

# LAST FAIR DEAL

## THE CROSSROADS

# GONE DOWN

By ZACHARY RICHARD

“STANDIN’ AT THE CROSS ROAD, I TRIED TO FLAG A RIDE.” Robert Johnson’s lyrics have entered the realm of American cultural mythology. It was at a crossroads down from Dockery’s Plantation in the Yazoo River Delta, the land where the blues was born, that the bluesman allegedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for mastery of the guitar. 🎸 The guitar was not only the instrument of his craft; more importantly, it was the instrument of his magic. Johnson used the guitar to make his living,

## WHERE SECULAR BECOMES SACRED

to express his life and to charm the women who would shimmy and shake to his pounding riffs. His power over women was his glory and his undoing. Even the devil couldn’t save him from the poison a jealous husband put in his whiskey. Or maybe it was the devil himself that poisoned the handsome young singer, anxious to get his hands on the King of the Delta Blues.



It's no accident that Johnson's alleged deal took place at the crossroads, an image that can be traced back through the African heart of American music.

In the syncretic world of the Afro-Cuban religions known as *Palo*, for instance, the *palero* uses his *firma*, or signature, to call on the spirits. The simplest such signature is a cross with the junction of the two beams in the center. Called *Lucero Mundo* (Light of the World) this symbol will be traced in yellow chalk on the floor preceding a ceremony. This manifestation of Congo traditions is distinct and typically antagonistic to the Yoruba traditions that inspire *Sant'eria*, but those who practice both are said to possess *La Santa Cruz*, The Holy Cross.

In such animistic practice, the cross is the symbol of the synthesis of the material and the spiritual. The priest is present at the junction between the two, standing at the crossroads. The nature of his or her power allows the priest to pass between the everyday world and the world of the

*orishas*, as is the case in Haitian *Vaudou* and Brazilian *Condomblé*. And common to all of these practices is the use of the drum, the playing of sacred rhythm

to induce the spirits to visit the practitioners, to mount them as a rider mounts a horse.

The notion of a junction, a crossroads, a door between the profane and the sacred is common to all religions, and, more often than not, music is part of the ceremony. Music is prevalent in all African and African-derived religious practice including the African-American Pentecostal Church where the frenzied dancing of the believers is the doorway to spirit possession. Sacred dancing is present in other traditions as well. Witness the whirling dervish of Muslim Turkey swirling in circles to get closer to God. But even where music and dance are not present, the crossroads is.

In the Soto Zen tradition of Dogen, each moment is the universe. Each moment surges up from the void. In order to fully



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realize one's creative nature, one need be completely present in each moment, free from attachment, pure of heart. Being absolutely present in the moment is key to the notion of *satori* or sudden enlightenment. The key is the integration of the physical and the spiritual.

In the Catholic tradition, the ultimate moment is the consecration of the host, when bread and wine are converted into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In that moment, the spirit comes into the flesh and the communion between the faithful and God is realized.

I was raised in that tradition. It was in Lafayette's Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in 1958 that I first encountered music and song. I was 8 years old when Bishop Maurice Schexnayder decided he needed a boys' choir to accompany the High Mass. I joined the choir and remained until my voice finally changed. Gregorian chant and simple three-part liturgical harmony were what I was taught, but what I really learned was the joy of singing. Our voices echoing against the marble of the nave, my young friends and I spent an hour a day five days a week practicing our harmony. Although we toured frequently on the academic rally circuit, scoring first prize pretty much wherever we sang, our big gig was the 11 a.m. Sunday High Mass. I'm not sure how this affected my perception of music, but I do remember that I felt very good in my white monk's robe with the green rope belt looking down on the mass from the heights of the choir loft, the huge pipe organ

rumbling just a few feet away, singing my heart out.

Since those days I have strayed from Catholicism. Maybe I had an overdose. At 14 I decided that I had a vocation and entered the seminary. It took me only two weeks to discover that the priesthood was not for me and my spiritual quest has since taken me down a different path. I have practiced Buddhist meditation ever since one sunny afternoon on the Tulane University quadrangle when Allen Ginsberg taught me a mantra. I have been meditating for 40 years, but cannot say with any certainty that I am any closer to enlightenment. I can say, however, that the closest I have ever come to spiritual liberation is when I sing.

My relationship to music is absolutely spiritual. There is something profoundly liberating in making music. Nothing in my life has been able to bring solace nor express joy as has singing.

In the practice of Buddhist meditation, one attempts to integrate the physical with the spiritual. By concentrating on breathing, the absolutely fundamental act of human existence, one attempts to encounter the Big Mind, the Mind before ego, the Universal Mind. Try as I might, however, I can't say that I've ever gotten close. Let me sing, however, and I will abandon any notion of self. The act of singing is, as with dancing, the perfect expression of physical-spiritual synthesis. Whether it's the result of the pressure of the diaphragm pushing air through the

vocal chords, or of the perception of the sound of my own voice heard inside my own head, I cannot say. I can say, however, that when I sing I am transported into another realm.

Chimpanzees will drum on trees to communicate with each other during foraging. It's not far-fetched to imagine our human ancestors doing the same thing. Drumming, i.e. rhythm, i.e. music has accompanied our evolution and perhaps even predates speech. Music was certainly present in the caves at Lascaux. Those who decorated the stone walls with beautiful images most certainly beat out rhythms to accompany their ceremonies. And if music is not in our genes, it is at least in our hearts. The most frequently used tempo in disco, rock and just about every other form of music is 120 beats per minute, the rhythm of the excited human heart, not a 150 bpm panic attack, but the rhythm of the slow jog, the rhythm of the dance, the rhythm of making love.

Music has the power to entertain, which would be quite enough. But it also has the power to heal.

In Morocco, when one falls sick the family calls in Mauritanian musicians who will play night and day until the patient is cured. Maybe we should think about hiring bands to play in hospitals, and keep music directors on call.



## THE ACT OF SINGING IS, AS WITH DANCING, THE PERFECT EXPRESSION OF PHYSICAL-SPIRITUAL SYNTHESIS.

In any event, music will accompany the human journey. We will gather as a tribe to dance and sing and to express a basic human need. We will collect and celebrate collectively. We will dance in hundreds or even thousands of styles. We might not even understand why we need music, why we need to be transported into the whirlpool of the dance, but once we get there our daily cares fade away leaving in their stead a feeling of freedom.

The bottom line is that music makes us feel good.

Each time we listen, each time

we dance, each time we play or sing, whether we are aware or not, we are standing at the crossroads, communing with the universe.

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*For more on Zachary Richard, please see page 15.*

# À la croisée des esprits

SELON HARRAP'S FRENCH / ENGLISH DICTIONNARY, « CROSSROADS » signifie « chemin de traverse, carrefour, croisée de chemins ». Donc « standing at the crossroads » se traduirait par « à la croisée des chemins ». Cependant il y a une couche de compréhension qui manque en français et ceci est dû à la mythologie du Blues qui est un phénomène essentiellement anglophone.

La notion mystique de « crossroads » fait partie de la culture anglo-américaine grâce à l'influence africaine exprimée dans la chanson de Robert Johnson. Se trouver à la croisée des chemins ne représente pas simplement un choix d'aller à gauche ou à droite, mais la possibilité de passer du monde physique au monde spirituel. Pour trouver l'équivalent dans l'expérience francophone, il faut explorer la culture afro-créole. Dans le vaudou haïtien, on parle de se faire monter, tel un cheval, par un loa, par un esprit. La métaphore du cheval exprime la possibilité de pénétrer dans le monde spirituel d'une autre façon, mais s'attache au même phénomène que celui de « crossroads ».

Sans le contexte culturel, il est difficile de traduire l'ampleur du symbole du croisement des chemins. On serait bien conseillé de remplacer « standing at the crossroads » non pas par « je suis au croisement des chemins », mais par « je me suis fait monter par l'esprit ». Il y a des concepts qui se traduisent mal et ceci en est un.

Dans l'expérience afro-américaine aux États-Unis, les traditions religieuses ont été submergées par la culture dominante des blancs. En peu de temps, les esclaves avaient apprivoisé le protestantisme. Toute leur ferveur religieuse s'est transformée voire déguisée en une apparence chrétienne, ce qui a donné les chants gospels, la danse aux claquettes (tap dancing) ... et la notion du « crossroads ». On n'a qu'à observer les rites des Pentacostals pour comprendre. Les esclaves en territoire français ont eux aussi adopté les moeurs de leurs maîtres, mais la fosse entre les pratiques des esclaves et de leurs maîtres est restée plus grande. En Haïti comme en Louisiane, les pratiques spirituelles africaines se faisaient loin du regard des blancs.

Chacune des communautés africaines transplantée en Amérique, à Cuba, en Haïti, en Martinique, en Guadeloupe ou aux États-Unis a traité avec la culture dominante à sa façon. Les maîtres les plus tolérants étaient les Espagnols. Grâce à des pratiques plus souples, ils ont permis l'utilisation publique des tambours, ce qui a donné la musique cubaine ainsi que la musique de la Nouvelle-Orléans. Chez les Français et encore plus chez les Anglais, les traditions africaines devaient prendre un chemin plus secret pour se maintenir. Néanmoins, peu importe où les Africains se trouvaient en Amérique, ils ont réussi à préserver les vestiges de leurs pratiques en les transformant, en les créolisant, donnant ainsi les métissages qui font la richesse de la culture américaine.