

# COVER

## THE BLUES IS THE TRUTH ... WELL, MOST OF THE TIME

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There's gonna be some strong mojo workin' at Edmonton's Blues Festival

“I went down to the crossroads and fell down on my knees / Asked



the Lord above ‘Have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please.’ — Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”



When Robert Johnson sang those lines in a recording studio in 1936 he was cementing the foundation of one of the strongest legends to come down any musical highway. The story of Johnson selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for his skills on the guitar became one for the ages, influencing everyone from the Rolling Stones to the White Stripes.

The legend has been told often—how Johnson wasn’t much on the guitar until he disappeared for a time only to return a master of the instrument—and it doesn’t even matter anymore whether or not there was a shred of truth to the tale; the story has become fully integrated into the mythology of the blues, and with good reason. Audiences love a good underdog story and you can’t get more underdog than a guy against the Devil.

Bluesman Watermelon Slim—known in his daily life as Bill Homans—is heading this way for Edmonton’s Labatt Blues Festival and he’s no stranger to the legend of the crossroads, having even made reference to it in a song of his own, “Devil’s Cadillac.”

“I tell you what,” Slim says over a scratchy cellphone as he drives himself and his band, the Workers, along a southern highway, “right this minute on my dashboard is my medicine bag, my mojo bag, and there are rocks in that mojo bag from that crossroads, from that spot we’re talking about right now where Highway 61 meets Highway 49 north of Clarksdale. And I can tell you this is some very strong mojo.” Slim is quick to point out, though, that when it comes to music at least, the power of mojo is something even less tangible than a straight-up business deal with the Devil.

“The crossroads myth is totally a myth,” Slim states. “I don’t believe for a moment that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil—we had me some fun with ‘Devil’s Cadillac’—but the idea that magic is involved is not just a myth. It is.”

Steve Berlin plays the saxophone—among other instruments—in Los Lobos, another group that will be in Edmonton for the festival. Berlin agrees with Slim’s assessment that there are things that happen with music that cannot be explained by strictly intellectual this-note-comes-after-that-note sort of theories.

“A lot of what we do is magic,” he admits over the line from a Las Vegas hotel room. “I won’t even begin to claim to understand how people respond to a song, or songwriters come up with an idea—I’ve seen enough and made enough records to know how they actually come together, but I think the inspiration is pretty mystical sometimes and I’ve been lucky enough myself to witness some fairly magical moments. I know it exists; it’s very inspiring. It’s something we all strive for on a nightly basis: ‘let’s see if we can make a little magic here.’”

Of course, considering that songwriting is a form of storytelling, it’s no wonder that so many artists have locked into the myth of the crossroads in some way, if for nothing more than the pure jolt that the story gives to the imagination. It’s a tale that inspires and gets the imagination flowing, which is important

fuel for any songwriter's fire.

"I think to a certain extent that one of the cooler things about [being a musician] is that you get to be part of an industry that actually believes in and often perpetuates myths all the time," Berlin agrees, laughing as he adds, "I don't imagine accountants or lawyers have too many mythological figures."

Slim agrees that stories like Johnson's, as well as the music and tales of other bluesmen, are important to the tradition of the blues.

"We have a lot of traditions in it, and that's part of it," he says. "The tradition of respecting the people who came before you—the Muddy [Waters] or Junior Wells or the Wolf—those folks made it easier for me to walk this path that I'm walking on now. They blazed the trail.

"I'm walking on a reasonably easy path compared with them," he continues. "And that's part of the tradition. They lived it. I'm living it. You can't just go around and say, 'I'm playing the blues 'cause I play that I-IV-V progression'—no, no, no, that ain't working out. There's a lot more to it than that." Slim is getting at the fact that a little music theory and a few stories always came secondary to the actual living that those original bluesmen did. Johnson was as good as he was because he got out and travelled with his guitar, living life and learning songs and licks along the way and grinding it all into his own style.

The same is true of Slim, whose history is rich with jobs worthy of a place in just about any blues tune. He's a Vietnam vet, he's worked nearly every job possible in the logging and lumber industries, he was a daily newspaper reporter for a short time and throughout the years he's always returned to driving trucks. It's that experience of working hard and seeing plenty of life—both good and bad—that Slim credits with giving his music some added weight.

"You could say I grew up trying to play the blues, you know," he recalls. "I was a kid. I'm a late-blooming musician and I don't know if anybody really plays the blues until they've lived some and experienced some.

"Does Jonny Lang play the blues?" he asks. "I don't know if Jonny Lang plays the blues or not. By the time he was making albums he'd about graduated from high school: how much of the blues can you do when you haven't graduated from high school? What do you actually know then? What have you actually experienced? Have you ever had a job where you had to sweat and maybe occasionally bleed for your living? So, yeah, I play the blues now, but I'll acknowledge being a wannabe for a long time while I was learning to play the blues."

The question of age versus quality is an old one, and there's never an easy answer. Still, while rock 'n' roll holds few prejudices against youth, there tends to be something about the blues that calls for an approach that is tempered by, if not age, at least some catalogue of heartbreak and pain.

"It means more to me now—I get it on a different level than I did when I was 22," Berlin concedes. "Definitely, blues is the kind of music that living it is paramount, so I'm always a little bit leery when hearing about the next 14-year-old blues superstar. I'm just like, 'Oh, yeah? What's he going to write about: pissing his pants?' If you haven't lived it, even if you learn every Stevie Ray Vaughan lick there ever was, I don't think it's the same thing as having something to say."

With the blues, having something to say has often resulted in the creation of something new. Look to the Rolling Stones, who started out playing blues covers before taking those influences and evolving into a gritty rock ‘n’ roll band in the early ‘70s, or the twisted rambling of the White Stripes in today’s music scene, where Jack White freely mixes blues with country and anything else that strikes his fancy.

Slim points out that there’s an element of blues to be found in all sorts of old school country singers, from Hank Williams to Johnny Cash to David Allan Coe.

“I’m talking about country people,” Slim grunts. “I’m not necessarily saying rock people because rock tends to climb the building and then kick away the ladder. At least the old kind of country that I play, we haven’t kicked away the ladder. We’re still playing and singing things that sound like the roots. I don’t have too much patience with this new country business and I don’t have that much patience with a lot of what’s called rock music, but when you get somebody like Chuck Berry or his descendents, the Rolling Stones—or at least the earlier Rolling Stones—they may be rock ‘n’ roll, but what did Muddy Waters say: ‘the blues had a baby and called it rock ‘n’ roll.’ These were people that kept playing rock with the roots going back deeper into the blues.”

That’s exactly the attitude that Berlin and his bandmates in Los Lobos take. While the group may not be the first one that comes to mind when the subject of the blues arises, Berlin says the music is essential to the band, even though Los Lobos doesn’t play strictly within the technical parameters of the genre.

“It’s one of the streams that feeds the river,” Berlin explains. “We always used to have a hard time—back in the early days anyway—from people who were purists of one thing or the other, and I’m sure that if you asked Muddy Waters even back then he was synthesizing what he heard, stuff he heard growing up on a plantation, and he plugged the instruments in and made something new. As far as I’m concerned our job is to reinvent it as well and we try to the best of our ability to bring something new to the form and to the genre.

“A lot of music—I think about reggae and jazz and stuff like that—there’s this kind of bizarre formalism that people expect you to act and look and play and behave in a certain way if you’re going to play this music, and I just feel like none of the people that those people think of as the architects of the music ever thought that way,” he continues. “I’m sure Charlie Parker and Bob Marley and anybody else you wanted to name basically took ideas from every single place they could and that’s why they were so great, because they were master architects and master builders and they heard all the possibilities of other kinds of music informing the music that they made and are part of.” **V**

*Fri, Aug 24 - Sun, Aug 26*

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