The Blues Brothers

The Blues Brothers is a comedy, musical, and action movie that manages to be successful in all three genres. The movie takes place in and around Chicago Illinois. It is located in Chicago because of Chicago's immense influence on the style of blues music. Without the setting and integration of Chicago and its music this movie would have failed in its sincerity.

Blues music came to Chicago during the “Great Migration” of African Americans to the north. African Americans went to northern industrial cities in search of better jobs and a new way of life. With them they brought the delta style of blues. Time and amplification modified this music into what is now known as Chicago blues. Chicago Blues differs from Delta and other types of blues music in that it uses amplified instruments including harmonica and keyboards. Chicago blues music also uses more variable chord progressions that can at times sound jazzy. Because the Blues Brothers play this type of blues music Chicago was the only appropriate setting for this movie to take place.

There is an industrial theme in this movie that opens with smokestacks obscuring the sunrise. It underscores the importance of industrialization on the electric Chicago blues. Factory workers purchase the more expensive electric instruments but still play the blues.

Smoke obscures the sunrise in the opening scene of The Blues Brothers:

The second scene of the movie is when Jake Blues is released from prison. The scenes involving the prison were all actually shot on location at Joliet correction center. There is frequent use of signs and monuments in this film to remind you that it was shot on location in Chicago, many of these reminders occur in the very beginning of the film:
The second scene in the movie is Jake and Elwood Blues visiting the Catholic orphanage where they grew up. It is obviously in a run down part of the city. We meet the caretaker of the building played by Cab Calloway who is a native Chicago blues man and influenced Jake and Elwood to take up playing the blues. The orphanage:

There is a lot of traveling and car chases in this movie and it can be noted that there are rarely trees or vegetation of any type shown. It is mainly backgrounds of bridges, overpasses, roads, and trains. Also a lot of scenes were shot at night and in very low light. The first car chase scene takes place in a mall:
The mall these scenes were shot in was not in Chicago but in a neighboring city to the north. It had been closed for a year before the filming and was never reopened after this chase scene. The mall was later demolished. Mall interior:

Elwood's apartment is in a very seedy neighborhood. It speaks to his lifestyle that although he wears a nice suit he lives in a building with a sign that says “Transients Welcome”. The buildings look old but well built and it looks as if it was once a thriving downtown area that has fallen into disrepair. Likely the constant noise from the trains has made property values go down. Elwood's hotel (before being firebombed):
The next scenes in the movie all involve getting the band back together so that they can make enough money to save the orphanage. First Jake and Elwood travel to find Murph and the Magictones who are playing a gig at the Ramada inn. Then they go to a fancy restaurant called Che Paul which really was a fancy restaurant in Chicago. The outside scenes were shot in Chicago, but the interior scenes were shot in Hollywood on a studio lot.

Historically the next scenes in the movie are very interesting. They take place on Maxwell street that was first planked and mapped in 1847. It was always a very culturally diverse neighborhood. By 1920 it became primarily a black neighborhood because of all the immigrants from the southern states, but most of the businesses were owned by Jews. There were often street performances in the open air markets, and Maxwell street is now considered to be the birthplace of the Chicago style of blues.

Currently most of Maxwell street has been turned into upscale housing developments or taken over by the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. There is very little remaining of the Maxwell street shown in the movie:

After recruiting all the band members, they all head to Ray's music exchange in order to purchase instruments. This building is also located on Maxwell street:
This is what it looks like today:

The next landmark in the movie occurs when the Illinois Nazi's are trying to track down the Blues brothers and find out that Elwood had falsified his address on his drivers license. They are taken to Wrigley Field:

The Bobs Country Bunker scenes and sauna scenes were not filmed on location. Nor were most of the scenes of driving around promoting their gig at the Palace Hotel Ballroom. The Palace Hotel Ballroom never existed, its exterior was actually the Chicago South Shore Country
Club that had been refaced for the movie, but the interior shots with the band and concert footage were all filmed in Hollywood. Of note is the use of the song “Sweet Home Chicago” as the last song of the night.

The ending of the movie takes you on a virtual high speed tour of downtown Chicago. Jake and Elwood are trying to escape from comically high numbers of police, troops, boats, horses, swat teams and in doing so drive insanely fast through the city streets. The streets were cleared for the filming and they actually did drive that fast. They actually discuss the street names and artwork as if they are tour guides as they fly past:

After they save the orphanage by paying the back taxes the blues brothers are arrested and the last scene of the film was recorded back in Joliet Prison with real prisoners acting as extras:

Summary:

My review was in no way a complete movie review but my intention was to focus on the geographical points of interest presented in this movie and explain their significance. It was the characters and the music along with the setting that made this movie so successful and entertaining.

Chorus to Sweet Home Chicago as sung in The Blues Brothers:

“Oh come on
Baby don't you wanna go
Come on
Baby don't you wanna go
Back to that same old place
Sweet home Chicago”
Works Cited:


