mississippi's most desolate reaches, wondering what he could be up to this time.

The act is precise, unhurried. Finally, with one last exacting swipe, he looks up and calls us over. This is no typical doodle in the sand. But from the moment I first spoke with Ruskey years prior, I've known he's nowhere near typical anything. Here's a guy who made a raft, Huck Finn-style, to float the Mississippi from Wisconsin to the Delta before he was 19. Now he makes his own canoes to offer trips to unknown mid-river islands. He was the first, and remains the big river's only, paddlesports outfitter between St. Louis and the Gulf of Mexico.

Ruskey knows the river's every fickle twist and broad bend, so when he draws a map in the sand, it's worth study. It could very well be the most up-to-date map of the miles ahead. On occasion, Ruskey shows us our location on the most-recent Army Corps of Engineers charts. But they're more than a decade old, and the river is in constant flux.

The ever-shifting Mississippi may create nightmares for builders and mapmakers alike, but it is a freshwater goldmine for paddlers. Except there aren't any. A mix of indifference, fear, and limited public access has left the Lower Mississippi almost completely bereft of canoes and kayaks. Consequently, Ruskey's life mission—to change people's perception of the river by bringing them to it—works against a very powerful current. The future of his dream, and his business, hinges on protecting access to lonesome islands like the one we're on. And the Lower Mississippi's few passionate conservation advocates, two of whom are staring at this impromptu map, know that their efforts to turn this stretch of river into a viable wilderness destination hinge on a thriving recreational infrastructure—meaning the soulful, bearded sage in the straw hat and neoprene farmer johns standing before us holds the key to its future.

THREE DAYS EARLIER, photographer Robert Zaleski and I pull into Clarksdale. It is a moonless Sunday night in November, and the once-thriving city an hour south of Memphis is eerily still. Light cast from a restaurant sign advertising rabbit and frog legs reveals a pair of collarless dogs roaming the streets. But as sunrays fill the cool, empty avenues early the next morning, Clarksdale comes to life. We poke around outside the Quapaw Canoe Company, where Ruskey emerges seemingly out of the woodwork.

The wiry 47-year-old, sporting a red scarf, sandals and a salt-and-pepper beard, walks us through the grouping of old storefronts that compromise his woodworking bay, recording studio, outfitting storage, retail shop space, plus an old bar he's converting to a hostel. We follow him downstairs into the "cave," a sanctuary that backs up to the Sunflower River, on which Ruskey often paddles home to his wife and young daughter. Looking at a large mural map of the Lower Mississippi, which he painted on one of the walls, Ruskey explains the curvy, enchanting lines that led him from a childhood in Colorado to a teenage raft adventure turned river indoctrination. "We had a wreck we should not have come back from," he says of the life-altering pylon collision that destroyed the homemade raft carrying him and his best friend. "Holding onto the wreckage and floating into the darkness, I told God, 'If you let me see one more day, I'll devote myself to this river.'"

What kept him in Clarksdale, though, is the other twisting current running through the Delta. "I came here with a guitar, looking for a bluesman to teach me the blues,"





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE AUTHOR, LOOKING OUT TO A TOWBOAT PUSHING FREIGHT DOWNRIVER NEAR THE MISSISSIPPI-ARKANSAS CONFLUENCE; PADDLING ALONG A BACK CHANNEL OF BUCK ISLAND, THE BEGINNING OF THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI WATER TRAIL; MORNING ON THE VAST BUCK ISLAND SANDBAR, JUST NORTH OF HELENA, ARK. OPPOSITE: CHARLES WRIGHT AND JOHN RUSKEY, RELAXING AFTER BREAKFAST ON ISLAND 64.

Ruskey says as he saddles in a chair amid a collage of paddling gear, musical instruments, found artifacts, historic maps and paintings, and potentially the largest collection of books in Clarksdale. He studied under master blues musician “Mr. Johnny” Billington and started chipping away at his first canoe, a sweetgum dugout. Twelve years later, “Riverman” Ruskey maintains a heavy schedule of guided trips, river expeditions, and local gigs with his band. Still, most of his time is simply spent educating folks about what lies beyond the levees. When asked about the connection that’s kept him at this lone intersection of big water and deep music, he can’t put his finger on it.

“The blues are created by the flooding of the river, but there are few songs about the actual river,” he says. “Music is a flowing medium just like water. You start this motion going, and it goes all these unexpected places.”

Soon we begin our own motion to the river, turning at the intersection of Mississippi Highways 49 and 61, where a pole topped with giant electric guitars marks the fabled Crossroads where blues great Robert Johnson is said to have sold his soul to the devil. We take 49 across the fluid expanse of river to our launching site in Helena, Arkansas. Ruskey’s riverside outfitting base occupies an otherwise empty cottonseed warehouse just behind the levee. But the Riverman is a popular soul in these parts, committed to multiple after-school mentoring programs. He spends the afternoon with a small group of grade-school students from a local charter school, teaching them to carve dugout canoes from a one-ton log. Once the children measure the woodchip piles and Ruskey uses the numbers to draw out a math problem on the ground in chalk, the students amble out.

“Goodbye, Mr. Ruskey,” one says, to which he answers with his trademark catchall: “All-riiight.”

A SLIVER OF MOONLIGHT BARELY ILLUMINATES THE UNKNOWN by the time we slide Junebug I into the Mississippi’s dark waters at Helena River Park. The massive 28-foot-long, 54-inch-wide canoe is Ruskey’s own design, modeled after traditional voyager canoes and built with Louisiana bald cypress strips. It’s a feat of real craftsmanship, the fruit of two and a half months work shared mostly between Ruskey, who is guiding from the stern, and his apprentice Charles Wright, paddling in the bow. The five of us begin plugging away strokes, tracking upriver in the glassy slack water on the back side of Buck Island.

The river is at 25 feet in Helena, a 70-year historic high for late fall and a medium-high flow for a river that can fluctuate up to 50 feet seasonally. For the paddle ahead, it means more back-channel options. Ruskey chooses one of these, cutting left and steering the big canoe upriver into the starlight. I ask him where we’re headed.

“We’ll take a left at Pleiades and Taurus rising there along the end of Buck, bear left at Auriga before what we call Doe Island,” Ruskey explains, mixing island names with constellations. “Then we’ll go up the channel into Buck, toward Cetus, and left at the Big Dipper is our camp at the head of the island.”

As we enter the channel I watch submerged trees slide by. In the silence, to the sound of the crickets, a few flapping ducks, and the stars reflection in the water, I start to wonder, ‘Have I ever *really* paddled at night?’ I think back to what Ruskey had told me about the Mississippi being this place, “strung somewhere in between heaven and earth,” where you can experience moments of beauty or—*SPLAT*—a beaver slaps the water, splashing us and shaking the deep thoughts loose.

“Ain’t nothing better than this,” Charles says, not losing a stroke.

I learn more about Charles later that night, around a driftwood campfire on a long swath of exposed sandbar. The flames fade, with the sky clear enough that the jets streaming into Memphis come into contrast. The 50-year-old father of three tells me he grew up in Cleveland before making his way to Clarksdale and discovering the unique kind of work to be had with Ruskey’s operation.

“I can’t express to you how much I appreciate this,” Charles says. “Fifty years old and I never seen stars like this.”

A SUNRISE OWL HOOT FROM RUSKEY WAKES US. He’s already got coffee brewed and his breakfast of choice ready—Irish oats covered in parmesan and sea salt with a cup of buttermilk—plus a report on the coyotes that chased off the flock of geese. *How long has this guy been awake?* Over breakfast, he talks of the miles ahead and the voyager mentality, and I realize that Ruskey’s no mere throwback. He really was born in the wrong century. He tells us about the 2004-2006 Lewis and Clark reenactment, where he not only carved a pair dugouts, but also paddled them on “every free-flowing waterway from St. Louis to Astoria [Ore.]—I don’t paddle reservoirs.” No wonder a rotating cast of expedition paddlers seek his guidance through the busy final stretches of the river from Baton Rouge to the Gulf.

We load up to begin our downriver voyage. Tim Richardson, paddling next to me, has flown in from Washington, D.C., to join us. The political affairs director for the American Land Conservancy is here to see the fledgling Lower Mississippi River Water Trail’s entirety that begins on Buck Island. Five years ago, his organization purchased the wooded, 1,500-acre island.

Now the conservation group is trying sell it to a state or federal agency as a protected launching point into the river’s most pristine areas, “like the Boundary Waters right here in the mid-South.” It’s not just the possibility of a casino or hydroelectric facility moving in that worries Tim, it’s the lack of riverside resources for public use.

“What is used is valued,” Tim states simply. This lynchpin island often provides the only public camping on a 40-mile stretch of the river bounded by private land. Without it, Ruskey’s operation and other local users would have no viable day-touring options with public access and year-round camping.

We continue on to Helena, where we pick up Kevin Smith, a termed-out Arkansas state senator from Helena who helped found the grassroots Delta Caucus. As we pass under the only bridge in the 200 river miles between Memphis and Greenville, Miss., Ruskey and Kevin take turns describing the Delta’s geography and rich history. The miles disappear as the river guide and native son play off each other’s didactic riffs about the first Spanish explorations, Civil War battles and riverboat crashes. The shoreline rice mills spawn talk of the landscape being altered for the sake of agriculture, and the economic fallout the rise of Big Ag has caused in communities like Helena and Clarksdale. “One more grain elevator, then 30 miles of nothing into what we call the Muddy Waters Wilderness,” Ruskey assures.

We stop on Island 62, where the eroding sand banks provide a reminder how the ever-shifting main current can change islands at will, or blast through winding oxbows to confuse state borders. The concept of an island beyond defined state lines makes me wonder how anyone could claim this here-today, gone-tomorrow no-man’s land.

“You ever see people out here?” I ask Ruskey.
 “Only the groups I bring out here,” he says.
 “And you don’t even know who owns it?” I ask.
 “I never see anybody, let alone any ‘No Trespassing’ posts.”

AFTER A FULL DAY OF A PADDLING, I begin my own initiation with a Mississippi mud bath, stripping down and wading into the knee-deep muck before a satisfying swim in the murky water off our camp at Island 64. A tug’s spotlight washes over our outfit as I dry off and a cold Budweiser appears.

RUSKEY POINTS OUT OUR CAMP ON BIG ISLAND, ALONG AN OLD CHANNEL OF THE WHITE RIVER; JUNEBUG I, BELOW, FULLY LOADED AND TRACKING STEADILY DOWN THE MIGHTY MISSISSIPPI.

Ruskey has started a driftwood fire. I listen to it crackle and to the hiss of the catfish blackening in the pan, and look down at my toes firmly planted in the cool sand. In that carefree barefoot moment I realize I've arrived back at the original, American river trip experience.

The setting also strikes a nerve with Kevin, who describes this peculiar pride in the river-life lore sewn by Mark Twain into the very fabric of our national identity. He's met people from Russia along the river walk in Helena, looking for what they've read in translated versions of Twain. "Huck Finn is the story that's up there with blue jeans and rock 'n' roll," he says. "Not just because it captures that time in America, but because it's about freedom."

He should know. After college, Kevin set off to paddle home to Helena from the headwaters of the Mississippi in a 17-foot Monark aluminum canoe. "I didn't have anything waterproof. I had a tarp to throw over everything," Kevin says. The trip opened his eyes to the harsh economic realities off the river, leading him to politics and eventually a seat on the federal commission, run by then-Gov. Bill Clinton, born out of the Delta Development Act of 1988. River tourism could be a sustainable economic windfall for the region, he insists. "This river is America, it drains most of it right through the heartland, and it's everything, the culture, the history."

It's hard to argue the significance of the Mississippi, its role as a vital corridor and barrier, between states, between east and west, and as a historic passage to freedom. It makes me wonder about the progress we've made as a society, or even within the paddling community for that matter—how in a lifetime of running rivers, including six years spent taking huge volumes of customers whitewater rafting, I can count the number of black people I've paddled with on a single hand.

I try to broach the subject with Charles when we break for lunch the next day on the forested Arkansas shore north of the White River confluence under a tall sycamore raining down its helicopter-like seeds in the wind, with the dull *tock-tock-tock* of a woodpecker at work. I ask him why more people from Clarksdale don't care about paddling, but he takes it a different direction.

"People thinking how *this* is wild," Charles says, pointing to our surroundings. "Well, I think that all the people living back there—what people do to one another—that's wild. This is what civilization should be." Speaking passionately and looking me sternly in the eye, almost tearing up, he adds, "No wild here. Ain't this civil?"

Whatever your definition of what's wild, we get farther and farther away from the forces that famously sought to "sivilize" Huck as Ruskey guides the big canoe down the old channel of the White River. The broad confluence of the White and Arkansas rivers with the Mississippi opens a maze-like array of backwater paddling options and carves out Big Island. We camp on its eastern edge, cut off, like most of the 20,000-acre island, from the tugboat traffic plying the Mississippi's main channel. We're maybe 70 miles into our trip, though no one can say for sure—Ruskey measures progress "in bends, not miles." But there's no doubt that we're deep into the wilderness. I hear a strange howl and fall into that certain self-awareness, taking extra care as I scramble in the dark to collect firewood. If I take an eye-gouging spill here, it's a long way to anything.

As Ruskey pours crab meat, corn chowder and lemon juice to finish off the signature shrimp temphe gumbo he calls Muddy Waters Paella, he ruminates on his central struggle—that what goes unseen can never be understood. "I have to explain what this is. The Mississippi's not all steamships and cute towns, but its not tugboats and waste sites either," he says. "It's about as pure a wilderness experience as you can get. The sun, the wind, the water, it's so elemental."

Waking to the dawn tapestry of pink and gunmetal gray, we follow the wild shore of Big Island back into the Mississippi, where we're greeted by massive

flocks of pelicans. I fall into the silent rhythm of my strokes, appreciating the shared effort on the giant canoe, navigating these channels the same way Marquette and Jolliet did in 1673. I can engage in the deepest of conversations or zone out for an hour, focusing on my breath. I lose myself in the cadence of matching strokes, and, when we cut through a channel to the Arkansas, to the sight of freshwater filling every horizon. On all sides are flooded forests and unnamed islets, presenting limitless potential paddling routes.

Ruskey chooses one that pulls us back to the main current, back to T.S. Eliot's untamed, "strong brown god."

As if to remind us of its hidden power, Ruskey points the canoe off the stern of the Henry Bee, an upriver tug pushing three rows of seven barge lengths, each 250 feet long. The steep, uniform head-high rollers are close enough together to flood the 30-footer if we take them head-on, so Ruskey steers us in at about 45 degrees, confident in his crew. His yogi calm, however, turns to imperative commands as Tim and Kevin stop paddling just as we head into the set. The bow rises completely out of the water, lifting Charles up and slamming him down in noisy splashes over the two biggest waves. He keeps pulling, and with a healthy 4 inches of tumblehome and enough momentum, Junebug I rides dry. We cut through the final waves and share a round of hoots, to which Ruskey replies, "All-riiight!"

The thrill carries us to our takeout near Arkansas City, a landing at the bottom of Choctaw Island. This 800-acre island, which then-Gov. Mike Huckabee bought for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to manage, provides the protected bookend for the water trail to pair with Buck Island.

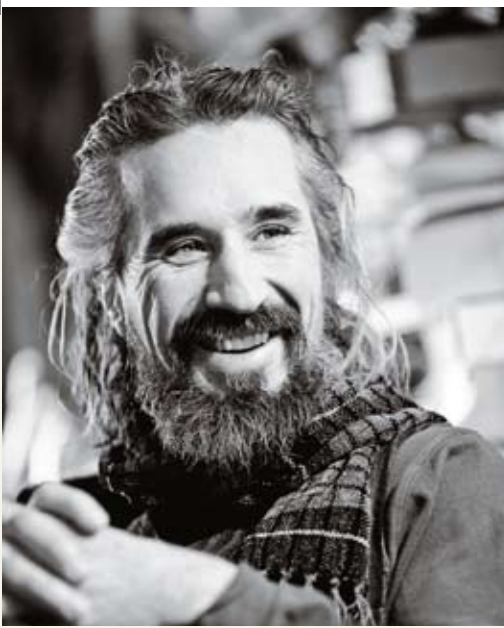
We load the trailer down as an interested hunter approaches. "I've seen one of those before ... what do you call that?" he asks.

"A canoe," Ruskey calmly states.

Not a minute on shore and he's right back to square one. In well over 100 miles, we've seen two other recreational boats on the river, both of them motorized. But Ruskey is someone who sees the world in a different, infectious way. Earlier that morning, he stood up a piece of driftwood in the sand because it looked like "a break-dancing alien." Soon he had a group of grown men scurrying like children to dress up the alien. Here's someone with no TV, who studies music and history, a man who would "rather drink muddy water and sleep in a hollowed-out

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MISSISSIPPI CROSSROADS

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log.” He brings something totally unique to the Delta: a new way to appreciate a rich and forgotten corner of the globe. Just like the blues, Ruskey is a pure product of the river’s constant rhythm, left alone in his struggle to evolve in his own, purely original way. He goes with the flow, literally, which is why he identifies with the Quapaw, the Sioux name for those who went downstream.

Before he walks away, the hunter announces that he’s “been wanting to try one of those.” It’s then I know there’s a future in this river trail. Ruskey has a way of bringing people into his fold, of making them see things his way. Call it conversion. I’ve been avoiding the Christ-figure parallels all week—from the striking appearance, to the humble temperament, to his selfless mentoring efforts, to the sandals and the carpentry—but it seems impossible to not spread the river gospel, when John Ruskey and I part ways.

“River be with you,” he says as we shake hands. Before I can even process it, the response is already floating downriver: “And also with you.”

In late October, the American Land Conservancy and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service penned an agreement to permanently conserve the 880 timbered acres on Buck Island, solidifying the long-awaited, crucial first step in its permanent protection. Visit [C&K](#) online for continued coverage of the formation of the Lower Mississippi River Water Trail, as well as maps and information from Ruskey’s forthcoming guidebook on paddling the trail, plus extended interviews, additional photos and video from this trip: [CanoeKayak.com](#)