

The Devil and Preston Black - by Jason Jack Miller

jeffrey

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I wish I could say I found that record the first time I walked into the joint. But honestly, I'd been going into Isaac's every week since he'd hung his shingle out. Ever since I started giving lessons next door, at least. Killing time at Isaac's was easier than killing time with Mick's Strats and Twin Reverbs. The guitar shop had become too much like work, Mick too much like a boss. If I showed up early he always found meaningless little jobs for me to do, like tuning the Guilds and refilling humidifiers. If I showed up a minute late he was all, 'Get yourself a watch.'

So I'd hide out at Isaac's until my lessons arrived, soaking up the juju that dripped off the old vinyl like heat from a spotlight. The simplicity of an album, its lack of moving parts, spoke to me in a way CDs didn't. Vinyl had a tender, handmade quality that made me believe that the music had been born into a more authentic era. Like a record could somehow be more sincere than a CD or mp3. But I knew all that was a load of crap. In the end, only the music mattered. For me, walking into Isaac's gave me the same feeling some people get when they walk into a church or a mall. I can't describe it. Maybe enlightenment, but I'm not sure if I've ever experienced that feeling. Either way, all I had to do to soak up the collective wisdom hiding in all of those vinyl grooves was appreciate the music, and try to understand where the artist was coming from. I swore if I browsed long enough I'd find whatever guidance I needed to get me through my paper-thin life. And since my own father ran off long before I ever learned how to hold down a G chord,

I'd never have to worry about overdosing on guidance. The guys my mom brought home didn't have a lot of wisdom to pass on. They all either wanted to preach to me or beat me. So I didn't need a semi-employed union pipefitter around giving me shit when I had the Holy Trinity of John Lennon, Joe Strummer and Bruce Springsteen helping me down the path of lyrics and music. Each of these guys came into my life when I needed them the most. And each left just like my own dad did—long gone before I ever had a chance to say goodbye. But their lessons stuck. Joe Strummer taught me it was okay to throw a few bricks, and that a cop was something I really didn't want to be. John Lennon taught me if you were clever they hated you, and for a fool it was worse. From Robert Hunter I learned the devil's friend sure ain't a friend of mine. In hindsight, I should've listened to Hunter. Call it irony, but the morning I found the old LP that had me standing on the Westover Bridge thinking about taking the final jump, I'd been browsing near Ozzy, a friend of the devil if the devil ever had one. Before that LP I assumed lyrics were just lyrics. Didn't know they could be their own warning labels too. Besides, the douche bags who worked at Isaac's treated me like I had the musical tastes of a ten-year-old boy. I couldn't help it I never heard of Black Flag or The Pixies growing up. My brother and me were pretty much forced to listen to whatever mom played in the car. Mostly country. Kenny and Dolly singing "Islands in the Stream." Garth Brooks, if we were lucky. Most people didn't have to dig as deep as me to find something they recognized in an old record or song. And digging deeper was pretty much what I was doing the day I found my LP misplaced behind Blizzard of Oz. On my way to return it to the BLUEGRASS section the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen stepped out of the stacks. She smiled. I smiled back. She asked what I had in my hand. On the album cover a bunch of anonymous pickers sat in front of an old log cabin. The back of the record said Uncle Mason's Front Porch: Best of the Blackwater Sessions. And on the track list, between "Pretty Polly" and "Hangman's Reel" was a song called "The Sad Ballad of Preston Black," written by E. Black. I knew right then and there that if I could ever find the man who'd written that song, I'd have found my dad.