

THE LAST JAM SESSION: A BLUES FABLE

Inspired by Rod Serling and The Twilight Zone

By Luther Badman Keith

The clock crawled well past 1 a.m. and the weekly blues jam entered the home stretch. The Old Bluesman with his usual straight shot of Hennessy surveyed the scene. His ears nearly bled from the latest young hotshot to hit the scene, calling himself “Blues Lightning.” He thought, “Boy this blues thing sure has changed, but man I still love it”.

After more than 50 years of playing blues from Mississippi to Michigan, the Old Bluesman was not your typical elderly curmudgeon who was a “hater” of this new generation of blues players. He understood it would take them time, and maybe a few hard knocks from some tough crowds, to learn that there was a lot more to playing blues guitar than playing fast and loud. Doing it slow and easy, with less flash and more feeling, was his preferred style, though he could rip a joint wide open with some rocking blues when the mood struck him. But, hey, the young man loved the blues. He would be okay.

Outside, there was a rumble of thunder. The crowd dwindled to the last fifteen or so folks. Many of the regulars left early because of the impending thunderstorm that TV weathercasters continue to howl about like the world was going to end. His Old Lady, a worrier, didn’t want him to go out that night. She listened to the TV all day and didn’t want him to make the drive to his favorite local juke joint. A few years back they moved out to a rural section of the county, where things were a little calmer and more restrained than some of the rough and tumble neighborhoods of the Big City. Still, he loved to play the blues

and he had his crowd that loved to see him play the blues, his style, his way. He didn't want to disappoint them. So he made the drive.

As usual, he had his cherry red 335 Gibson guitar. He called her "Red." Everyone knew about BB King and Lucille, the name the greatest bluesman of them all gave his guitar. Giving his guitar a name, like it's a real person, might seem strange to some people but Red was better to him than most women, or so-called friends. She never complained, never had a headache. When he squeezed her, she always showed affection. Sometimes she cooed; other times she screamed with sheer pleasure. "Yeah, I'm in love with her," he proudly admitted. "Never leave home without her."

"Hey, old bluesman, when you gonna play?" came a shout out of the crowd. "Drove through a storm and been waiting here all night for you." "Just saving the best for last," the Old Bluesman replied. Somebody cackled, "the best or the oldest"? The Old Bluesman laughed and ambled off the bar stool. He carefully removed Red from his guitar case and strode to the microphone. He had a drummer, a bass player and a harmonica player to back him up. All were younger but had jammed with him before. He didn't have to tell them what to do. They knew the Old Bluesman always opened his show with a slow blues in the key of G.

Mixing a little sweet with a little sour, he worked his way through those six classic opening notes that were the staple of the slow blues for generations. The crowd settled in. He closed his eyes. "I feel like playing some blues," he began to sing, "That's the only thing that will ease my troubled mind. I feel like playing me some blues, that's the only thing

that will ease my troubled mind. “Blues, blues, blues, make me feel so fine.”

The harmonica player took a solo, and then the Old Bluesman sauntered through his solo, bending, nudging and basking in the sheer joy of an experience that was almost orgasmic. He smiled thinking, yeah, glad I came out, he thought to himself. When he finished, the storm had intensified but he knew he would be okay driving home. He would do so like he played his blues, slow and easy. “Good job, Old Bluesman,” he heard as he headed out the door. “You were worth waiting for. See you next week.”

He kept his head down through the pelting rain as he headed to his battered, black 15-year old Buick with more than 200,000 miles on it, glad that Red was safely tucked away in her case. It was after 2 a.m. Dodging drunks and the police constantly worried him when he left a jam, not because he was drunk, but you never knew what might go down when stopped by the cops. Anyway, things were gonna work out tonight. He made it out of the city and on to the rural road that led home. He strained to see the road with the windshield wipers going full blast. Almost home, just needed to get over the bridge, over the river and five minutes later he would stride through the door, being careful not to wake the Old Lady.

The car skidded to the left as he approached the bridge. When he woke up, it was morning. He was on the riverbank with his guitar case next to him. He checked on Red. She was fine, not a drop of water on her. Then he looked at the river and cursed. “Damn,” the Old Lady is really going to be mad at me.” The Buick was badly smashed and in the water. How he got out, he couldn’t remember. He could do nothing but walk home

and make a full confession. He and the Old Lady had been together 40 years. No, she wouldn't be happy about the accident, but she would forgive him.

Passing the local cemetery, he saw James Smith and Johnny Brown digging a fresh grave not far from the road. "Hey, fellas, who died? Anybody I know?" Neither man looked up as they continued to dig. "Sure is too bad about the Old Bluesman," "yeah," Johnny agreed. "Things won't be the same without him. Nobody could play the blues like him." "Dead!" the Old Bluesman exclaimed at the bafflingly oblivious grave diggers. "I'm not dead. Feel this flesh and bone. What's going on here?" Neither man responded. "Well, shoot," the Old Bluesman said, exasperated. "Let me just go on home and talk to the Old Lady."

When he walked through the door, his Old Lady dressed in black was being comforted by Rev. Jones, pastor of Greater Hope Missionary Baptist Church, a house of worship he rarely attended. "What am I gonna do without the old man," she sobbed?" "Couldn't get him to go to church much like I wanted but he was a good man." "Sister, the Lord will make a way for you," the minister intoned. "He's in a much better place now."

Once again, the Old Bluesman was thunderstruck with disbelief. He shouted, "What the hell is going on here"? "I'm standing right in front of you as plain as day. Come on Old Lady, can't you see me?" They did not react. He thought, this is strange, very strange and then decided to walk back out to the road, and maybe into town, to find some answers.

With Red in his guitar case slung over his shoulder, he strode back out to the road and began to walk. Something about the road, the trees

and the scenery seemed different but he couldn't quite figure out exactly what it was. After following a stretch of picket fence along the road for some time he came to a gate with a man dressed in white wearing a black hat.

"Hey, Old Bluesmen, we've been waiting for you". "Why are you waiting for me?" "I don't know you." "Brother, don't you know? You're dead." "Dead, how can that be?" "Think back until the last thing you can remember," "Well, I was driving back home after the jam, I got to the bridge, the car swerved and" "That's right," the man said. "That's what I'm telling you."

"Well, I'll be danged. Well if this is heaven, how come I don't hear no music, or nothing like that?" "Well, you will, brother, as soon as you come inside. Come inside and get your reward." "Okay," he responded as he pulled Red out of her case. "I'm really looking forward to jamming with some of my old blues buddies up here." "Oh no," the man said in horror. "They don't allow no guitars in heaven." "What, no guitars and no blues in heaven? What kind of heaven is this? "f it's not good enough for Red, then it's not good enough for me.

"Guess I'll just keep walking along this road." The man at the gate panicked. "Brother, that road don't go nowhere. That's eternity road. It just goes on and on without an end." The Old Bluesman walked away and didn't look back. He stopped for a minute, took Red out and played a few familiar runs before resuming his trek down the road.

Several more miles up the road, he saw a man approaching him. He was wearing overall blue jeans and smoking a pipe. With a big smile on his face, the man said, "I'm looking for the Old Bluesman and a guitar

named Red.” Relieved, the Old Bluesman said “that would be me. “I thought so,” the man said. “We’ve been waiting on you.”

“Don’t try to trick me like that other fella,” the Old Bluesman said. “I’m not going anywhere that I can’t take Red. That would be a helluva place to be.”

“Oh, you didn’t get mixed up with him did you?,” the man said. “They never stop trying to get our people. That was hell. Down yonder is heaven.”

“Can, I bring Red in there?” asked the Old Bluesman.

“Absolutely, the weekly blues jam is just getting ready to get started,” the man said as he suddenly sprouted the wings of an angel. “What about my Old Lady? Will she be okay”? She was real good to me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about her. In fact, I hear tell you’ll be seeing her real soon.” The Old Bluesman felt better. As he walked through the Pearly Gates, he heard the familiar sounds of guitars tuning up.

He walked towards the sounds and came to a building that looked like a juke joint, the sign out front read, “Blues Heaven: All jammers welcome.” One by one, his friends from the old days in Detroit came up to greet him. There was Mr. Bo, Willie D. Warren, Little Junior Cannaday, Uncle Jessie White and Duke Dawson, just to name a few. Then his good friend Johnnie Bassett, still wearing his trademark cap, stepped forward and extended his hand. Johnnie said, “I haven’t been up here too long, but I think you’re gonna like it. What you wanna play?” The Old Bluesman, overcome with joy, thought for a moment and replied: “Give me a slow blues in G.”

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