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## I Went Down to the Crossroads

**‘So, have you guys been laid?’**

**W**e’ve all had interesting conversations with taxi drivers in our time but as an opening gambit this still came as a something of a surprise. The cabbie in question was a generously proportioned African American gentleman, memorably kitted out in a white and gold velour track suit, oversized and unlaced Timberland boots and a leather fedora. It’s not often you feel under-dressed when being picked up in a minicab, but this was certainly one of those rare occasions.

On the morning in question this voluble, lavishly attired roué was collecting me and my travelling companions Jamie and Phil from a hotel in downtown Memphis, where North Front Street crosses Jefferson Avenue, to take us out to Graceland as per the itinerary for our collective sixtieth birthday road trip. I checked the

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schedule again just to confirm that ‘getting laid’ hadn’t been slipped in there as an optional extra by our travel agent Shannon. It seemed unlikely even though they do always tell you to read through all documentation, but there didn’t appear to be any brothel vouchers in our travel pack.

It was rainy that day in Memphis. The Mississippi river, which in my mind was going to be a glistening mile-wide ribbon peppered with chugging paddle steamers from the decks of which distant straw-hatted relations of Tom Sawyer dispensed cheery waves, was a Lowry-esque Salfordian smudge of turgid grey traversed by weary goods locomotives hauling their endless chains of rusting containers all the way to Arkansas.

Being practical souls, the three of us had dressed for the weather and were sitting in the taxi in our firmly zipped and poppered cagoules, while our charmer of a chauffeur indulged in several minutes of sexually infused badinage and innuendo with the ample receptionist. Once he took the wheel you would have thought that one look at us would have told him that the answer to his question was only ever going to be in the negative. People in Memphis to ‘get laid’ probably don’t pack cagoules, do they? On reflection it occurred to me that his enquiry wasn’t actually restricted to the immediate locale. Perhaps he glanced at us and wondered whether we’d been laid ever. Again, the way we looked that day, a response in the affirmative was by no means a foregone conclusion.

As longtime buddies since university days, and music

nuts our whole lives, Phil, Jamie and I had always planned a trip to some of the key historical sights of the birth of rock and roll and R&B. Memphis has not only Graceland, but also the Sun and Stax studios and the blues joints of Beale Street with their neon hoardings and promise of honest sweaty bands and cheap liquor. Nashville has a similar strip for the cream of country bar bands on Broadway, the Grand Ole Opry and the Country Music Hall of Fame. For the journey between the two cities we'd opted to take a scenic route called the Natchez Trace Parkway which rolls through endless miles of woodland, dipping into Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi and stopping amongst other places at Elvis's birthplace in Tupelo where the shotgun shack he was born in still stands on its original footings.

Before heading on the parkway to Tupelo, though, we detoured to Clarksdale, Mississippi. In many ways it is such a classic American 'small town' that at first you wonder if you haven't strayed onto a film set. Naturally the streets are on a grid pattern and none of the buildings are above two or three storeys high. Cars park diagonally into the curb, every store and house has a bench on the stoop and puffs of dancing dust swirl with every rare breath of breeze. The walls are painted in bright oranges, pinks and turquoises, or at least they are colours that were bright once. Chipped, faded and heat ravaged, it looks like there hasn't been a reliable painter and decorator in town since the mid-Sixties.

But there is history here. There are clues in some of the shops. In a settlement this size in the UK you might

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expect to find a mini-mart, a pub, a grocer's or butcher's, maybe a newsagent's, a scented candle and mindfulness parlour, artisan beard waxer and, if you're very lucky, a Post Office. You wouldn't happen upon a saxophone outlet very often. But there's one in Clarksdale. It's painted puce with various bluesmen caricatured on the frontage and is called Deak's Mississippi Saxophones and Blues Emporium. The sign on the pavement outside advertises 'harmonica lessons, sales and service, live music, folk art, open harp surgery and cold beer'. Top man Deak. Which shopping experience isn't enriched by the offer of cold beer except for perhaps test-driving a new sports car or motorbike? Or buying a gun perhaps. None of these items seemed to be readily available in Clarksdale although there were two other musical instrument suppliers, several more purveyors of folk art and cold beer and a heroically graffiti-infested fairy-lit blues club and soul food café co-owned by Morgan Freeman called Ground Zero for reasons that evade me. Dining in places named after memorials to major terrorist incidents is not something that it's easy to do but I had catfish nevertheless. It just seemed the right thing to do somehow. It was nothing to write home about although I suppose that's exactly what I'm doing now.

So why is there such a musical presence in a one-horse town like Clarksdale? Well, it's because it can make a convincing case for being the very place where the blues itself began, or at least the Delta blues as opposed to the Chicago blues (the birthplace of which you can probably guess at). The Delta blues came first. It is the

folk music of that landscape. These are primal screams of poverty and pain featuring, for the most part, voice, acoustic guitar and harmonica, and even a few hours in hundred-degree temperatures traversing that flattened, sweating topography is enough for you to begin to understand how that music came about. Chicago blues came a bit later and developed when many of the dab hands of Delta migrated to Illinois and discovered the electric guitar. Ironically the generally acknowledged first Delta blues recording, Freddie Spruell's 'Milk Cow Blues', was recorded in 1926 in . . . Chicago. So although the birth of the blues happened on the Delta not Chicago, *recorded* Delta blues was born in the Windy City. Of course pinning down the actual birthplace of the genre to one point on a map is well nigh impossible. There are many locations, notably the Dockery Cotton Plantation which stakes a claim, but at the heart of Clarksdale's bid is one of the greatest legends in all of rock and roll.

You come into Clarksdale on Highway 61. As this was my first time there, it felt inappropriate to soundtrack the drive with Bob Dylan's 'Highway 61 Revisited' but next time I'll be sure to put that right. Just before you hit town there's an intersection with Highway 49. It's a wide but nondescript junction with a Sonic petrol station and various stores offering hot food and tobacco. Traffic lights hang from scrawny electric cables above a central grass island. It's not particularly well tended, though there is a flower bed, and a utilitarian grey wiring box is mounted on a telegraph pole. It's a junction like

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hundreds of thousands of others in the USA. Except that it isn't.

Also rising from the turf is a post with three semi-acoustic guitars clinging to it and a sign under each of them that says 'The Crossroads'. For this is not a crossroads. It is *the* Crossroads. And, at that moment, having been experiencing major life changes myself it felt like a significant place to be. The whole trip was planned to celebrate our landmark birthdays, but it also served as a welcome escape from dealing with stuff back home, and standing on this spot seemed to bring all those feelings together. So what was it about this spot that made it such a symbol of change and transformation and one that altered the course of popular music?

Robert Johnson, or possibly Spencer, or one of around eight other surnames he adopted at various times, was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, in 1911. He was, like most black people in the States, from impoverished stock and raised in a town that was a real powerhouse for the growing of tomatoes and cabbages but had little else going for it, bearing in mind this was at least a century before the lilies were gilded and cabbage was labelled a superfood and tomatoes a fruit. Even had he known all of that, it seems unlikely that young Robert would have found the information fascinating enough to make him want to stick around. It's on the Delta. The soil is fertile. Stuff grows. So what? And so he became an itinerant musician and agricultural labourer, at one time ending up at the famed Dockery Cotton Plantation where the

workforce at one time or another also included Delta blues legends Charley Patton and Howlin' Wolf.

Over the years that followed there were various recorded sightings of Johnson all over the region as he scraped a living singing in juke joints or on street corners. In Beauregard, Mississippi, he hooked up with Ike Zimmerman who famously practised his guitar-playing and singing in graveyards at night. In Robinsonville he spent some time with another giant of the scene Son House who seemed to take quite a shine to Robert and liked his harmonica playing (perhaps he'd had lessons at Deak's), but considered him a very poor guitarist and average singer.

It's clear that, not unlike our taxi driver, the young Robert Johnson was a dude with some presence. He was evidently a charismatic performer, if prone to wandering off when he got bored, and was effortlessly persuasive with the ladies. That Robert Johnson got laid, and regularly, is not in doubt. The cagoule wasn't launched until the early Sixties in the UK when former Royal Marine Noel Bibby registered the Peter Storm trademark. However, even if they had been available in Mississippi in the Thirties it seems unlikely that Robert would have bought one because he was a dapper guy. Nomadic he may well have been but in the only photos we have of him he was what blues aficionados ZZ Top might call a 'Sharp Dressed Man'. There are really only two portrait images that are generally seen. In one he has a cigarette hanging nonchalantly from his lip at a louche angle, as he shapes a barre chord in braces and a white shirt. In

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the other more famous picture, which is reproduced in a peeling mural on a Clarksdale gable end, he is resplendent in a pristine chalk-striped suit with pocket handkerchief, shirt, tie and a rakishly cocked trilby. His spindly fingers once again bestride the neck of the guitar he is most associated with, a Gibson L-1 archtop, the instrument which by rights should sit on The Crossroads marker post. He looks every inch the superstar, the Prince of his day, even though he would actually go higher up the ranks of the nobility by being dubbed 'The King of the Delta Blues'.

But hang on. If Son House was right and Johnson was a journeyman in terms of his guitar-playing abilities, then how did he reach these exalted heights?

Roughly four centuries before Robert Johnson's lifetime, in what is now Stuttgart, lived, legend has it, a scholar, magician and alchemist called Johann Georg Faust. A restless soul, he found himself as dissatisfied with the incantations and inculcations of the town of Knittlingen as Robert Johnson would come to be with the dubious fruits and over-hyped superfoods of Hazlehurst, and began to wonder if there was a way of deriving greater rewards and excitement from this earthly drudgery. This is a thought many of us have had and have sought to confront by buying a new sports car or motorbike, experimenting with an inadvisable wardrobe makeover, returning in late middle age to a foam party in a cavernous Ibiza discotheque or getting laid by a younger consort. In fact, Faust did go down this latter route with a fragrant Fräulein by



the name of Gretchen who would later be arrested for murder after drowning their son. So that went well. However, the key part of Faust's plan to negotiate the midlife crisis was to recruit a bit of help from the Devil.

Summarily summoning Mephistopheles, Faust made a pact to enjoy a bounteous and luxurious life on earth in return for letting his soul head off to Hell when it was all over. Given this came in his sixtieth year, this might not seem like a grand old age but remember this was Württemberg in the fifteenth century and so the equivalent today would be living until you were seven hundred and fifty. Probably.

Now, you might be wondering why Faust had need of Satanic assistance, being as he was already an alchemist and therefore presumably able to transmute base metal into gold. One would have thought that colossal material riches would automatically ensue from having that ability just as it does from being able to play football to Premiership standard nowadays. So why would he throw his soul onto the table as a bargaining chip? Perhaps he took a gamble that the Devil might not come back to collect his debt. This seems foolish, though to be fair we're still a couple of hundred years off the Brothers Grimm collecting the story of Rumpelstiltskin. If this cautionary, and indeed Germanic, tale had been available to Faust perhaps he would have thought again. These gargoyles of the underworld always come back to close the deal. Rumpelstiltskin was absolutely clear that if the miller's daughter wanted to marry the king then he would use his alchemical artistry to spin straw

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into gold as required, but he would be nipping back in the future to collect her first-born sprog as payment in full. Even then, he gave her a get-out clause. If she could guess his name then he would cancel said debt. And here it was that the titular imp made his crucial error. After two nights of name guessing (it's not Keith or Darren or Son House or Howlin' Wolf), he camps out in the woods and dances round his own campfire singing:

Tonight, tonight, my plans I make  
Tomorrow, tomorrow, the baby I take  
The queen will never win the game  
For Rumpelstiltskin is my name.

Didn't he know he was in a fairy tale and there was bound to be a woodsman or hunter lurking nearby? Why if feeling the urge to sing didn't he choose one of many songs appropriate to a woodland setting such as 'A Forest' by The Cure, Hank Williams' 'Settin' the Woods on Fire' or 'I Talk to the Trees' as performed on the soundtrack to *Paint Your Wagon* by Clint Eastwood? And so of course he was overheard and the message relayed back to Her Majesty who promptly proclaimed his name and sent him on his way, making me think that he might not have been an incarnation of Lucifer but just a really gobby goblin, albeit with a handy sideline in precious metal transmutation. And another thing, if you can already spin straw into gold then why not just do that and buy all the sports cars and motor-bikes you like without getting into a tangle at the palace?

I digress (often) and what, you may ask, does any of this have to do with Robert Johnson? Well, here's the thing. Though his precise movements are hard to track we do know he was married to a woman called Caletta Craft and in 1932 they were living in Clarksdale and approaching Robert's date with destiny. In a Faustian pact he is supposed to have encountered a massive, mesmerising black man at the Crossroads who agreed to show him lots of brilliant licks on the guitar and educate him in the art of killer songwriting in exchange, like our friend in Stuttgart, for his soul in perpetuity when the time came. You can understand the temptation: it is often said that the Devil has all the best tunes although I don't think he had 'Dancing Queen' or 'Get Lucky' so that might not be entirely accurate.

What's clear is that after this encounter, an alchemical reaction took place transmuting Johnson's base skills into blues gold (if that's not oxymoronic, colour-wise). Within a very short space of time, our itinerant harmonica-toting busker had made his classic recordings in 1936 and 1937, which include tellingly 'Me and the Devil Blues', and had become the Jimi Hendrix of his day. In fact Eric Clapton would later proclaim Robert Johnson as a prime influence. Unfortunately the deal went sour as I suppose a deal with the Devil is wont to do. Johnson died aged twenty-seven, perhaps the first legend to check out at that number on a list that also includes Hendrix, Amy Winehouse, Brian Jones, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and Janis Joplin. Not only that but his recordings were unsuccessful during his short lifetime and only celebrated posthumously.

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Yet those recordings did change things for ever. It's not just that they influenced so many other artists but they have also cemented rock and roll's association with the dark side. In Robert Johnson's time just singing secular songs was enough to find yourself accused of selling your soul to the Devil. You had strayed from the heavenly light into the cesspit of the shadows. Black is the colour of rock and roll. The night is the time of rock and roll. Godlessness, misbehaviour, overindulgence and debauchery are the pulse of rock and roll. Robert Johnson was the first man alive to realise that.

Now, there may be some of you who think that a lot of this is supposition and hearsay and in any case hinges on the existence of God and Satan. Fair enough, but look at the cast iron facts behind the myth. There was definitely a Robert Johnson. Or maybe Spencer. Or maybe another surname. He definitely died when he was twenty-seven in 1938, shot by the jealous husband of a ladyfriend he was escorting. Or possibly by drinking poisoned whiskey. Or by contracting incurable syphilis. No matter, he is buried at Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Morgan City, Mississippi. Unless you prefer to visit his nearby gravestone at Payne Chapel, Quito. Tell you what, why not dip down to his headstone at Little Zion Church just north of Greenwood, then you've seen all three. Then again you might think, as some do, that he lies unmarked in a pauper's grave somewhere. What's beyond doubt though is that Robert Johnson met an extravagantly modish, darkly persuasive and mysterious figure at the Crossroads where Highways 61 and

49 cross. Unless you prefer the intersections of 1 and 8 at Rosedale, or 28 and 51 at Hazlehurst. Clearer than that I cannot be.

Unlike Robert Johnson, Phil, Jamie and I did not get laid in Clarksdale, Memphis, or anywhere else on that trip. Not that our enthusiastic taxi driver didn't tantalisingly hint that the knowledge at his disposal would certainly extend to the full range of personal services available in town.

'So, you guys been laid?'

'Errmm, no, we haven't.'

A beat.

'D'you guys wanna get laid?'

'Errmm, that's very kind, but no, thank you very much. How long does it take to get to Graceland?'

It only came to me months later. A charismatic black man in lavish attire had beckoned us towards a portal to an underworld of temptation and debauchery. Had we, like Robert Johnson, encountered the Devil at a crossroads? What, at that stage in my life, would be the ramifications if I had chosen to go a different way?

## 2

### The Gates of Hell Opening

A thunderstorm rages. A solitary, solemn church bell echoes from across the marshlands. In front of a gently decaying water mill is a tendrilous and bedraggled autumnal garden where a lonesome crow perches on a mottled tree trunk and observes a young woman of deathly pallor dressed in black. Her expression is inscrutable. Okay, so far so familiar to anyone who has tried to organise a family holiday at a country cottage with a reluctant teenager going through a bit of a goth phase who has finally, after several warnings, had to be forcibly separated from her mobile phone.

But then what happens? Nearby (but out of view), in a dank storeroom lit only by candlelight (probably), three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse begin to create a sound from just three notes that will change rock and roll. We may indeed have caught them in the greatest act of musical alchemy ever achieved: transmuting base metal not into mere gold, but heavy metal

itself. Or at the very least Black Sabbath, for it is they, creating what the fourth horseman Ozzy Osbourne described as a noise 'like the gates of hell opening'.

I love Black Sabbath. Their 1971 classic *Master of Reality* was the first album I ever bought. I paid Pete Leatham at school one English pound for it, though my dad may have gone halves with me as I recall. Black Sabbath's debut eponymous album was released in 1970 followed by *Paranoid* later the same year, on the cover of which a dumpy hombre in a motor scooter helmet appears to be brandishing a plastic scimitar in some chilly and spartan woodland copse for no good reason. What a body of work they amassed in those early years. *Paranoid* also gave the band their breakthrough hit with the title track in which, rather unfairly and ungallantly I've always thought, Ozzy terminated a relationship with a lady because she couldn't help him with his mind. Helping Ozzy with his mental state would turn into a job requiring many different layers of expertise and understanding down the ensuing years, but unless some kind of demand for psychiatric assistance had been made clear to this unnamed Missy of the Midlands on the first or second date, I don't really think it was fair to expect it later on.

In 1972 came another classic album in *Vol. 4*, with tracks like 'Supernaut' nailing down a formula that would be slavishly imitated down the years though never equalled, with *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* following in 1973. I would finally get to see them live on 24 May 1974 when they played at the Free Trade Hall in

Manchester supported by Black Oak Arkansas. I remember the day vividly. I had carefully rolled some earplugs out of cotton wool, cunningly stiffened with my own earwax to train the recalcitrant fibres into balls, and placed them in a small plastic box that once held lavender-scented sweets, in the bib pocket of my Brutus brushed denim dungarees. As me and my familiar assemblage of acne-ridden amigos were sitting in the cheapest seats in the upper circle this careful protection of hearing may have seemed overcautious but these were pre-health and safety times and gigs were loud. When The Who played Charlton Athletic's ground The Valley the week before I saw Sabbath, it was so loud that it could be heard in space having bounced off the Great Wall of China. Possibly. Look, things were LOUD, alright? If we went to a gig on a Saturday night and our ears weren't still ringing at school on Monday it hadn't been loud enough.

I suppose in many ways those were the musical rules that bound our particular gang together. Teenage fandom is by its very nature tribal and if you are going to experience seismic shifts in your musical discovery and appreciation that will stay with you all your life it seemed only right that these experiences should be collective. More than that, though, at the heart of this story lies one of the most crossroads moments in all of rock and roll – and it goes something like this.

The members of Birmingham band Earth tended to gather at the flat of bassist Terry 'Geezer' Butler, where the interior redecoration, presumably at the expense of



a hefty deposit, had been heavily influenced by the underground's obsession with the occult. The counterculture was still shapeshifting after the Summer of Love in 1967 and explorations in how to open the doors of perception went in all kinds of directions including to some very dark recesses. The striking thing about all the various ways that were investigated to throw off the shackles of polite society is how they all came to the same conclusion that it could be done in one of three ways. First, by taking large quantities of mind-bending narcotics. Second, by having sexual liaisons with as many people as possible. And finally, by having sex with as many people as possible while simultaneously taking large quantities of mind-bending narcotics. Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page became mightily infatuated with the teachings and experiments of master of the dark arts Aleister Crowley, whose oft-quoted mantra chimed easily with the era's new-found freedom: 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.' Geezer Butler's interest in occultism and satanic ritual appears to have been considerably less intense than Jimmy Page's in consisting mainly of liberally slapping on the Crown matt black emulsion and stencilling a few upside-down crosses on the bedsit wall.

Opposite Geezer's gaff there happened to be a picture house and while the band were idly cogitating on that evening's likely doors of perception openings, Butler was struck by the regular queues of punters eager for the latest horror films. Sensing that all manifestations of the dark side seemed to make for good box office, and had cost him a few bob in decorating expenses, he decided

that if they could shroud their work in a cloak of shadows they might be on to something. Taking their new name Black Sabbath from the title of a 1963 Boris Karloff film they were off. But what did a band called Black Sabbath sound like?

The important thing to remember with bands like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin is that they weren't strictly heavy metal bands to begin with. They were heavy blues bands, and in fact, although Sabbath may well have invented heavy metal (though the phrase first appears in the Steppenwolf anthem 'Born to be Wild'), all their initial inspiration came from the blues. The blues that came out of the Mississippi Delta was the folk music of the times while also laying down the foundations of rock and roll. It was folk music because it was the voice of the oppressed, overworked, underpaid working man and woman. But it was also rock and roll because this voice spoke with anger, force and aggression. There are tenets laid down in the Mississippi Delta blues that go through punk and beyond. The primal yelp of Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson and in particular Howlin' Wolf influenced generations of artists desperate to explode in the same way. Theirs is a real passion, fuelled by a life of backbreaking work in the cotton plantations.

Bands of the Sixties beat era could hardly claim to know the horrors of slavery. They did know poverty and working-class life, though, which, while hardly comparable, did come with their own set of hardships which found expression and outlet in the blues. All the bands of that period were backstreet kids looking for a way

out. Okay, the Beatles' story had some semi-detached suburban *mise en scène* but the Stones, The Who, the Small Faces, The Animals, the Yardbirds, The Hollies and Gerry and the Pacemakers were all artful dodgers gazing at the stars. And pop stars of the Sixties were generally of humble beginnings. The label stalwarts of Tamla Motown were all drawn from the Detroit housing projects and Abdul 'Duke' Fakir of the Four Tops once talked of having a length of rope to hold his trousers up as he was unable to afford a belt.

Of course there are notable exceptions to this sweeping generalisation. Not all groups came from humble backgrounds. Genesis met at Surrey's uber-poshington Charterhouse School near Godalming. One of the accepted ways of writing new material in those days was to go to a barn, bothy or even water mill somewhere and 'get it together in the country'. Led Zeppelin and Traffic both tried this with considerable success. When Genesis decided to do the same thing, it was fortunate that the family of their road manager and schoolmate Richard Macphail had a cottage standing empty which they could take over free of charge. That was unlikely to happen to The Animals whose family homes had yet to have indoor lavatories. Phil Collins insists that when he went to said bucolic toff's Hobbit holiday home, he was greeted by bassist Mike Rutherford – who should surely be played by Bill Nighy in the biopic – wearing a smoking jacket, and not in irony. Certainly it seems like Mike Rutherford is not the kind of guy whose trousers have ever been kept up by rope.

In recent times much has been made of the rise of the middle-class pop star who has come to fame either through the BRIT School route, or with a certain amount of family money and security behind them. The theory is that young people are in so much debt early in life thanks to the insanity of the university fee and student loan system, and the cost of living in general, that taking a chance on jamming with your spoddy mates and hoping for a lucky break in the early stages of your earning capacity is just too risky. You might never catch up and be off the housing ladder for ever. It should be stated that genres such as grime do seem to have returned to a time of stars emerging from humble council estate backgrounds but the situation for bands has changed. In decades past, a group of wannabe rockers could just huddle together for warmth in a squat and travel the country in all weathers in a Commer FC van without an MOT but with a condemned sofa squeezed in behind the driver and shotgun seats. Seat belts? Don't be silly. Sign on the dole occasionally and you had all you needed to be a band and live slap bang in the middle of the pre-gentrified inner cities. That template held good for almost half a century but, thanks to the lack of affordable housing and artists no longer being able to colonise down-at-heel neighbourhoods, it can't happen now.

Looking back at the Seventies, it also seems to have been a time when even the trappings of success were themselves more modest than we might assume. Look at pictures of Mick Jagger at home in the early days of the Stones' fame. Though he was living in a small London

flat, he had not one, but two Trimphones at his disposal. He had well and truly made it in a world where most households used a call box. A SodaStream? Utter decadence. Manifestations of wealth were not something that the working-class hero became afraid to brandish though. John Lennon may well have imagined no possessions, although he seemed to have plenty in his big white mansion, but try telling that to the Mods and the Teds who spent every penny they had on the sharpest duds in which to swagger about town. There are cautionary tales however. Geezer Butler once came back to the Midlands streets of his childhood in a new Rolls-Royce which, thanks to the handbrake not being fully engaged, duly cruised driverless down a steeply inclined grimy terraced street followed by the harassed and humbled hobgoblin of the bass whose pursuit was not especially aided by his precipitously high platform boots.

One of the things I've noticed in many years of conducting interviews is how down-to-earth and self-deprecating the rock idols of the West Midlands are. Grand viziers of glam Noddy Holder and Roy Wood have become dear friends of mine and are the cheeriest, breeziest company you can keep. I've had the pleasure of Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi's company on several occasions and have found him to be polite, funny and fascinating. I met Justin Hayward of The Moody Blues at Glastonbury and found him to be as courtly an individual as I have ever met. I don't know Jeff Lynne but I'm reliably assured he's just the same despite having spent yonks hanging around with Bob Dylan, George

Harrison and Roy Orbison. Even Robert Plant, once the biggest, preeni-est, bare-chested-est, luminescent mane-est rock god on the planet is a man who goes to watch Wolverhampton Wanderers and has an impish sense of humour. So why should that be?

It has been suggested that the geographical location of Birmingham leaves it without another rival city within spitting distance. I've spent most of my life in or near to Manchester, a town which has produced some of the music and bands I dearly love, but I couldn't honestly say that all the creators of that soundtrack have been grounded all-round good guys. This is in no small part due to having to be constantly on the watch for showers of sarcasm sailing up the M62 from Liverpool a mere thirty miles away. Like Castor and Pollux, our great northwestern metropoli are forever shackled together. It's the same for Leeds and Sheffield. And Glasgow and Edinburgh. Does constantly having to fight your corner against plucky local opposition put that chip on your shoulder? Or maybe Birmingham, sitting in the centre of the country, gave its denizens a more pragmatic view of life. North, south, east or west? Sometimes the cross-roads itself can prove the best.

Whether or not Sabbath's riffmeister general Tony Iommi feels a sense of gratitude to his manual labouring past is hard to say as an almost unique set of circumstances almost ended his career at the very point it was due to begin. Iommi was the Birmingham-born son of parents from Palermo. A guitarist of some repute through working with bands like the Rockin' Chevrolets and the

Polka Tulk Blues Band, he had also had a stint in Jethro Tull. Having informed his family that he was leaving behind a steady job at the metalworks for a life on the road with his Sabbath soulmates he casually dropped into the conversation that, with that decision having been made, he wasn't bothering to go in for his last day. Mamma Iommi, with a work ethic drilled into her in the vineyards of Sicily, was having none of that and duly despatched her son to do the honourable thing and fulfil his last shift. Unfortunately once he got to work Tony was informed that due to some other less dutiful employee having failed to clock in, he would be working on a machine he'd never operated before: a guillotine press.

And so it was – and it feels like there ought to be a clatter of thunder at this point – that during his last day at work before leaving to become a professional guitarist, Tony Iommi duly guillotine pressed the middle two fingers of his right hand. And him a left-handed guitarist as well, meaning those were the very digits despatching the riffs from the fretboard. All that remained were fleshy stumps from which lengths of feeble-looking bone protruded and Iommi was, not unreasonably, informed by medics in casualty that he would never play the guitar again – or presumably operate a guillotine press.

The story might have ended there, were it not for the intervention of a foreman at the foundry who told the digitally challenged wunderkind about Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt, born in 1910, was a Belgian Romani gypsy jazz guitarist who played the best gypsy jazz guitar that

has ever been played. On the road from a young age, he married in his teens and lived in a caravan with his wife Florine who eked a living making artificial flowers. One night on his way to bed, the unchained Django managed to stagger into a candle, upturning it and causing a tempestuous blaze to rip through their vardo – speeded on its way by the copious quantities of celluloid onboard to be used in his wife’s labours. Reinhardt suffered extensive burns and narrowly missed out on having to have a leg amputated. The fourth and fifth fingers of his left hand were reduced to smouldering, useless stumps. And this, the opposite of Tony Iommi’s situation, for a right-handed guitarist. Catastrophic. Like Tony, doctors told him he’d never play again yet Django refused to accept this prognosis and taught himself to play with the fingers he had left. In 1934 he formed the Quintette du Hot Club de France with legendary fiddle player Stéphane Grappelli and continued to play the greatest gypsy jazz guitar that has ever been played.

Inspired by Reinhardt’s overcoming of adversity, Iommi began to think of ways he could tackle the business of holding down the guitar strings with his ravaged fingertips and began to experiment with some melted tops of Fairy Liquid bottles. Moulding them into shape, and eventually topping them with strips of a leather jacket, he began to achieve the right traction for shaping the chords. However, the tension on the strings meant it was a painful process, and certainly too tortuous to be endured throughout the length of a full set. And so,



in the simplest possible way of reducing that tension, the strings were detuned to as many as three semitones below bottom E. And once he got down there, as Ozzy accurately noted, ‘it sounded like the gates of hell opening’.

Iommi could so easily have taken a different exit from his own crossroads, but instead his accident made him decide to forge ahead, resulting in the creation of Sabbath’s genre-defining sound: a sound that they would not otherwise have discovered. The *Black Sabbath* album was recorded at Regent Sound Studios in London on 16 October 1969 in a mere six hours. The band were not present at the mix as they were already en route in the van to another gig. They pretty much just put it down as they would have played it live and Geezer Butler is no doubt quite right when he says the sound of it has stood the test of time because it is so unadorned with any studio trickery of the day which would have dated so badly. Less is certainly more, although that particular cliché may still be one which Iommi, looking at his hands, finds hard to accept. Nevertheless it’s true. Especially if you have more to begin with. When I listened to the album’s title track recently I was astonished to notice – in the brutally simple guitar and bass notes combined with Bill Ward’s uniquely hyperactive drumming – a distinct resemblance to tracks recorded by Joy Division nearly a decade later. Their music, too, had a dark heart in the lyrical pain of Ian Curtis.

And yet for all that, it is questionable whether Sabbath’s music really does have a dark heart. If the

Sabs ever did have any real interest in the occult it seems that they soon grew bored of the Ouija board, instead taking large quantities of drugs and having sex with as many people as possible. But being essentially four lads from the backstreets of Brum they seem to have retained an inherent ordinariness, and certainly a sense of humour. I met the four of them once backstage at a radio programme I was broadcasting from the ill-fated UK Music Hall of Fame. During our chat Ozzy cheerfully admitted that yes, after a huge gig at the Milton Keynes Bowl while the band were taking the applause at the front of the stage, he did pull down Bill Ward's tracksuit bottoms as his fists were pumped ceremoniously aloft because 'he's got a big old schlong has Bill'. You've got to love that. There was no sign of Bill Ward's schlong, or indeed any other part of him, at the final Sabbath hometown show on 4 February 2017, and that seems to me a great shame. Even if unable to play the full show he should surely have had a part in somewhere.

At the Manchester Free Trade Hall in 1974, even though Bill was behind the drums, I failed to glimpse the same appendage. But I did see Black Sabbath. And standing bombazine-clad and brooding, like the Count of Monte Cristo with a Gibson SG, at the heart of the band where he would be the only ever-present member for very nearly fifty years, was Tony Iommi. The man who, due to an accident with some heavy metal, invented heavy metal.