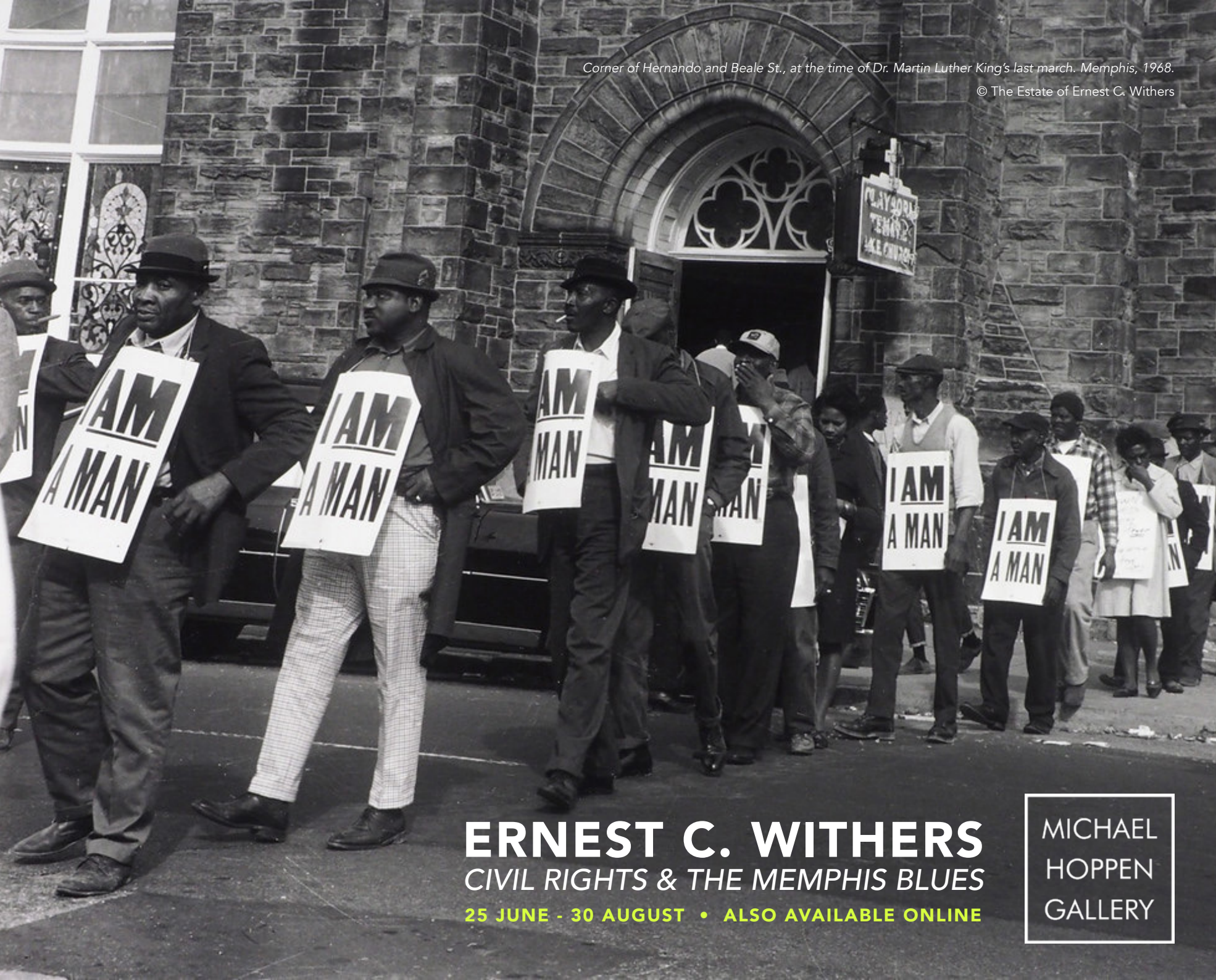


Corner of Hernando and Beale St., at the time of Dr. Martin Luther King's last march. Memphis, 1968.

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ERNEST C. WITHERS
CIVIL RIGHTS & THE MEMPHIS BLUES
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MICHAEL
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ERNEST C. WITHERS

CIVIL RIGHTS & THE MEMPHIS BLUES

Howlin' Wolf and his band, dressed in white shirts, smart trousers and brightly shined shoes, laughingly stoop to pick cotton in a field in Arkansas. A young B. B. King poses with one foot on a piano stool, holding a book of gospel songs. Elvis Presley hangs out backstage, surrounded by black teenagers in Native American costumes, at a concert presented by the rhythm-and-blues station WDIA; a sign overhead proclaims, "Profanity or Obscene Language Will Not Be Tolerated on this Stage." A tearful Aretha Franklin joins Coretta Scott King at a conference after the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968.

In a career that stretched back to World War II, Ernest C. Withers captured some five million images. They have become an archive, not just of Memphis musicians, but of public and private lives, civil rights marches and church congregations, of segregation and desegregation.

Throughout the 1950's, Withers was, in his own words, 'a news photographer', 'recording events that were taking place.' Momentous changes were occurring, and he recorded them for African American newspapers across the country. Withers travelled throughout the South during this decade and into the 1960's with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., James Meredith, Medgar Evers and other leaders of the Civil Rights



Elvis backstage, WDIA Goodwill Revue, Ellis Auditorium, December 7, 1956 (Carla Thomas in front)
© The Estate of Ernest C. Withers

movement. He provided images that made the dramatic stories of the era – Dr. King riding the first desegregated bus in Montgomery, murders of Civil Rights workers, voter registration drives, lynchings and the powerful Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. The result is an all-encompassing, moving chronicle of the great American crusades of the second half of the 20th Century.

Withers worked out of a studio at 333 Beale Street, Memphis, for the majority of his career. "I'd rather be here than anywhere else I know," Withers said, echoing W. C. Handy's *'Beale Street Blues'*.

Today, Beale Street is made up of a strip of clubs and bars that draw a tourist trade but in its heyday it was the main street of black Memphis. Withers recalls it as 'a street of frolic'. From the Palace Theater to venues such as Pee Wee's Saloon or Club Paradise, Beale Street rang with jazz, rhythm and blues and the Delta blues that came up the Mississippi on its way to conquering the world. It was the springboard for B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Bobby Blue Bland, Johnny Ace, Ike and Tina Turner and other musicians whom Withers photographed in their prime.

These Memphis Blues musicians sit amongst iconic images of the Civil Rights movements in America during the mid-20th century; and are on show at Michael Hoppen Gallery, June 25th-August 30th, 2019.

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Waitresses and juke box, Plantation Inn, West Memphis, TN, 1950s.
 © The Estate of Ernest C. Withers



Mule train leaves for Washington, poor people's march, Marks, MS May 1968
 © The Estate of Ernest C. Withers

B.B. King performing at night club May, 1970 © The Estate of Ernest C. Withers



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Tina Turner, Ike and Tina Revue, Club Paradise, 1962 © The Estate of Ernest C. Withers



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