The Devil's Tuning (Proof of Concept)

by
Matthew Hawk Eldridge

(Based on the life of Blues Legend, Robert Johnson)

Matthew Hawk Eldridge
matthewhawkeldridge@yahoo.com
770-364-3990

EXT. MISSISSIPPI WOODS - NIGHT

Robert Johnson's song, HELL HOUND ON MY TRAIL, plays.

ROBERT JOHNSON, 25, a tall, lanky, dark-skinned man wearing ripped, oversized overalls, darts through the bare trees, terrified for his life.

Tree limbs shaped like bony fingers appear to grab at him as he runs. He looks back and sobs as ferocious dogs BARK in the distance.

Robert trips over a root and tumbles down a hill. He stumbles to stand.

Dog BARKS turn to HOWLS, the sound closer than before.

INT. COLETTA'S ONE ROOM SHACK - NIGHT

Robert Johnson bursts through the door and slams it shut. He leans against the wall and breathes heavily.

His wife, COLETTA JOHNSON (22), a petite, beautiful black woman, who is nine months pregnant, rests on the bed. Tears stream down her face.

COLETTA JOHNSON
Ain't nothing out there, Robert.

With short, quick breaths, Robert nods.

ROBERT JOHNSON
You Ok?

COLETTA JOHNSON
I'm hungry.

ROBERT JOHNSON
You eat today?

She shakes her head, no.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
You eat yesterday?

COLETTA JOHNSON
You've gotta do something. I can't live like this. Ask Ike for work.

ROBERT JOHNSON
No one's hiring.

COLETTA JOHNSON
Try harder.

Robert opens the fridge and finds it empty.

COLETTA JOHNSON (CONT'D)
You promised me, Robert.

He opens the front door and walks out.

COLETTA JOHNSON (CONT'D)
Where are you going?

EXT. GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

Raindrops glisten on a carved tombstone.

INSERT - THE TOMBSTONE which reads: "Virginia Johnson and Baby Johnson,1913-1929"

ROBERT JOHNSON
I miss you, Virgie.

Robert leans against a dead tree within view of their grave, and plays his harmonica. A full bottle of whiskey rests beside him.

ACOUSTIC BLUES GUITAR REVERBERATES in the distance, the haunting tune carried by the wind.

Vicious dogs BARK from afar. Robert, with a slight buzz, stands and staggers as he walks.

EXT. CROSSROADS HIGHWAY 61 AND 40 - SUNRISE

Robert stares at the two road signs. He places the bottle of whiskey to his lips but the bottle is empty.

Inebriated, he squints and passes out on the edge of the dirt crossroads.

EXT. CROSSROADS HIGHWAY 61 AND 40 - SUNSET

Robert awakes to haunting BLUES GUITAR PICKING close by.

He peers across the street and sees a vintage shack that wasn't there before. A dark-skinned, suave, hat-wearing man, THE DEVIL MAN, plays slide blues guitar on the porch.

EXT. OLD WOODEN SHACK AT THE CROSSROADS - SUNSET

Robert approaches the steps of the porch. He watches as The Devil Man performs THE CROSSROADS BLUES.

ROBERT JOHNSON
It was you.

The Devil Man smiles as he plays. He nods to Robert who sits beside him.

THE DEVIL MAN
You hungry?

Robert nods.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT'D)
I bet you are.

INT. OLD WOODEN SHACK AT THE CROSSROADS - NIGHT

Robert Johnson and The Devil Man sit at the food-covered dining room table. Robert stuffs his face.

THE DEVIL MAN
You're gonna need some more of this. It'll take the pain away.

The Devil Man pours Robert a drink and he gulps it.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT'D)
Slow down. I got plenty of it.

ROBERT JOHNSON
What is it?

THE DEVIL MAN
Georgia Peach Moonshine. I made it myself. Be careful. It'll play tricks on you.

ROBERT JOHNSON
You the only one here?

The Devil Man nods.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
Why do you have so much food?

THE DEVIL MAN
Stick with me, I'll make sure you eat like this everyday. I'll fatten you up, skinny man.

ROBERT JOHNSON
You show me a thing or two on the guitar?

EXT. OLD WOODEN SHACK FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Robert Johnson and The Devil Man sit on the porch. The Devil Man holds his guitar, a Gibson L-1.

THE DEVIL MAN
Grab your guitar...

ROBERT JOHNSON
I didn't bring it.

The Devil Man nods to the corner of the porch. Robert's guitar magically props up against the wall.

Robert picks it up and inspects it closely.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
It's my guitar. How did you?

THE DEVIL MAN
I've got my ways. Play me something.

Robert plays the first few chords of *Amazing Grace*, his voice going from flat to sharply out of tune.

ROBERT JOHNSON
(singing)
Amazing Grace...

Robert's guitar flies out of his hand supernaturally and slides across the floor. The tuning pegs turn on their own. The notes bend. Smoke billows from the hole.

THE DEVIL MAN
That's nice...for a little child. Who you playing for? For you? Or for the little kids in daycare?

Robert slowly picks his guitar up from the ground and retunes it.

ROBERT JOHNSON
(afraid)
My friend Ike taught me some new sounding riffs.

THE DEVIL MAN
The guy from the graveyard.

ROBERT JOHNSON
How’d you know that?

THE DEVIL MAN
I know everybody.

Robert’s hands shake as he plays the riff.

The Devil Man plays slide guitar to the riff, with a new, unchartered sound for the 1930’s.

ROBERT JOHNSON
Teach me to play like that?

THE DEVIL MAN
It’s getting late.

The Devil Man puts the guitar down.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT’D)
I need to turn in. You should too.

ROBERT JOHNSON
Wait. You can’t just do that without showing me something.

THE DEVIL MAN
Tomorrow. Come on. I got a room for you.

INT. OLD WOODEN SHACK GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

BLUES GUITAR RHYTHMS fill the room as Robert tosses and turns in bed. He sits upright. His eyes pop wide-open, exasperated from a nightmare. Sweat saturates his body.

EXT. OLD WOODEN SHACK FRONT PORCH - MORNING

Robert Johnson sits beside The Devil Man.

Awkward SILENCE.

The Devil Man offers him a drink from a flask. Robert rejects it.

ROBERT JOHNSON
You were there, weren’t you?

The Devil Man drinks from the flask.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
(angry)
You took Virgie. You took my son. Didn't you? Didn't you?

The Devil Man stares at him with devious, crazed eyes.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
I'm going home.

Robert stands from his chair and reaches the steps.

The DEVIL MAN
If you're looking for love, you'll get it. Hell, you'll get more love than you ever dreamed of. You, my boy, will wake up in the arms of a different woman almost every week.

ROBERT JOHNSON
I got me a woman.

THE DEVIL MAN
(sinisterly laughing)
And you ain't got a dime to take care of her. Tell me... was it love when you Took advantage of a sweet, innocent, sixteen-year-old girl and got her pregnant?

ROBERT JOHNSON
I married her.

THE DEVIL MAN
She'd still be here if it wasn't for you. You did the same thing to the next one, too. Didn't you? You got them believing you're something special. But you're not.

Robert jumps up from the chair in anger, grabs The Devil Man's guitar and holds it like a baseball bat, ready to swing it at The Devil Man.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT'D)
(laughing mischievously)
You wanna hurt me. I feel it. Go ahead.

Robert's hands tremble. His eyes fill with tears. He slowly lowers the guitar.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT'D)
Feel that anger, Robert? Use it! Use it in your songs. Put it in your words. That's the song the world needs to hear.

ROBERT JOHNSON
(his voice quivering)
I know who you are.

THE DEVIL MAN
I'm here to help you.

ROBERT JOHNSON
I don't need your help.

THE DEVIL MAN
If you wanna go back to Tillie's and have them boo you off the stage again, then go ahead, leave. You'll be a nobody.

Robert saunters to the steps.

THE DEVIL MAN (CONT'D)
My offer's no longer good once you step off this porch. But if you want fame, if you want love, if you want to play this thing like you're the best damn guitar player on this side of the Mississippi, then stay. We'll start right now.

Robert stares in disbelief.

ROBERT JOHNSON
I wanna be the best guitar player in the world.

The Devil Man nods.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
I wanna be heard by a million people.

The Devil Man laughs mischievously.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT'D)
I wanna sell a million records.

A serious look overwhelms The Devil Man's face. His eyes fill with rage.

THE DEVIL MAN
I want your soul.

A STRONG WIND BLOWS through the house and porch. The curtains dance, dogs HOWL, the candle lights blow out.

INT. TILLIE’S JUKE JOINT - NIGHT

Dressed in a fancy, pin-striped suit, Robert Johnson performs ME AND THE DEVIL BLUES on stage with THE DEVIL MAN’S GUITAR.

A hundred people CHEER him on.

SUE ZIMMERMAN, 40’s, a short, heavyset woman wearing bedclothes and a nightcap, bursts through the door and screams in a panic.

SUE ZIMMERMAN
Robert! Help! It’s Coletta!

EXT. COLETTA'S ONE ROOM SHACK - NIGHT

Robert Johnson paces out front as SCREAMS come from inside. He BANGS on the door.

ROBERT JOHNSON
Come on! Let me in!

Robert breaks the door down with his shoulder.

INT. COLETTA’S ONE ROOM SHACK - CONTINUOUS

Coletta trembles in bed, covered in blood. The stillborn baby lies at her feet.

Robert stops at the blood-covered baby and gawks at her. He approaches Coletta and strokes her head as she takes her last breath.

EXT. LONG DIRT ROAD IN THE DELTA - NIGHT

Robert travels the road by foot, The Devil Man’s guitar in one hand, a whiskey bottle in the other.

Robert Johnson’s ME AND THE DEVIL BLUES plays in the background.

EXT. OLD WOODEN SHACK AT THE CROSSROADS - NIGHT

An angry Robert BEATS on the door with his fists. Dogs viciously BARK on the other side of it.

Robert retreats down the steps.

A beat.

Robert bolts back to the door and BANGS on it with the guitar case until the door breaks open.

The barking STOPS and no dogs are in the room.

INT. OLD WOODEN SHACK AT THE CROSSROADS - CONTINUOUS

Untouched dishes of food spread across the table. Two candles burn in the middle of it.

INSERT-- A note reads: “GO AHEAD AND EAT!”

Robert looks closer. The food is rancid, overcome with maggots, worms, and roaches.

ROBERT JOHNSON
Where are you?

Robert inspects the dark corners of the room.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT’D)
(yelling)
Where are you?

Robert opens the guitar case and pulls the guitar out.

ROBERT JOHNSON (CONT’D)
(yelling)
Deal’s off.

Robert slams The Devil Man’s guitar against the table, over and over in anger as it smashes to pieces.

EXT. OLD WOODEN SHACK AT THE CROSSROADS - CONTINUOUS

Robert runs out of the shack and down the steps.

The Devil Man sits on the porch smoking a cigar. The red glow of the cigar matches the red glow of his eyes.

THE DEVIL MAN
You think you can just call it off? It doesn’t work like that.

ROBERT JOHNSON
It’s over.

THE DEVIL MAN
I own you, Robert.

ROBERT JOHNSON
I’m done.

The Devil Man laughs sinisterly.

Robert runs away from the shack and down the street. The darkness of the night engulfs him until he is no longer visible.

THE DEVIL MAN
You're done when I say you're done.

Three vicious, beast-sized, demon-dog ghosts, THE HOUNDS OF HELL, BARK ferociously as they run out of the shack and down the steps in Robert's direction.

THE END