

Searching for the **Blues**

The whole truth about
Robert Johnson
and the **Crossroads** myth

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*A mystical story that deeply explores the question
of what exactly might be behind the legendary
„mojo“ of the great Blues masters ...*

1. The search

Diving deeper

They say it's a mouthpiece for those who hang out in pubs, sing about whiskey and women, handle all kinds of drugs and sometimes use knives or guns in fights. They say the blues is a pool for the troubled, for restless spirits drenched in the constant rain of diabolical powers. For lost souls. That's how it used to be. Especially in the old days.

„You bet they were lost ...!“ ponders Fred to himself with a worried expression. Fred Loosli thinks a lot and with passion about clichés. About platitudes discussed in the commonplace. „Gospel is God's music - the blues, on the other hand, is the devil's voice!“ is one of the phrases that keeps him busy. Or the commonly heard story about slave songs being the origin of the blues. „You'd have to put yourself in it ...“ - he muses. Without a desire to travel back in time and perhaps even to awkward places, it would be difficult to understand the blues. But Loosli has to understand it, now on this all-important step!

He knows tons of chords, scales and all the names of famous blues musicians. That alone would soon not be enough for him. „It's the moment to get right to the heart of things!“ Fred is ready to travel. Even if such a film is irritating, he says, you have to dive deeper, at least for a few moments ...

At the last moment, quiet doubt: „Maybe better a cold beer and a good blues record to relax?“ No. There's no turning back. The beer comes later. Loosli wants to know more.

What really happened back then - during that miserable deportation of the Africans ...?

At a loss

You bet they were in a lost cause ...! Their compulsory intercontinental journey - it definitely did not promise any good. At that time, 500 years ago. It was the beginning of one of the biggest misappropriations of peoples of all times, and that a narrator at this point can only think of lapidary formulations like „intercontinental journey“ or „it definitely did not promise any good“, is basically scandalous, unimaginative! But to occupy oneself in detail with the coloring of inner pictures about agonizing torment, which exceeds the measure of the own ability to suffer by a thousandfold, is nothing for weak minds. Perhaps it is also tasteless. Disrespectful.

The transatlantic slave trade, operated first by powerful European monarchies and later by the settlers of the New World, resembles an unimaginably gigantic, man-hungry white beast that claimed about as many victims as the entire 2nd World War. More than 40 million black Africans were systematically deported during almost 400 years. Only one in four survived the brutal capture at home, the ordeals of being dragged from the interior of Africa to the coast, and finally the ghastly strains of the crossing. „Strains“ - what a word ...?! If we imagine that this designation hardly to be surpassed in ghastly simplicity also only one of these at that time undignified perished comes to ears, also only one of these since then as desperate spirit beings on the highway of the infinity racing around - then at this moment probably a maximum of divine care will be necessary, in order to protect itself from the hatefully rumbling lightning and thunderclap from the beyond. What the white beast did is irreparable.

The abducted and sold people were literally stacked like cargo on the ships during the crossing, in the most confined space. Chained, beaten, the tormented huddled in their excrement and vegetated, tormented by hunger, thirst and seasickness. Those who became too ill were thrown overboard out of fear of contagion. The goods had to be delivered to the importers in working order; an excessively damaged slave would not have generated a cent on the market. If the slaves survived the crossing, the horror trip really be-

gan: they were „refreshed“ by the ship’s doctor, provided with food rich in vitamins, freed from hair and beard, rubbed with palm oil. In the jargon of the time, this was called „bleaching“; wounds and physical blemishes were painted over without further ado. Then the goods went on to the sales table to be hawked to the highest bidder in immaculately shining condition.

Nobody knows how it feels. Presumably, you simply don’t feel anything anymore, you leave your body and your soul, you capitulate before the overwhelming power of this terror called „pain“. If we had to experience such degradation today, even for one hour, the lifelong overcoming of trauma would cost us a fortune. Imagine the unsuccessful pack of therapists, ashamedly cowering in the corner of reasoning distress, waffling about „working up karma“ or „lessons not learned.“ At least the slaves of the time have been spared of that; they knew there was no justice. There was no help for them, no human dignity. Just endless pain.

A large part of them were taken to the islands of the Caribbean or to Brazil, the rest ended up in the USA. After arrival, the journey into the

darkness of torment continued; they slaved to exhaustion in sugar cane and rice fields, tobacco and cotton plantations, or in the master’s



house. One was marked with a branding iron, whipped, tied up, malnourished, often mutilated, and only rarely - for instance, when the master could no longer stand the tinnitus of his guilty conscience - treated with some degree of „fairness“. Those privileged in this way were then probably lively enough to dance exuberantly to cheerful banjo and percussion sounds - like in this idyll painted by an unknown hand around 1780.

For all the others, there was just enough strength to motivate them-

selves with collective, rhythmic wailing chants on the field. The legendary „Fieldhollers“, in other words. Yeah, those bloodcurdling chants that accompanied the toil in the cotton fields! That was the origin of the blues - wasn't it ...?

Here began - so we are taught - the miraculous triumph of that cultural diamond blank we call „blues“. It is almost as if this thesis wants to excuse what has happened, with a subtle „so it wasn't for nothing after all, that dark time of deprived dignity“ explanation. In any case, the humiliated managed in a most impressive way probably the greatest challenge of human existence: they transformed pain, despair and grief into an immensely powerful, emotionally charged energy.

„As a white person, to enjoy this music with awe and admiration is in the end even the only possible form of redemption!“ - speculates Fred Loosli.

The sound and its pedigree

Of course, the transformation happened back then in the innocent purity of unnamed instinct. The idea that centuries later generations of blubbering palefaces would consume this music, beer glass in hand, as a painkiller and pick-me-up, would probably have elicited a rather uncomprehending smile from the fieldhollers of those days. Loosli believes he can feel the grimace of that smile frozen in the permafrost of collective memory on the back of his neck whenever he hears today's genre connoisseurs affirm that the blues is not sad at all in reality. „Why does hardly anyone have the courage to trace the pedigree of a sound?“ - wonders Fred.

Music as the voice of a restless spirit of past times? To grant a sound such a pedigree would be dangerous. It would trust him, the sound, the ability to transport the cry of a people tormented long ago. To let yourself be touched by this cry would mean to identify with it, perhaps even to feel a little responsible for its history. And

on the other hand, it would tempt us to follow this voice in the here and now, perhaps discovering our own archetypal feelings of despair and grief in hidden corners of the soul.

„Stop! That’s enough ...; I have to come up again!“ - Fred tries to swim free from his mental time travel. „I’ve got my own problems. Music is supposed to build me up, not to load me down with other people’s misery!“ Surfacing to catch his breath again; in the real world, where the planes of „time“ and „space“ rule. The past is history. Each generation writes its own history, with a beginning and an end. When the word „blues“ was first hurled into the linguistic orbit around 1910, the slave trade had already been passé for decades. None of the black blues musicians of the first hour had to toil chained in cotton fields. They did not know this feeling of their ancestors. Not really.

Today’s bluesmen know it even less. The slave trade has been history for over 140 years. „The nasty word has at least disappeared; the methods have become more refined!“ - Loosli murmurs. There is still a hungry and mostly black child dying every five seconds, there are still billions of people toiling daily under inhumane conditions, the wage and wealth gap is widening worldwide, daily and inexorably. „But no one can point the finger at evil slaveholders anymore.“ They have become invisible, submerged in the labyrinth of the liberal market. The whips have been replaced, too, by more sophisticated tools like the money interest system ...

But these are all things that don’t directly affect the blues. „I have to concentrate!“ - Loosli gives himself to consider. The road is still long.

The fairy tale of the blue devil

Back from his trip through time, resurfaced and again supplied with fresh air from the here and now, there are still more than enough unanswered questions on the subject of the blues to keep

Fred going: „Why did the blues heroes of the first hour sell their souls to the devil, as is always rumored?“ - he asks in wonderment. „They had their chance, back then, almost 100 years ago. They could have thanked fate for no longer having to live in the slave misery of their parents; they could have chosen a good middle-class and God-fearing life ...“

But then they wouldn't have become blues entertainers who hang out in pubs, sing about whiskey and women, handle all kinds of drugs, and sometimes use knives or guns in fights. Then they would not have ended up in jail, as some of them did. The blues and all its trappings, it all simply has to smell of dirt and sin, otherwise it wouldn't be authentic. And who but the devil can have a hand in dirt and sin?

„Nonsense; all just silly clichés!“ - Loosli murmurs, slightly annoyed. They've been around for 100 years now, these countless devil and juke joint stories. It's child's play to disprove them all, by enlightened blues connoisseurs who diligently help us to remove the dirt residue of misconceptions:

Those were pretty rough times back then. Raw morals prevailed in an era when there were hardly any problem-dissolving justices of the peace, psychotherapists, self-help groups or fluffy soft-feeeling social safety nets. Those were pure struggles for survival. If the Devil was sung about in a song now and then, it was simply because such songs were well-loved by the public at the time; and because blues musicians - the pop artists of the day - simply could not afford not to pay attention to this Devil trend. Otherwise, modern historians and scientists basically agree: it's all just fairy tales - the devil doesn't exist.

Loosli is reassured. Even if, as is so often the case, a recently picked up hypothesis does not seem to grant him hope for final peace: „The devil succeeds in the most intelligent of all moves when he makes us believe that he does not exist. What if there is a tiny trace of truth hidden in every cliché after all? What if the devil somehow had a hand in the Blues? And if he is now even doubly happy because modern man denies him ...? „I don't want to take responsibility for that!“ - Loosli exclaims, before he lets the not de-

finitely clarified question rest in the drawer of his curiosity.

In any case, to this day he lacks a plausible explanation for the fact that a distinction has always been made between blues and gospel. Musically, Fred has never really understood this difference. „Why can't the blues also be sacred?“ - he has asked himself for many years.

And something else is going through his mind right now: „The cool beer ... - why not now? Why all that brooding?“

Searching for a sign

Is it good or bad, the blues ...? „It doesn't matter! Bullshit, this petty question!“ - Loosli murmurs to himself, annoyed. He doesn't feel like thinking in black and white. Not now! He has other problems. Fred Loosli, a little over 50, a lean and rather pale man from the northwest of the USA, is once again out and about in the forest. In search. He has loved the forest since childhood. And searching, the tireless philosophical questioning, has almost become a passionate addiction in his life.

The climate and greedy bark beetles of recent decades are beginning to have an effect. Here in Loosli's homeland, the conservative American state of Idaho, the conifers had once been denser. But they are still an oasis for Fred. All sorts of creeping, flying, flowering and smelling creatures cavort in this wonderful universe called „forest.“ And if you believe all the millennia-old nature spirit stories just a little bit, there are certainly a lot of invisible beings hiding here in the woods. Loosli never found this belief particularly difficult. His soul seems somehow made to be touched by the essence of Celtic mythology. His grandparents came from over there, from the old continent. He himself never made it to Europe. Ireland, Scotland or French Brittany must be paradise. But even without traveling there, something in Loosli's inner world starts to vibrate - when he hears this wonderful music, drenched in spiri-

tuality, poetry and romance. It feels somehow vulnerable, and yet comfortingly beautiful. Almost like the blues. It is the blues of the white man, Van Morrison once said. With a touch less dirt and edges, Loosli thinks. But the Celts were not wimps. They were rather complex and highly contradictory beings, marked by the balancing act between feminine dreamy sensitivity and masculine aggressive pugnacity. A perfect home, then, for Fred and his constantly struggling twin soul.

During his occasional walks in the forest, he often feels like a bard looking for a piece of relaxation here in the realm of nature spirits. For a few years now, Loosli has adopted a certain ritual of humility - and when entering the forest, he always knocks politely on the door of the assembled elf and fairy community: „Hello! Sorry for my unasked-for visit. And thank you for your refreshing presence!“ Though he usually feels slightly embarrassed and hopes the forest ranger isn't lurking behind a tree somewhere, exposing him as an unworldly weirdo. Somehow Loosli also feels caught by the lord himself. Well knowing that idolatry and thus also Celtic belief in spirits are frowned upon in the Christian religion. But in the end, after all these years, he is used to these endless games in his ambivalent world of thought. There was always some concordant way to persuade his numerous inner disputants to smoke a peace pipe.

In the present trial of the Celtic idolatry, for example, he succeeds in a rather convincing defense speech by assuring the master: „No worry, Jesus, against you these creatures have no chance! Be sure, I will never ask them for help. But I may greet the assembled spirits here nevertheless friendly - or do you want to deny that the Celts were already there, still long before you were chosen as the Messiah ...?“ As Loosli estimates the master, he can be persuaded by well-considered and skillfully formulated arguments quite to a compromise - if it is honestly meant. Life in the universe is full of compromises, how else could it have developed? Or then, please, the divine power would have to destroy a land spot like „Switzerland“ with one blow ...!

Fred admires Switzerland. His parents often told him about that little paradise - and even gave him one of those magnificent po-

cket knives, with all the useful blades. Even today, his beloved „red Swiss Officer knife“ is always with him when he leaves the house. No doubt, divine power would have long since trampled this wonderful mini-country on the old continent into the ground, if concordance were a sin. When it comes to democracy, the oddball inhabitants of this island of prosperity have made it to the top of the world. „They’re simply the best!“

And in yet another discipline, this idyllic corner of the world has produced world class. In American folk music, that is. Loosli loves not only the blues, but also these earthy sounds of the whites from the southern Appalachians. Doc Watson (1923 - 2012) was one of his heroes, and that’s why his heart was touched sooner or later by a pair of Swiss brothers, the Krüger Brothers. Uwe and Jens Krüger, together with their bass player Joel Landsberg; they have been the talk of the town for some time. The boys are incredibly virtuosic and embody the American sounds with a genuineness that Loosli can’t explain. How is it possible to learn and develop this music so deeply on the old continent over there? It must be because of this strange land spot; the Krügers must have discovered some mysterious magic there early on that revealed to them the key to these sounds. Yes, this Switzerland is certainly a magic land! Even if the great guys are now at home in North Carolina and no longer with their old friends, the Concordance Champions - the Krügers and this red knife, they are the perfect Swiss Ambassadors for Loosli.

No, compromise can’t be a bad thing. A Lord who says yes to Switzerland would most likely also accept Fred’s defense speech.

Now I have digressed. My name is Richard Koechli. But that is of little importance, because I am only the narrator here. Actually, I wanted to report about how Fred Loosli, tired and rather perplexed, makes his way along the mule track. How he, surrounded by all kinds of groves and what could be hiding in them, irritated by the „Is the blues sacred or of the devil?“ Question, is once again on the search. But what he is looking for would hardly reveal itself here of all places. And certainly not now or on command. What Loosli is looking for is a sign. Signs rarely come when you call out

for them. Signs are as shy as deer. He knows it. Nevertheless, Loosli marches on, hoping to find at least some peace and quiet - here in the beautifully situated woods on the eastern edge of the small town of Coeur d'Alene, not far from the Canadian border. Peace, and beyond that, with a lot of luck, perhaps even more. The great exception namely, the Joker: a sign ...

So what happened? And what does all this have to do with blues ...?

Whether he is holy or of the devil, the blues; what a question? „Of course he is holy!“ - Loosli exclaims. And of course the word „holy“ has lost all its power in our everyday language. But this process cannot be stopped, we hear linguists appease. A language has to evolve, to be changeable. Certain words are given new meanings, while others disappear completely.

The word „holy,“ at least, still seems to exist. But its sound now unmistakably resonates with a certain lack of juice and strength. The once majestic word is degenerating into an unspectacular expression of a beloved pastime. For some, soccer is sacred; for others, the Sunday evening thriller, their own car or the daily Facebook visit. But Loosli would not want his „holy“ to be pigeonholed as „ordinary“ quite so easily. No, not without resistance! When he, Fred Loosli, speaks of holy, he implies a certain wholeness, a transcendence - basically nothing less than a latent connection to the world beyond.

„Connection to the world beyond“ – wow, what a word ...! Sounds as if this man's grip on the ground is in danger. How can such a thing happen, when he is walking on well-fed green forest soil? Were there any hallucinogenic mushrooms lying by the way-side that Loosli couldn't resist? Or wouldn't a cold beer have been a better idea after all?

Seriously now, appearances are deceiving; religion is not an issue here. May God prevent us from talking about God. Even Saint Gregory and Meister Eckhart agreed: „We cannot actually speak of God; what we speak of him we must stammer.“ When writing, one cannot stammer, so this book here is not about God. Neither

is it about anything occult, esoteric. If Saint Gregory and Meister Eckhart would live in today's time, their statement would have a rather different wording anyway: „A rendezvous with the supernatural does not get just any card reader who exhilarates himself with mushrooms, pills, Aleister Crowley books or similar garbage!“ No, such things are not reported here. Rather, we are talking about something wonderfully down-to-earth, a cultural pearl, but one that is very difficult to grasp, despite its damp earthy smell. If at all.

We are talking about the blues. When Loosli assumes that the blues is „holistic“ and „transcendent“, he simply means that it could possibly be both at the same time. Black and white, good and evil, divine and also of the devil. Alive even. Why does everything always have to be so complicated ...?

„But does that already make him holy, just because he is alive?“ - Loosli continues to ponder. As far as his eye can see, the fir trees here seem to be decorated everywhere with loud contradictions and unanswered questions. „How wonderfully simple life could ripple along if one could manage to commit oneself skin and hair to a binding truth!“ It is not granted to us, Loosli thinks sullenly. No music professor or historian in the world has yet managed to really explain the essence of the blues to him, apart from chords and scales. And the great masters of this art, he says, are all either long dead or as secretive as the grave. „Nobody wants to give away the secret!“ - Fred complains. Now, of all times, when he so desperately needed answers.

So maybe both are in the blues, the good and the bad. Loosli doesn't let up: „Does that alone make him holy ...?“ He shakes his head. For him, the famous dot on the i is missing. A sign is missing. Otherwise, we could simply believe in nothing. Neither in God nor in the devil. It would be easier in a way, without a sign.

Loosli is not fooling himself; he knows that in wide circles nowadays you are better off if you believe in nothing. Whoever leaves the field to science, trusts everything that is visible and tangible, reaps loud pats on the back. Although he too could not resist this temptation at various times, the village priest of the time put

a spoke in his wheel early on. How the latter managed to make a lasting impression on him remains a mystery to Loosli, because the good clergyman was only sparsely blessed with the talent of a mood cannon. There is basically only one sentence of the priest that he remembers today; however, it has it in itself, and it could perhaps even be helpful to Loosli - here on his search for the great secrets of the blues. At the time, as a toddler, he wondered with impertinence what this sentence would contain for his future; but for some inexplicable reason he remembered the words anyway: „All we really need to live is love - and a sign now and then.“

Today Loosli knows; love is from this earth, and with a little luck and own doing it can be found. The signs, however, come from a zone we cannot gain access to, at least not by honest means. No amount of help can conjure them up, not even the high price of patient waiting guarantees their appearance. „But I must be ready at any time with my antenna extended, just in case!“ - Looslidem seems to want to gain something pleasurable from waiting.

There are songwriters who describe this character search with a much fatter dose of poetry. How about Bono's „I still haven't found, but I'm looking for“? Well, basically they all mean the same: just that „latent connection to the beyond“ ...

„That hallucinogenic babble again“ - a bad-tempered reader might be tempted to scoff here. For Loosli, such philosophical musings are a permanent compulsion, in good times and bad. At the moment, they don't seem to be exuberantly good, the times. On the contrary, he feels rather frustrated and empty as he plods along the shady forest path on this sunny Sunday afternoon. The idyllic little Fernan Lake can be seen between pine trees, and further away even Lake Coeur d'Alene, his beloved lake. Loosli has felt at home here for almost 50 years. Still, today he can hardly feel any sense of joy. All the unanswered questions about the blues, the quiet doubt whether that blues is still there at all; the longing for a sign that would now, at this crucial moment, show him the way to the original source of the sought-after bluenote art - all this seems to