

By: Representatives Thompson, Boyd, Arnold

To: Rules

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 80

1 A RESOLUTION COMMEMORATING THE MEMORY OF THE SHAKE RAG
2 COMMUNITY AND RECOGNIZING THE MONUMENTAL DIFFERENCE THAT ITS
3 RESIDENTS HAD NOT ONLY ON ROCK AND ROLL BUT ALSO THE BIRTHPLACE OF
4 AMERICA'S MUSIC.

5 WHEREAS, Shake Rag was a unique African-American neighborhood
6 in an underserved but culturally thriving section of Tupelo, the
7 birthplace of Elvis, and Tupelo and Shake Rag were where the seeds
8 of Elvis' personal sound took root; and

9 WHEREAS, located east of the old M&O (later GM&O) railway
10 tracks and extending northward from Main Street, Shake Rag was one
11 of several historic African-American communities in Tupelo, and by
12 the 1920s, blues and jazz flowed freely from performers at Shake
13 Rag restaurants, cafes and house parties, and later from
14 jukeboxes, while the sounds of gospel music filled the churches;
15 and

16 WHEREAS, the origin story of the Shake Rag name has its own
17 colorful and debated folklore where one version includes the idea
18 that the clothing of folks running away from a fight would shake
19 in the wind, and another version claims that as trains were



20 approaching the area, passengers would wave rags to signal the
21 engineer to stop for them; and

22 WHEREAS, gambling and bootlegging were commonplace in Shake
23 Rag and although outsiders often regarded the area as dangerous,
24 former residents proudly recalled its churches, prosperous
25 businesses and strong sense of community, a quality highlighted in
26 Charles "Wsir" Johnson's 2004 documentary about Shake Rag, Blue
27 Suede Shoes in the Hood; and

28 WHEREAS, unfortunately, Shake Rag was leveled by fire under
29 the guise of eminent domain and revitalization in the late 1960s
30 and its culture and lifestyle were lost to the whims of those who
31 write history, except for those who know old Tupelo well, and the
32 most zealous fans of the blues and Elvis; and

33 WHEREAS, the burning of Shake Rag cleared 60 acres, removed
34 169 families from their houses and closed 43 businesses, and those
35 in charge of the project, the Tupelo Housing Authority, the
36 Planning and Zoning Commission and representatives of the Urban
37 Renewal Commission, proclaimed that progress had been made by
38 eliminating a slum from the area and relocating those who lived in
39 the community to public housing built on North Green Street on
40 what was called Livingston Estates; and

41 WHEREAS, Roy Turner, former president of Tupelo's Elvis fan
42 club and a local historian, explained that, "Elvis lived in 'The
43 Hill' just before (moving to) Memphis. 'The Hill' was a



44 higher-income African-American neighborhood, and a neighbor who
45 was close to Elvis exposed him to the Shake Rag community"; and

46 WHEREAS, in 2003, Scott Morris wrote eloquently about the
47 filmmaker Mr. Johnson and the 45 people that he interviewed for
48 the film, and later, Morris wrote about whether Elvis Presley ever
49 really walked about Shake Rag as a boy, learning blues licks from
50 the musicians who gathered in the neighborhood; and

51 WHEREAS, "Shake Rag and Elvis: Fact or Myth" the story asked,
52 depended on one's perspective, according to the story, with the
53 best answer coming from Odie Johnson Sr., who Morris quoted as
54 saying, "Elvis' daddy (Vernon Presley) used to work with me at
55 L.P. McCarty. That was right here on Main Street in Shake Rag";
56 and

57 WHEREAS, music teacher and community advocate Stephanie
58 Stubbs of Tupelo organized a group of young musicians and
59 performers to record a song titled "Shake Rag," and the song,
60 recorded at FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, remembers
61 Elvis but also honors the little-known history of the now defunct
62 "Shake Rag" neighborhood of Tupelo and its influence on rock and
63 roll; and

64 WHEREAS, it is most appropriate to recognize and honor those
65 communities that have had a positive and lasting impact on the
66 State of Mississippi:

67 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF
68 REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, That we hereby



69 commemorate the memory of the Shake Rag community and recognize
70 the monumental difference that its residents had not only on rock
71 and roll but also the birthplace of America's music.

72 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be
73 furnished to the residents of the Shake Rag community and to the
74 members of the Capitol Press Corps.

