

Demystifying the Myth of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil at the Crossroads

Enter:

Isaiah "Ike" Zimmerman (April 27, 1907 – August 3, 1967) was an American Blues guitarist, who is now known to have been musician Robert Johnson's main guitar teacher.



Zimmerman (sometimes spelled Zinnerman) was born in Grady, Alabama. He married Ruth Sellers in the late 1920s, and lived with her and their children near Beauregard, Mississippi. He played guitar and harmonica in local juke joints, often practicing at night in local cemeteries where he would not disturb others. He became known for his guitar skills, and gave guitar lessons. Robert Johnson, who had been born in nearby Hazlehurst, came back to the area, probably around 1931, and sought out Zimmerman with the intention of improving his fingerpicking and bottleneck guitar skills.

According to one of Zimmerman's daughters, interviewed by blues researcher Bruce Conforth:

“Robert, he fitted in our family, and he had to be nice, because my daddy was a strong man and ...a good man, my daddy was, and so he wouldn't have taken up no time with someone who wasn't a good person. That's the reason that I believe that he [Ike] took Robert under his arm. And so he was just like a family member.... He came there and lived in our house. But he met my daddy in Itta Bena, Mississippi. That's where they first met... Up in Its juke joints and stuff.... Robert Johnson asked my daddy to teach him how to play guitar...and my daddy taught him. He lived there with my daddy. He stayed a long time (because) he was staying to learn how to play the guitar... It seemed like to me he just took him for his family 'cause... for a long time I thought he was related... And they was going at that guitar like some... I told my son "I can remember hearing that music". 'Cause it sounded just so good just like they was competing, he was teaching him then.”

Living with Zimmerman's family for about a year, Johnson became known by his initials, "R.L.". After practicing together while sitting on tombstones in Beauregard Cemetery – thought to be a contributory factor to the legend of Johnson "selling his soul to the Devil" in order to play well – the pair toured local lumber camps and juke joints before Johnson began performing on his own. When he returned to his home in Clarksdale, Johnson impressed locals with how much his performing skills had improved during his time away, and, in 1936 and 1937, recorded the songs that eventually secured his status as one of the most important and influential blues performers.^[1] Members of Zimmerman's family have claimed that some of Johnson's songs, including "Ramblin' on My Mind", were in fact written by Zimmerman before Johnson stayed with the household, and others including "Dust My Broom" and "Come On In My Kitchen" were written by Johnson and Zimmerman together.

Zimmerman himself never made any recordings, though he performed widely in Mississippi. He gave up playing blues music, probably in the 1950s, and became a Pentecostal minister. He

moved to California around 1960, and died in Compton, Los Angeles, from a heart attack in 1967, aged 60.

As told by the late blues great Eddie 'Son' House Jr., (who also claimed to have been Johnson's musical mentor) as a teenager Johnson seemed desperate to find a spot in the blues world: " He (Johnson) used to play harmonica when he was 'round fifteen, sixteen years old. He could blow harmonica pretty good. Everybody liked it. But he just got the idea that he wanted to play guitar... He used to sit down between me and Willie (Brown). See, Willie was my commenter, you know, he'd second all the time, he'd never lead, I'd do the lead. And we'd be sitting about this distance apart, and (Robert) would come and sit right on the floor with his legs up like that, between us. "So when we'd get to a rest period or something, we'd set the guitars up and go out – it would be hot in the summertime, so we'd go out and get in the cool and cool off some. While we're out, Robert, he'd get the guitar and go bamming with it, you know? Just keeping noise, and the people didn't like that. They'd come out and they'd tell us, 'Why don't you or Willie or one go in there and stop that boy? He's driving everybody nuts' ... I'd say, 'Just leave the guitars alone... (but) we couldn't break him from it, and his father would get at him, dogged him so much that he run away.

Herein lies the beginning of his mythic, almost supernatural reputation, for where Johnson went during his absence from the Delta was unknown to its community. His return, 18-24 months later, however, proved to be one of the most dramatic, and retold, moments in blues history. It was the ultimate fodder for the development of his Devil pact legend; the final piece of "evidence" that many within the southern African-American community would

take as proof positive of his evil deep, and of the nature of the blues as “the Devil’s music.” As Son House recalled this momentous event: “Me and Willie, we was playing out at a little place called Banks, Mississippi. I looked and I saw somebody squeezing in the front door, and I seed it was Robert. I said ‘Bill, Bill.’ He said, ‘Huh.’ I said, ‘Look who’s coming in the door, got a guitar on his back.’ He said, ‘Yeah, no kidding.’ He said, ‘Oh, that’s little Robert.’ I said, ‘Yeah, that’s him.’ I said, ‘Don’t say nothing.

And he wiggled his way through the crowd, until he got over to where we was. I said, ‘Boy, now where you going with that thing? To annoy somebody else to death again?’ He say, ‘I’ll tell you what, too. ‘He say, ‘This your rest time?’ I say, ‘Well, we can make it our rest time. What you want to do, annoy the folks?’ He say, ‘No, just let me – give me a try.’ So I said, ‘All right, and you better do something with it, too,’ and I winked my eye at Willie. So, he sat down there and finally got started. And man! He was so good! When he finished all our mouths were standing open. I said, ‘Well, ain’t that fast! He’s gone now!’

This amazing transformation of an individual who was known as, at best, a mediocre musician into one who could make people’s mouths drop open easily allowed Southern superstition to take possession of the Johnson legend, much as they accused the Devil of taking possession of Johnson’s soul

The tradition of making a pact at the crossroads in order to attain supernatural prowess is neither a creation of the Afro-American nor an invention of blues lore, but originated in Africa and is a ritual of Voodoo worship.

Once the belief made its way into the African-American community, however, the idea of selling one’s soul to the Devil became a common theme in folk narratives and music.

Fortunately, a recent chance encounter between the grandsons of both Johnson and Zimmerman made possible an interview with one of Zimmerman's daughters and grandson. This opportunity opened the door to a 70+ year old mystery and provides important new data about the life, and "missing" years of Robert Johnson. Equally, if not more important, is the fact that it finally provides the introduction of Ike Zimmerman to blues aficionados and music scholars alike.

Doing the research for this article has been a fascinating journey. Once the door is open, the flood begins. I tried to keep it short while maintaining key elements.

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