

The Devil & Mr Johnson

(part 1)

by Daniel Passamaneck

The night was black as burned flesh. Robert stood at the front of the room, draining a watery beer and feeling its meager coolness dissipate inside him, slaking his thirst and soothing his parched throat a little but mostly accentuating for him how hot it was inside the packed roadhouse. He'd played a solid set, old songs as well as his own stuff, and the rhythm of his guitar and of dancing madness still seemed to resonate off the unfinished boards of the walls and roof. The crowd, still milling restlessly, was charged up somehow. They wouldn't leave till the kegs were kicked, but Robert wouldn't be sticking around so long as that. He was being pestered by hoochies whose charms had long since worn thin; the men were drunk and seemed to be growing increasingly frustrated and belligerent about the dwindling supply of alcohol and female attention.

He'd sung enough songs and smelled enough sweat for the night. Grabbing his hat and his guitar, he pushed his way out the back door. A few partygoers had congregated there but they didn't slow him down - though a few tried with come-on queries and jaw-thrusting challenges. "Back off, back off," he barked at them all, seeking the refuge of the night's anonymity. "Y'all don' wan' nothin' from me, I'y burn right through ya - don' tempt the devil 'less ya ready fo' hell!" Though his curse produced a few giggles from the women and some mutters from the men, they let him pass.

As he walked, the clean air, smelling like a plate of roasted beets, filled his senses and cleared his mind. Still warm in the sweltering night, a clarity arose within him, an energizing cleanliness. All was still and dark, yet he felt static crackling just beneath everything.

Things felt portentous.

A few minutes of wide-striding lopes through the moonless night put him at the crossing of a rough country road and a crude dirt track. Once the spot had been shaded by a large tree; he sat down on its stump, pushed his hat back on his head, wiped the sweat from his brow, and sat for a moment, absorbing the quiet through his skin. When the laughter and footsteps came up from behind him, they seemed to have arrived out of thin air.

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Jimi's hand ached, but it was way down over there, at the end of an arm that seemed impossibly long. His skin was hot; he lapped the sweat from his upper lip with a snake of a tongue. There were people; he knew some of them, had flashes of recognition of others. Chicks lay like cushions on the flowing paisley carpets and some dude had a joint and an eyedropper. He reached for the dropper with that aching hand but had difficulty navigating the distance back to his eyes, so a chick rose up and helped him get two drops per pupil. He mumbled a thanks that sounded like a cat trapped in a piano and managed to snag the j; three deep drags and the colors kicked in.

Details congealed: he'd been recording some tracks, after a show, not sure where - not Seattle, or New York, or London, or any of those cold damp city places - this was a hot damp place in the country, and it felt like it was getting hotter by the second. He discovered himself standing, his axe in his hand. His head rotated and he sensed the atmosphere in the studio closing in on him. "I gotta get some air," his voice said, and though the sound echoed in his ears no one seemed to have heard him. The door was before him; miles away, a hand he'd once owned turned a burnished, grinning knob.

Fresh air bathed his face. He realized it was almost as hot outside as it had been in the studio, but the blackness of the night was tranquil and soothing, and a whisper of a breeze eased his burning head. The strat in his hand hung almost to the ground; he observed dispassionately that a shorter man would be dragging it along the rough road down which he found himself ambling. He pulled off his bandanna and shook out his afro. Fresh air, real colors, the absence of sound, the billowing of his wide lapels and flared trousers and extravagant hair... He felt refreshed, but something more as well - a pregnant potential, as if he were at some kind of precipice, a diving board or the edge of a cliff, and everything around him was calling on him to jump into something new. A crack opened in the earth before him and he leapt it, both feet landing with twin puffs of dust at the crossing of two paths. He was looking at it and laughing when a voice came from outside his head to interrupt his reverie: "Who the hell are you, boy? And what the hell is that?"

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A wiry man sat on a stump, beads of sweat rolling down his dark skin and beams of power shooting from his fingertips and eyes. He wore a suit the way a fieldhand wears dungarees, and his broadbrimmed hat sat well back on his head, forming a black halo that made the whites of his eyes gleam all the more intensely. An expression of wry disbelief was on his face and a battleworn acoustic axe waited at the ready by his strong right hand. "Can you hear me, boy? Are you for real?"

Jimi smiled big and nodded. "I'm a voodoo chile," Jimi replied, "runnin' wild on a country mile. What's your story, man?"

Robert was relieved and smiled back; he'd honestly not been quite sure that this lanky devil in the crazy outfit was really for real. There was something about this guy that seemed unusual, even besides the bizarre hair and the strange clothes. Robert had been

mouthed off lately about doing some summoning - mostly to give the mamas a thrill and get a little sugar off'em. This guy, though, seemed summoned, and now that he was there, Robert wasn't sure what to do about it.

