

Farewell Letter to the Blues

by strannikov

Farewell Letter to the Blues

Memphis, Friday the 27th

Dear Mary Jane:

You heartless bitch. No doubt you've heard by now that I've blown town. You may even have heard rumors about my locating to another state, and I'll leave it to you to figure out whether I'm traveling north, west, south, or east, and by what means of transport, as I'm confident you will not exert yourself tracking me down as long as you can find other willing, witless prey close at hand and as long as I exercise the perfect good sense to steer entirely clear of your pesticidal embrace.

I think I hardly exaggerate the peril I'd begun to feel at being in direct, close, or even remote proximity to you, you fleabit hag, since simply relocating to an adjacent suburb did not deflect you from your deliberate defenestration of yours truly on 21st the last, namely this past Saturday, just prior to your attempting to shoot me (ineffectually, I am pleased to report) from the vantage point of my former second-floor porch with a firearm no more menacing than the derringer you stole from me. (I hasten to remind you that from a distance of over twenty feet even a .22 derringer can deliver a stray bullet, and in fact, two days later, I dug both slugs out of the insulation board siding downstairs—you missed me by inches, you one-eyed hussy!)

And, you peasy-headed shrew, don't you dare think I didn't notice that it was you who stuck that fork into my neck in the Piggly Wiggly

parking lot late Tuesday night (I saw your stupid watch dangling from your bony wrist from under your tattered gloves, you fart-brained floozy). While you had the decency to use (or I had the sheer luck to benefit from) a sterile fork, it still took Dr. Beam thirteen stitches to close the four gaping puncture wounds, and the doctor reports I lost a lot of blood: although you did miss my carotid artery, I cannot take much consolation from the fact that you succeeded in perforating my trachea, which means I won't be able to participate in this summer's Woodland Gobbler and Barnyard Hollering Contest down in Cruxfield (I hope you are enormously happy with your malicious malfeasance, you rattle-skulled coot).

I assume, too, that setting fire to my car late Wednesday night (after peeing all over the upholstery and the floor mats) was all your idea and that if you didn't perpetrate this misdeed yourself, you put one of your new specimens up to it, some pool hall hustler or construction site Tarzan under your nefarious influence. Are you not actually insane, you cold-hearted horror? I hope a lit stove falls squarely on your head, you sour-whiffed scarecrow!

In all the misfortune you have brought me these last tedious years, my only consolation is that my mother did not live long enough to witness the abject degradation you have heaped upon my poor bald head time after time. Whatever did I ever see in you, you peevish tobacco worm?

Sincerely yours,
Hardstool Hawkins

P. S. — that seventeen-year-old you found me with Saturday night was not Clarice Sims's niece, as I heard you'd told everybody at church last Sunday, hahaha: no, she's a second-cousin of mine, twice removed, from over near Vidalia. Even though you broke four of her ribs and two of her teeth tossing her down the stairs, I suggest you molest her no further unless you want to risk losing your other ear,

you gap-toothed frump: I gave her my .32 pistol the day before yesterday, and she's a better shot with one hand than you are with two, you gubber-tushed imbecile.

P.-P. S. — don't you dare forget, either, you poisonous wasp, you owe me \$14 still for that shaving mirror you broke over my head and for my new toothbrush you used to scrub out the toilet. Please remit at your earliest convenience to the return address appearing on the envelope, you scurfy scabby fiend!

Liner Notes Never Written

Frankly, "Hardstool" Hawkins was one of the least accomplished bluesmen ever to perform in front of paying audiences. Whenever he managed to get his guitar fully strung, the instrument's strings would not reliably be in tune. Whenever he managed to get even half his available strings in tune, he ordinarily would proceed to mangle his songs by playing only on the untuned strings at his disposal. He vomited into his guitar any number of times (preceding, during, and following performances, depending on when he started drinking) and managed to hit or fatally kick most of the instruments of his reluctant accompanists the few times anyone dared to join him on stage.

Had Hawkins not so vociferously, so stubbornly, so stridently insisted on accompanying his own singing, he doubtless would have won a place in the very front rank of bluesmen, and justly so: the range and resonance of his deep rich bass-baritone voice is the only thing that ever endeared him to anyone. It is perhaps testimony to the power of his voice that audiences and fellow musicians (and harried women) put up with his manifest nonsense for years on end: and had he only consented to put down his stinking ill-tuned guitar (even though he'd rinse it out with Lysol after his gigs, he never

came close to getting the accumulated stench out), his blues vocalizations would have garnered him the fame that justly eluded him during his admittedly and mercifully brief career.

Nevertheless, much of the time he comported himself with quiet dignity.

It comes as no surprise to learn that no recordings of a Hawkins performance were ever made: his lamentable playing style (a hardship inherent to his being entirely self-taught: Hawkins didn't even have a radio or records to listen to, all he ever did was catch snatches of tunes whizzing by from out the windows of interstate traffic spring, summer, and fall) would have driven any latter-day John Hammond to distraction, up the wall and down again, trying to get something, anything that didn't sound like playing barbed wire with marimba hammers. (Some have suggested that Hawkins' difficulties stemmed in part from deafness in one ear and synesthesia in the other.) But that voice: earthy, deep, well-modulated, a barometer of pain and misery that caught the ear of all who heard it.

Another problem of career management that Hawkins faced: he only ever plied the route along Interstate 20 between Monroe and Shreveport, with only infrequent or early exceptions. "He got off as far as Memphis one time I know of, way early b'fo' I knowed 'im," reports Joe Nathan Sims, Hawkins's next-door neighbor and only close friend, the resident of a similarly-styled shotgun house on a frontage road facing Interstate 20 between the mighty east-west corridor and Barksdale Air Force Base to the south. "He see dat road, he wanna git on dat road, but he hahdly git no further'n Monroe!" Sims slaps his thigh in amiable recollection. "He larnt t' sing stannin' 'long dat fence, tryin' to sing louder'n de traffic, all dem eighteen-wheelas, 'spesh'ly."

Addendum to the Career of Hardstool Hawkins

On the Monroe/Shreveport side of the Mississippi, there was no convenient Highway 61 with a crossroads on it where it was routinely safe to propose and conclude any deal with the Devil, so Hawkins walked out north of Dixie Inn one night along State Road 7 with guitar in hand, sizing up crossroads.

He walked long and far enough to begin to despair, hell, there weren't any crossroads intersecting State Road 7. Finally, just after ten, he came to a dirt road approaching the thin paved road from both sides that looked promising. This crossroad was sufficiently remote and overseen by a lone gas station. Late as it was, a light was still on inside. Three or four cars were parked on one side, along the front sat the rusty hulk of an old pick-up. An old black fellow in overalls and a frayed straw hat tipped on his head sat erect in an old ladderback chair, rocking gently on the chair's stubby hind legs. Good thing someone was here, Hawkins had cottonmouth, he needed a Pepsi.

"Gimme a bag of peanuts to go wif it," he added, dropping an extra two quarters on the countertop against which he leaned the scrawny neck of his smelly guitar. Hawkins dutifully poured the peanuts from their cellophane bag into the skinny neck of the Pepsi bottle.

"You play dat smelly thang?" the old man asked.

"Yeah, I play it, you thank I'd be totin' it on a walk out dis way if I didn't?"

"Well, who's you playin' fer outchere? You ain't playin' fer me, an' ain't nobody else outchere."

Hawkins thought about how to say what he had to say without saying it. "I'm puttin' on a show at midnight rounchere."

"Ain't no place rounchere open at midnight. Dis is Toosdy."

"Donchu worry 'bout who I plays fo' o' whem I plays, if I wond t' vitechu, I woulda." As an afterthought and for clarity's sake Hawkins added: "I'm playin' a private gig, some man want me to audition."

"Don't nobody rounchere hold no audition for no guitah player fum Shreveport. You bes' git on back down de road 'fo' you git los'."

Hawkins was in no mood to explain that he'd come all this way without an express invitation: he figured the Devil would just show up if he went to all the trouble of showing up at an available crossroad with his guitar at midnight.

"When you closin' up, ol' man?"

"I be righ'chere to one a. m."

"One a. m.? Go home crawl in bed, I'll stay here 'n' watch, ain't nobody gwine be fillin' up heah afta midnight."

The old man snorted. "You don't know nuffin'."

Eleven p. m.: a second dirt crossroad, too dark to be seen.

A quarter hour or more after midnight: a third dirt crossroad, not directly lit but at least a waning half-moon was lifting its face up over the adjacent fields and the line of pines planted dark on the horizon. Hawkins had just decided he was never again going to walk this far out of Shreveport this late at night, why couldn't the Devil conduct business in daylight hours at any cross-street in town, why'd he have to do it out in the middle of nowhere on almost a pitch black night with nobody around?

All of a sudden there he was. Hawkins knew instantly this was the real Devil. First thing, he had a real Derby hat tilted on his head, the short brim resting just above his left eye. He had on a three-piece pin-striped suit with six pearl buttons on the vest and a gold chain dangling out of the left vest pocket and black patent leather shoes. Too dark to see his socks.

The Devil was not equally impressed. "I don' want yo' soul, Hahdstool Hawkins, I don't want no paht of you. You can't do nuffin' fer me, you don' play whuf a shit, you too lazy to sing. Yo' soul ain't no good t' me, neiveh, I can't trade you fer nuffin' mean anythin' to me. You bes' git back to Shreveport."

"Look here, Debbil, dis my soul we talkin' 'bout! I ain't got nuffin' else t' trade, I ain't lettin' go dis guitah!"

Even though it was the smelliest guitar west of the Mississippi, a tug of war ensued. The Devil gripped the neck of the guitar deftly, but Hardstool snatched it away, one of the Devil's fingernails snagged and broke the smelly guitar's sixth string. "Go on now, Hahdstool, you go play wif what lef' o' yo soul 'n' what lef' o' yo guitah. And don' you fuhgit: when you git through playin', you's all mine anyway, I ain't wrasslin' wif no guitah player for nuffin'!"

Further Addendum to the Career of Hardstool Hawkins

The colorful folk legends that grew up around Hardstool Hawkins, in spite of his not having a career of any consequence, interpreted his name to suggest that he was obliged to perform seated upon un-upholstered barstools in the few venues that would allow him to perform. This much is true, as far as it goes: in fact, at one point in his non-illustrious career, Hawkins could be spotted hitchhiking with his stinking guitar slung under one arm and an all-wooden barstool parked atop one shoulder.

Nevertheless, the true source of his appellation was not reliably discerned until some months after his death, when a clean-up of the shotgun house he'd lived in outside of Shreveport revealed the dwelling to be littered and heavily strewn with empty bottles that originally held various camphorated tinctures of paregoric.

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