

big  
truck, (theater)  
small town. (taylor)

story and photos by Kim Breaux

Taylor, Mississippi. A place where the sweet aromas of hay, lumber and beer waft through the cool night air; where lights flicker against the wooden pillars like oversized fireflies. It is a place where lawn chairs and Solo cups, cowboy boots and waltzing couples, camouflage pants and harmonica's wails can mean only one thing: Southern small-town life.

At the Big Truck Theater in Taylor, Miss., old friends reunite. Parents dance with their toddler children. Little girls wear brightly-colored bows nearly half the size of their small faces. Women sitting in the front row sway back and forth to Dolly Parton songs. And tapping their feet in unison with occasional hoots, hollers and claps, approximately three dozen people wait in anticipation of the headlining act—Hot Thangs, a 10-piece band comprised of various rattles and a tambourine, saxophone, clarinet, electric guitar, drum set, harmonica, ukulele, French horn, piano and washboard.

“This is a rural setting. If it looks like it might give you a splinter, it might give you a splinter,” said Mark DeLoach, guitarist in Hot Thangs and owner of the Big Truck Theater and adjoining art gallery that he and his wife operate.

In a town with a population of 289, two churches and

a total land area of just over four square miles, Taylor is best known for its Taylor Grocery catfish hub, its thriving arts scene and, of course, its small-town, old-fashioned Southern feel.

“At night I’ll go outside and sit on my chair or by my chimney, and I’ll look up and see every star I want to see. It’s quiet—you hear dogs bark, and I’ve got chickens in my backyard from my neighbor,” said Kim Beason, eight-year resident of Taylor and associate professor of park and recreation management at Ole Miss. “It’s perfect. I got lucky when I found this place.”

Taylor is a sort of “Andy Griffith-ville,” he said.

“A lot of small towns in Mississippi, you might walk around and give funny looks, but people are excited to see you in Taylor,” said Tricia “The Fire Girl” Parker, who performs a fire show for audience members at the end of each Saturday night Big Truck performance.



The fire show, she said, is called “poi” and involves holding a chain in each hand with a wick on each end. The fiery chain pierces the darkness as it’s twirled like a baton on the back of the moving pickup truck.

Parker, who is an art teacher at Oxford University School, started working for the adjoining art gallery after a friend told her about Big Truck. And while she lives in Oxford, she admits to considering a life in Taylor.

“It’s just a growing scene. It’s so interesting. It’s an arts community,” she said. “There’s a very good quality of work out here. It’s not just

people selling work to make money—it’s people who are multi-talented, people who are musicians and artists and make work that they love.”

Taylor is full of an eclectic group of people, she said. They are people who are interested in travel, music and art—people with truly unique tastes. There’s not just one artsy type.

“It gives it more of a jambalaya flavor than just a hotdog or something,” she said.

“Money lengthens the runway—it doesn’t help you land and it doesn’t help you take off. I get up every morning and roll, (because at the end of the day,) there’s no check waiting.”

-Mark DeLoach

DeLoach retired from the real world eight years ago, as he likes to put it.

He left a corporate career and then gave up a furniture-making job to do what he really loves, he said.

“There was no challenge in life—I didn’t have to run across the tundra to catch the antelope,” he said.

He and his wife, Christine, who he described as a painter, writer, photographer and musician, were drawn to Taylor’s art scene.

Together they put together their art gallery. And for 15 consecutive weeks, they have worked around the clock to

get Big Truck off the ground.

“It’s what we do. We can’t imagine doing anything else,” he said.

They recruit local and often unknown musicians to play at the live weekend performance. These groups range from polka players to 17-year-old grass-pickers to a seven-member mariachi band, DeLoach said.

There are 1,200 people eating fish every weekend—they have to have something to do. And Big Truck may seem like



it's all fun and games,  
but in reality, it's a lot of work, he said.

In spite of his less financially-stable choice of career and in spite of the inevitable frustrations involved with owning and operating his own business, DeLoach has no regrets.

"I want to raise chickens in here sometimes," he said. "What else would I do?"

Big Truck is a product of the DeLoaches' dreams. They made it happen, Parker said.

"Taylor has such a receptive spirit for this sort of thing," said DeLoach, who began his musical career at Taylor Grocery before the start of the Big Truck Theater. He vouches for the fact that the only way to succeed in life is to "make your fingers hurt."

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Taylor is a haven for artists for more reasons than simply its embrace nature. Taylor harkens back to a time when things were simpler. A place where old-fashioned ideals and nostalgia add to its charm; where authors, musicians, painters and photographers frequent for refuge and inspiration; where the only weeping is done by its willows.

"This used to be one of the hubs of Lafayette County. I've got pictures of my house when kids used to swim in my ditch," Beason laughed. "To me, this is home." **M**



Campbell McCool, along with his partner Stewart Speed, secured a 10-year contract to build 200 homes in Taylor. The homes will range in price from \$220,000 to \$250,000. The plan, which took 18 months of town meetings to get the go ahead, was originally known as "Main Street Taylor" but has since been changed to "Plein Air," a name referring to a style of French painting that emphasizes painting in natural light.

McCool, a 1985 graduate of Ole Miss, described the project as a "traditional neighborhood development," with wooden houses with tin roofs and white picket fences.

Basically, it's the opposite of a traditional suburb. This development "encourages a pedestrian lifestyle," he said. The idea is for the development to capture the feel of what Oxford used to be and will help maintain some of the small town appeal that people in Taylor currently enjoy.

There will be a corner pharmacy, a restaurant or two, art seminars at the art school and a new fire station, among other things. People can park at their house and walk to the grocery store, he added.

This new urbanist development emphasizes narrow streets and walking, and this plan is "100 percent in line" with the "enhanced art scene in Taylor," McCool said.