



## The Worth of the Rural 'Creative Economy'

By [Stuart Rosenfeld](#)

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**From the Blues Trail through the Delta to the Walter Anderson Museum on the Gulf Coast, rural Mississippi's economy is bouyed by what we call the "creative economy."**



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The Mississippi Delta is home to the nation's most distinctive form of music, the blues. Thousands of people come each year to follow the Mississippi "blues trail," listening to musicians at juke joints up and down the river.

How important are "creative" jobs to a state's economy and to rural communities?

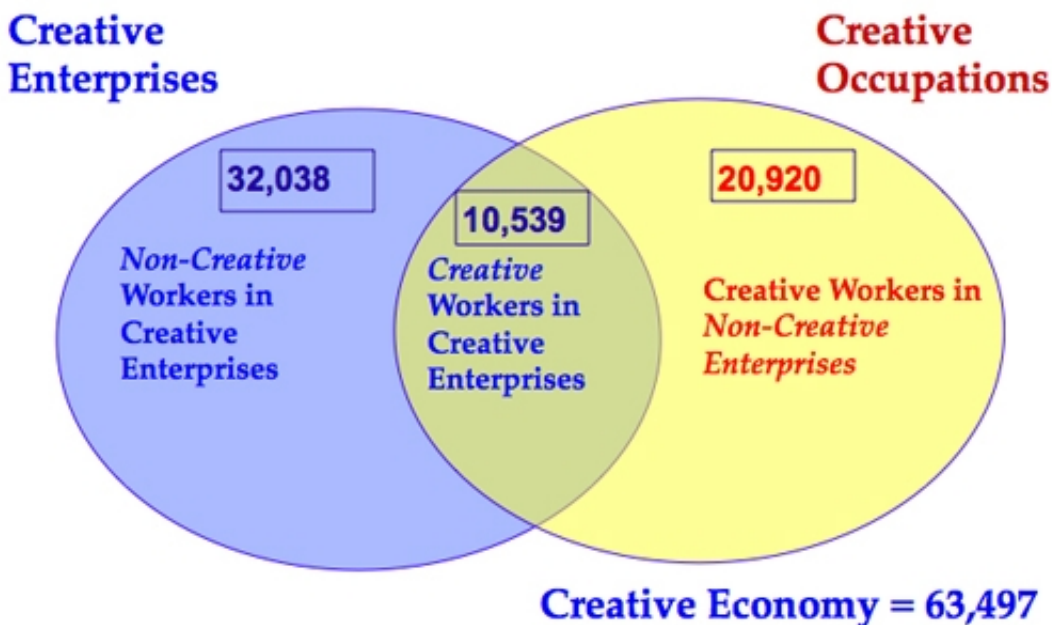
About two years ago the Mississippi Arts Commission entered into a unique partnership with the Mississippi Development Authority to find out. Realizing they had an overlapping interest in how arts, culture, and design benefit the state's economy and its people, they ordered a study to examine Mississippi's creative industries.

The notion was to look at these businesses not just as a cultural and social good but on economic terms. The state examined the creative economy as a source of jobs and wealth, as a competitive advantage for products and services, a magnet for talent and tourists, as a stimulus for innovation in science and technology, and in terms of its contributions to academic performance.

The influence of creativity is readily apparent in Mississippi — in its literary reputation, musical heritage, and renowned ballet competition. The state is a rich source of talented people, and has been for generations.

Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Craig Claiborne, Morgan Freeman, Leontyne Price, Muddy Waters, James Earl Jones, Walter Anderson, Willie Morris—and even Bret Favre, in his own way—are but a very few examples of Mississippi's deep reservoir of well-known creative people.

## Creative enterprises (the cluster) & Creative occupations (the workforce)



This wellspring of talent developed across the state. It was found among an educated, privileged agricultural society that was able to appreciate and invest in the arts. It emerged from a history and culture that have bred and cultivated imaginative writers and from the landscape of the coast that inspired artists.

And, perhaps most often, it was found within a poor and undereducated class of share croppers and tenant farmers that developed its own expressive art forms as a form of release from the hard work of daily life.

In addition, Mississippi has architectural gems in historic Vicksburg and Natchez, a Gulf Coast that attracts artists and tourists alike, and a notable history that include remnants of its native American tribes right through the Civil War and then the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Measuring the creative economy**

The creative industries span all forms of original art, their applications in the design of products, services, and places, and the value chain that supports all of these industries. (Regional Technology Strategies and Mt. Auburn have developed and refined this definition in a dozen states and regions.) We found that creative industries are disproportionately filled with self-employed workers. They are hard to find and count. Also companies included in sectors not predominantly “creative” (e.g., consumer products and food services) have to be teased out of the standardized data. This was done in Mississippi.



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The Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs, Mississippi.

Mississippi’s creative industries employ about 45,000 people. This included employment in commercial applications of art, such as architecture, interior design, advertising, graphic design, web design, fashion apparel, culinary arts, the media, and TV/film industries. We added the companies that make it possible to reproduce, distribute, and sell creative goods — printers, galleries, and agents. Finally, we tacked on the art and design schools, councils, associations, and other non-profits. Altogether, these include 45,000 people.

That may not seem so impressive when compared to large metropolitan areas with their media

conglomerates, large publishers, and multinational advertising agencies, places assumed to be where young creative people are choosing to move. Yet Mississippi's creative industry cluster is larger than many of the state's noted clusters, such as information technology, defense and security and apparel and textiles. It's not much smaller than forest and wood products.

Amenities that come with the creative economy are sufficiently important to make a difference to large employers like Toyota and North Mississippi Regional Medical. (Big employers want their workers to enjoy their lives outside business hours.)

Moreover, there are more than 20,000 people working in creative occupations in other parts of the economy. And these numbers don't include the thousands with earnings from creative endeavors that supplement their primary occupations and incomes.

### **Celebrating and Showcasing Creativity**

Raw numbers, however, tell only a small part of the story. The creative economy depends on non-profit organizations, cultural and entertainment events and venues, and places where creative enterprises can be started, housed, and displayed. These businesses need an educational system that develops creative talent and an appreciation for what it produces, and resources.

Mississippi's Whole Schools Initiative, supported by the Mississippi Arts Commission, maintains an emphasis on the arts in the public schools even as so many other states are de-emphasizing these areas. About 150 festivals—from Tupelo's Elvis Festival to Newton's Loose Caboose— attract almost a half million attendees. Art and music are seen, heard, and sold at available at coffee shops and diners as well as large theatre complexes.

Further, much of this economy is embedded in the culture, traditions, and history of Mississippi. This is a home grown industry.

Sometimes stories can much more effectively show the impact of creative people, places, and enterprises. We begin along Mississippi's Gulf Coast, where the arts helped Ocean Springs and Bay St. Louis recover after Hurricane Katrina. A new organization, Arts, Hancock County worked with the county Chamber of Commerce and the Mississippi Arts Commission to help artists get back into business, which in turn stimulated tourism and the recovery.

Art permeates the local economy in this region, showing up everywhere from the hospital to hair salons.

"We've gone from a few businesses to more than 100 restaurants in the community. All of this has come to us because of the arts," according to Margaret Miller, Director of the Ocean Springs Chamber of Commerce. "I don't even qualify that statement."

In the Delta, it's the music that distinguishes the region. In Indianola, the BB King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center has become a major stop along the Blues Heritage Trail that traces the birthplace of the blues. It's attracted the Ground Zero Blues Club, where artists from across the nation perform. Since it opened, in 2009, it has brought visitors from all 50 states and 30

countries, and tourism revenues are up 12.5 percent.



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A juke joint in Clarksdale, Mississippi. It's part of the annual Juke Joint Festival.

The Mississippi School of the Arts, located in a former college in downtown Brookhaven, opened in 2003 as a residential school for 9th and 10th grade students with talent and interest in the arts, but who do not necessarily expect to follow a career in the arts. Students have to meet tough academic requirements and audition to be accepted. The school is an integral part of the community, and the campus is owned by a local group, the Brookhaven Trust. In 2009, graduates received more in scholarship offers than the total state appropriation for the school.

The culinary arts are also part of Mississippi's creative economy, with many fine chefs, specialty place-based foods, Viking's Culinary School, and a host of southern food writers, many connected to the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi's Study of Southern Culture. Tamales, brought to Mississippi by Hispanic farm laborers early in the 20th century, may not be the first food that comes to mind. Yet the state has a Hot Tamale Trail, which threads its way through the Mississippi Delta to Vicksburg, with stops at Solly's, Joe's and Doe's.

### **What's Next?**

So what is Mississippi doing with all this information? In August 2011, Governor Haley Barbour headlined a Summit in Jackson that brought a capacity crowd of 400 (with many turned away) to learn about and talk about creativity in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Economic Council's 2011 Blueprint Mississippi lists second on its agenda for

growth “Support Mississippi’s Creative Economy” by supporting the goals of Mississippi’s Creative Economy. Goals—each of which provide action steps and examples, which include

- Facilitate efforts that make communities throughout the state more creative and vibrant;
- Help communities preserve and generate added value from their cultural and historic heritage;
- Enhance the competitiveness of the state’s businesses and industries through increased use of art and design; and
- Build capacity to grow and retain talent living and working in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Arts Commission recently hosted regional creative economy summits to take it directly to the communities and let them know about resources available to them. Most important, the concept of a creative economy is creating a buzz across the state and is generating excitement in small towns that now see new opportunities they may not have considered, new ways to generate, attract and keep jobs.

*Stuart Rosenfeld is the founder of Regional Technology Strategies in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The Creative Economy reports are available on [RTS's web site](#) and more extensive information about the implementation process can be found on the [Mississippi Arts Commission's web page](#).*

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