

In "Old Hat to Raise the Devil," a young man aspiring to be a blues musician, but lacking the talent, hears that Robert Johnson learned to play guitar by selling his soul to the Devil. Using his old hat, he calls up Satan and asks for the same deal that Johnson got. But the Devil needs to be convinced, so the boy passionately recounts the time he saw Robert Johnson play.

A young Black man, more a boy of sixteen or so, walks a dusty road on a Southern summer night. He carries a beat up guitar case in one hand, kept closed by fraying twine. He wears a weathered fedora hat atop his head, its upturned rim downturned in several places. A jacket is draped over one arm, his white shirtsleeves rolled up and a tie hangs loosely around his neck. Sweat dampens his chest and underarms. A bleached bone moon stains the night cobalt blue with splashes of silver.

The boy reaches a crossroads and stops. He looks around in all directions. The night makes no noise, not even a rustle. He spies a large rock, just big enough to sit on. He tosses his jacket over it and sits. Placing the case at his feet, he pulls out a well-used guitar that's surely seen better days, and puts it over his knee. He looks around again. He holds his hat in his hand as he wipes his sweaty brow with a forearm. Then he tosses the hat into the middle of the road. It spins and floats briefly before landing squarely.

The young man begins to play the guitar, and none too well, either. He starts to sing The Lord's Prayer, only backwards, which couldn't sound any worse if he sung it properly.

Amen.
for ever and ever.
the power, and the glory,
For thine is the kingdom,
but deliver us from the evil one.
and lead us not into temptation,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and forgive us our trespasses,
Give us this day our daily bread,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Thy will be done
Thy kingdom come.
hallowed be thy name.
Our Father who art in heaven,

As he sings, smoke seeps from around the edge of the hat. The hat begins to rise slowly, a shadowy form beneath it. The boy's eyes are wide and fear shows on his face, but he doesn't stop singing. And then a well-dressed Black man stands before the boy, wisps of smoke trailing off his tailored suit, the ratty fedora replaced with a crisply stylish hat. He is not amused. He doesn't even let the young man finish the song.

"You can stop that wailing and gnashing of teeth now, son, before angels start dropping from the sky."

The boy stops, looking stupefied. "Sweet mercy. I thought the

Devil was a white man for sure."

The Devil grins, showing a gold front tooth stamped with a pentacle.

"Child, I am all colors and none. If you were a white man, then I would be a white Devil. Because I reside within you all. God may have made you in His likeness, but I am your reflection in the dark."

The Devil regards the boy. "Now. No one calls the Devil just to see what color he is. You wish something from me."

The boy seems to find his courage. "Yessir, I surely do! You heard my pickin' and singin' and said yourself it was an abomination to the ears. The women laugh at me and the fellas won't let me play with 'em. And I don't want none of that no more."

The Devil is amused. "And you think I can make the women fall at your feet and the men respect you?"

The boy is determined. "I saw Robert Johnson a few days back playing a juke joint in Three Forks."

The night falls away around the boy and the Devil. Moonlight is replaced by the amber haze of a juke joint's tobacco stained air. Smoke weaves through sweaty, undulating bodies of men and women that dance as if possessed by the twang of a guitar played by a man that picks his notes like a voodoo priest, summoning the loa of the Blues to ride the dancers.

The Devil and the boy watch, unseen by the patrons, the boy in awe, and the Devil with a wry smile. "I saw the way the women looked at him, their eyes full of sin. And the men, they all wanted to be him."

The pair walks up to a makeshift plank bar on wooden barrels. The boy addresses an older man that sits in a nearby chair nursing a nearly empty glass. "I asked one of the old fellas where Robert Johnson learnt to play like that. He told me to buy him some whisky and he'd tell."

A man behind the wooden plank refills the old man's glass.

"Well, I bought him some whisky with my last two bits and waited while he drank it all down, all the while Robert Johnson is playing so hard even the smoke is dancing in the air.

"The fella finishes his whisky, and then he just starts laughing, right in my face. So, I ask him what's so damn funny, and he says you sure you wanna know how Robert Johnson learnt to play like that? And I says back, Well, that's what I bought you the damn whisky for, ain't it?

"He leans in real close like, and I can smell that cheap whisky like turpentine on his breath, and he whispers in my ear..."

Both the boy and the old-timer stop for dramatic pause. The boy looks straight into the Devil's smiling face while the old-timer smiles at the boy. Satan seems to be enjoying the young man's enthusiasm for storytelling.

"Robert Johnson done sold his soul to the Devil, boy. Sold it to play the blues like no man can. So, if'n you're wanting to play like that, I suggest you go find Satan his own self and ask him to do for you what he done for Robert Johnson."

The juke joint is gone in a blink, as if it was never there. Which, of course, it wasn't.

The young man straightens himself. "And here I am."

The Devil studies the young man, almost sadly. "And here you are. And you want from me what I gave Robert Johnson. You do understand that such things always come at a price, yes?"

"Mama says if I want to play the Devil's music, well, then I'm damned, anyhow. Might as well make my soul count for something while I

can. An' I don't believe Jesus knows the blues."

"No. No, I don't believe he does. Leastways, not the way I know them." The Devil holds out his hand. "Give me your guitar, son."

The boy hands over his guitar. The Devil takes it in his long nailed hands and turns the tuning keys this way and that, plucking the strings. The strings tuned, the Devil plays a lick so devastating, the sky explodes with lightning, and thunder drives the boy to his knees, his hands over his ears. The wind howls, kicking up dust and leaves.

And then it's over, just like that, and the night is still again. The Devil holds out the guitar for the young man. "It's done."

The boy tentatively takes the guitar back, his eyes fixed on it.

"Oh, and child?" The young man looks at the Devil.

"You may want to head back to Three Forks."

"How's that?"

"To pay your respects. Robert Johnson died last night. Painfully."

The Devil removes his hat and tips it cordially, revealing two small onyx horns. "Be seeing you."

The boy watches as the hat, now back to its original sad condition, tumbles to the ground. He bends down to pick it up. The Devil is nowhere to be seen. The boy puts the hat back on. "Yeah. I suppose you will."

He adjusts the guitar, strums a couple perfect chords, and hums. Then he begins to play and sing as the night listens...

Well, with my old hat I raised the Dev-iil
He come to me that ni-ii-gghht
I offered up my sooo-uulll
To play the blues with all my mii-ight

Then the Devil, he smil-ed
Satan's mark upon golden too-oth
He said he'd be seeing me-eeee
And I knew it to be tru-uuth

Ohhh, my soul belongs to He-eell
And my heart can never be yours, ba-baay
Like the first angel that fe-eell
I'll never look upon Heaven's ga-aates...

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