

## **No Sympathy For The Devil**

WAUDBY, Carolyn

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## CONFERENCE REPORT

## NO SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

CAROLYN WAUDBY immerses herself in the conference of the 2019 International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, held in Memphis last June, where the supernatural origins of Delta blues were laid bare.

Memphis, Tennessee. Reputedly mentioned in more songs than any other city, birthplace of rock 'n' roll, home of the blues, and the final destination of Dr Martin Luther King.

It's a fitting location for the 37<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research – a gathering of academics, storytellers, journalists and fans of the strange. Up the road, at Clarksdale, Robert Johnson was said to have made a pact with the Devil in return for outstanding guitar skills. The Mississippi Delta is awash with folklore.

Or rather, it's not a delta – more an alluvial flood plain. The name itself is the subject of legend, points out conference co-organiser, Gregory Hansen of Arkansas State University. "It's a mystery why it's called a delta."

A stone's throw from Beale Street<sup>1</sup> in the Centre for Southern Folklore, Hansen addresses the "scholarly trope of blues from the Delta", unpicking the myths that surround the region's musical heritage against a backdrop of American quilts.

Hansen begins with arguably the biggest legend of all, that of Mississippi blues guitarist Robert Johnson. Stories about Johnson circulated in the region's juke joints and it was in a juke joint where the charismatic musician's legend began. "He turns up and asks to play his guitar – and when he does, he isn't very good," recounts Hansen. The guitarist continues to pester people and they tell him not to come back. He disappears for a year or so and returns. When he does, Son House is there and Johnson

wants to play. House agrees – but when Johnson's fingers touch the guitar strings, heads turn. He has become a great player, and he's performing original tunes audiences haven't heard before. People ask, what's happened?

The story passed around is that Johnson went to the crossroads of the old Highways 61 and 49, near Clarksdale<sup>2</sup> and sold his soul to the Devil. But, as a result of dealing with 'he who cannot be named', Johnson was told he would die an agonising death at the age of 27.

Legends of men trading with the Devil in exchange for their souls stretch far back in time – such as the story of Faust. And they crop up frequently in music. For example, in 1979 The Charlie Daniels Band released a track entitled "The Devil Went Down To Georgia" in which a youth named Johnny engages in a fiddle-playing contest with Satan.

Canadian storyteller, musician and conference attendee Gail de Vos delves deeply into the multi-layered Robert Johnson narrative in her book *What Happens Next? Contemporary Urban Legends and Popular Culture*. She presented a paper on the story at a previous ISCLR conference.<sup>3</sup>

Hansen related how his own interest in blues narratives was sparked when he witnessed how teachers were using this and other legends in the classroom in Pennsylvania. "Teachers are engaging in the folklore process," he told the conference. But this led to him thinking about the whole trope of the 'Delta blues' and "some of the problems of thinking uncritically".

Hansen argued that Johnson's famous blues song "Cross Roads" is, in fact, not about a deal with the Devil but about "spiritual faith" in which

the guitarist falls to his knees to pray. The Devil legend is probably connected to an earlier Johnson, he continued – Tommy Johnson, a Delta blues musician born in 1896. "Robert Johnson is really a regular guy. This is about white jazz and blues writers looking for exoticism."

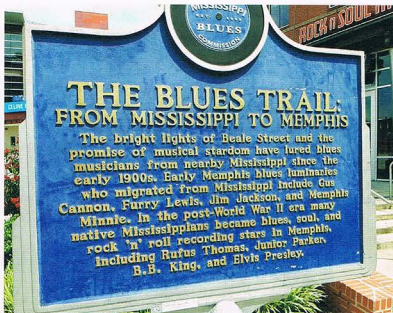
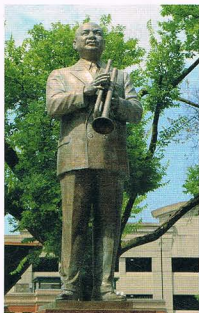
Hansen admitted that blues scholarship has changed even his own assumptions about blues in the Delta. Dispelling the idea that the blues found their origins exclusively among African American musicians in the Delta, Hansen listed other influences and sources, such as an account of a black musician in 1903 pressing a knife on the guitar in "Hawaiian style", producing the weirdest music ever heard. "This was probably more music hall."

Square dancing and reels (or "reals") with string instruments such as mandolins and guitars were other possible sources – music about "real life rather than spiritual life". Indian-style music played in Florida,<sup>4</sup> plus the music of black banjo and fiddle players also contributed.

Musician and music publisher WC Handy, honoured with a statue in the centre of Memphis, is reputed to have written the first blues song on Beale Street in 1909 and has been dubbed the 'Father of the Blues'. Here



ABOVE: Beale Street in Downtown Memphis, 'Home of the Blues' and confluence of various streams of musical folklore.



ABOVE LEFT: WC Handy looks out over Beale Street from his spot in Handy Park. ABOVE RIGHT: Sign for Memphis 'Blues Trail'.

Hansen took his academic argument deeper, pointing out that some of the lyrics of the so-called blues don't follow the usual composition pattern. River music, Vaudeville, minstrel shows and high-end shows more connected to the jazz scene also became linked to Memphis and the Mississippi.

Hansen claimed that the blues as a distinct genre doesn't show up until 1911 or so. The Delta then started to come in to the picture. Blues became a popular and accepted definition, characterised by 12 bars, call and response, a diatonic scale and flattened notes. But he warned scholars should be looking at a whole network of origins rather than merely Delta sources. "We're positing something with no documentation. We've over-generalised musical history."

"We've fallen into the trope of trying to find the home of the blues. Like the birthplace of Homer, we've got all these homes for the blues in Memphis and Arkansas. Whole traditions have been neglected, such as the piano."

Memphis trades heavily on its musical heritage. Tourists can visit the Sun Studio, where Elvis cut his first recordings, the Stax museum of American Soul Music and The Rock 'n' Soul Museum, to name just a few attractions. But even the blues

trails were "calling the history into question."

Hansen invited the conference to examine how mass media excludes some of the musical traditions of the blues. "There is observational bias. Folklorists have been complicit in this ... Pre-conceived notions and definitions are linked to the process of legend-making."

Among the blues legends, monsters of all shapes and characteristics made a prominent appearance, though none from the Delta. Gail de Vos illustrated how the Wendigo – an often 'misrepresented' and 'fearsome' Indigenous figure – had been culturally appropriated without regard to its roots or contextual background. The entertainment industry had latched onto the Wendigo, carelessly depicting it in comic books, cartoons, films, novels and television as a "stock villain" in the manner of vampires and werewolves, she argued.

Eleanor Hasken, of Indiana University, related how The Mothman of Point Pleasant, Virginia, had become sexualised and romanticised, including recently among the LGBTQ+ community. She reported that visitors turn their credit cards down the crack between the buttocks of a statue outside the town's

museum.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, David Puglia, editor of a new casebook of North American monster legends due out soon from Utah University Press, discussed monster stories in relation to the landscape and environment of the New World.

Supernatural art was an emerging theme with indie horror film *The Velvet Buzzsaw*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Rene Russo, the subject of a paper from Michelle Jones and Margot Crabtree of Utah State University. FT's Dr David Clarke demonstrated how UFO symbols have sparked visual rumour and legend, and Alan Brown from the University of West Alabama expounded on the legends behind indelible images in stone and glass.

Unusually, among the witches, fairies and hellhounds, there were stories from combat zones. Folklorist Richard Burns showed how Vietnam marine combat sniper Carlos Hathcock had been turned into a folk hero among fellow soldiers, while Jesse Fivecoat from Indiana justifiably won the student prize for sensitive research uncovering ghost narratives that emerged from the horrors of the Northern Ireland Troubles.

Some might think legends are just stories. But in times of war they can be used by decision makers and agencies

to manipulate the masses, sometimes with serious consequences – the focus of a paper by Henrik Olinde of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

Next year's conference will take place in the ancient Catalan port of Tarragona, Spain. Sign up now at: <http://www.contemporarylegend.org/>

#### NOTES

**1** Beale Street was developed in 1899 by Robert R Church Senior, Memphis's first African-American millionaire, as a centre for black culture. In 1903, a trumpet player from Clarksdale, Mississippi, named WC Handy, was invited to teach music and Memphis became the home of the musician who created the "Blues on Beale Street". The street became a celebrated home of the blues. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Louis Armstrong, Muddy Waters and Albert King were among blues and jazz legends who played there. As a young man, BB King was billed as "the Beale Street Blues Boy" and a club he owned on the street still hosts live blues music today.

**2** The location of the crossroads is disputed and, in fact, is believed to be Rosedale, Mississippi. However, a sign comprising a sculpture of three electric guitars stands at Clarksdale. <https://ofpotts.com/robert-johnson-sold-his-soul-to-the-devil-in-rosedale-mississippi/>

**3** Gail De Vos, *A Meeting with the Devil at the Crossroads: A Contemporary Legend?*, Third Series 1, 2011, p. 119-159.

**4** According to Hansen, the context for Indian style refers to the phrase "The Blues in Indian Style". This was a song performed by Estelle Harris by 1911. It's one of the first documented examples of the term 'blues' being used to identify a musical genre. There are credits of her performing the song in Memphis at The Savoy. But researchers have found advertising and promotional items that could go back earlier, including shows in Florida. The 'Indian style' would refer to Native-Americans in the USA and is thought to refer to a way of performing the music.

**5** The Mothman statue is modelled on an illustration by artist Frank Franzetta on the dust jacket of the second edition of John Keel's book *The Mothman Prophecies*, originally published in 1975.