

Searching for Robert Johnson in the Soggy Mississippi Delta

The author's search for Robert Johnson in Greenwood, MS started shortly after snapping this shot of art depicting the legendary bluesman in Clarksdale. Photo by Gianna Volpe



By Gianna Volpe

It was dusk on January 23rd when the 2015 International Blues Challenge (IBC) semifinalists took on Memphis' Beale Street and rain began to fall deep in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, where a young couple headed south from Clarksdale in search of Robert Johnson's final resting place.

The act itself is a metaphor, a funny thing to try and find. The most influential bluesman is also the most mysterious. Folklore says he traded his soul for guitar prowess at the Crossroads before being poisoned when he was just 27 years old.

As Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art Store in Clarksdale, MS proprietor Roger Stolle would say – and did the

following morning at his shop where this reporter scored some excellent records like Tommy Johnson and Ishman Bracey's 1928 recording session and T-Model Ford's first album, *Peewee Get My Gun* – "looking for Robert Johnson's grave is rather like looking for Santa's workshop."

To better understand the mythological breadth of Robert Leroy Johnson's life and death, check out the screenplay *Love in Vain* along with whatever reading material Mr. Stolle recommends. You see, some consider the legendary Robert Johnson himself to be a metaphor; a proverbial blues unicorn I hunted with my friend, one guit-fiddlin' Robert "Johnson" Europe that stormy night in Greenwood, MS.



The gravesite of legendary bluesman Robert Leroy Johnson is in Greenwood, MS. Photo by Gianna Volpe



Roger Stolle at work at Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art Store in Clarksdale, MS. Photo by Gianna Volpe



*The Crossroads is where Robert Johnson made a pact with the devil, the story goes
Photo courtesy Roger Stolle*

Metaphor or not, this trip was an important one, the only thing that would stand the chance of getting the competition roaring up in Memphis off my good boy's mind.

It was Rob Europe's second time visiting Beale Street, and though it was his first time there to compete among the IBC quarterfinalists, it had come as a genuine surprise to us both that he hadn't made the semifinals cut.

Rob's order of business after not making the cut, was to try out the Gibson Factory's L-1. The L-1 is famously associated with Robert Johnson, though Rob had found the experience of playing it an oddly disappointing one. That's when I knew what needed to be done.

This was the exact stuff of which Rob's beloved blues was made, so when he asked if we should call the game on account of the rain, I assured him there would be no better time to look for Robert Johnson's grave than during a downpour amid the dead of night and winter all at once.

The legend himself had reminded me of that. I'd spotted Robert Johnson's graffitied portrait smiling at us from the door frame of Muddy Waters' birth house, which has been reconstructed within the new wing of Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum. He was out there, yards away in the rain, reminding me that the kind of satisfaction we sought would not be found within any four walls.

We came close to visiting two of Robert Johnson's three disputed grave sites that night, but when Rob announced our arrival to the first – a Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Morgan City, MS – I said, "No, No, NO. We're looking for Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Greenwood," where an alleged eyewitness placed his burial.

Robert Johnson was singing "I believe, I believe I'll go back home" through the stereo speakers of Rob's Sonata as we pulled up the muddied road leading to Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church 20 or so minutes later.

"I feel like I should probably just Google this," I said to my recording iPhone. I exited the vehicle and had begun shining a flashlight on each headstone I came across. "But part of me doesn't really want to," I narrated into the darkness. "Doesn't feel right."

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The Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art Store in Clarksdale, MS Image by Chuck Lamb

I'd insisted on hunting down Robert Johnson "the old fashioned way." True to form for a dead bluesman, we found Robert Johnson's best-known gravestone under a creepy tree toward the back of a boneyard in Greenwood, MS.

Though we said no words to Robert Johnson that night, Rob left a glass medicine bottle slide on the legend's headstone, then handed me a rose petal and instructed me

to take a piece of the cotton flower sticking out from a beer bottle vase.

I've since placed a chunk of the cotton tuft inside the body of one of Rob's guitars, gave the seed to his mother to propagate – which it has – and have taken to calling my good boy Robert "Johnson" Europe because, well, it just feels right.

I'd also taken an orange guitar pick from Mr. Johnson, something my Rob has convinced me he won't miss. Neither Roberts are known for using a pick when playin' the blues.

And as Mr. Stolle at Cat Head assured me back in Clarksdale the next morning – shortly before Rob and I stood on the same section of the Mississippi River levee Robert Johnson did more than a century ago – musicians share. 🎵

Gianna Volpe learned blues from her father, a Cajun keyboardist and karaoke enthusiast who first taught his little girl a blues ditty "bout a doggy walkin' down the street who didn't have enough to eat," before instructing her to parrot a blues ending to any song she heard. Volpe is an award-winning writer and photographer from New Jersey who now lives on Long Island's East End and can be found anywhere on the Web under the handle "AgentJaneFox." She is 27 years old.

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