

*THE SKINNY BLACK KID IN A ZOOT SUIT*

by Michael Waterman

“San-O-fucking zzzaaa,” the hippie screeched out, “San-O-fuckin’ zzzaaa!” and he, who was riding shotgun, along with the eight others in the rectangular boxy VW van, they all began to laugh wildly, including the driver who tried to shake the steering wheel back and forth although fortunately it held in a fixed position, nine bizarrely dressed people in a van that looked as if it had been painted by a Chicano from Espanola New Mexico where the houses are painted bright colors to drive off the bad spirits, a Chicano who came to California took lots of drugs and splashed all those vivid New Mexico colors onto the nearest stationary object which happened to be a VW van. (Which wasn’t far from the truth.)

“Who the hell ever goes to San-O-fuckin’ zzzaaa?”

And everyone laughed even harder, the van now weaving its way down Highway 101. If they were stopped, the fuzz would be sure they were all on acid, but hell it was only a little gauge leveling out this hazy late California afternoon.

“And what do they call them? zzzaaa-ians? That’s goddamn it: they’re zzzaaa-ians!”

This time the giggles, laughs and whoops were riotous, and a station wagon full of Stanford professors’ children driven by a Stanford professor’s wife was endangered but collision was avoided at the last second, the kids surviving to play their baseball game in Palo Alto twilight and the hippies making their blissful way on to San-O-fuckin’ zzzaaa.

In another half-hour the brightly colored van was wandering about a rough edge-of-downtown section of San Jose.

“Every time I get lost, I get to see something new,” one of the hippies said. “This is groovy!”

A girl who was not quite so wasted told him, “If we were headed straight to the damn place you could say the same damn thing. None of us has been here before. But for sure, this is not Berkeley!”

The destination of this and several other similarly lost vehicles was El Barranca Bar which normally had an exclusively Hispanic clientele. But tonight, word had gotten around, tonight Jimi would play at this previously unheard of location. Not too many people had heard of Jimi Hendrix yet, but Bill Graham had booked him at Fillmore West.

“Outta sight man, outta sight,” was what those still conscious when he played kept saying, “outta fuckin’ sight!”

But the Buzz carried an even more mysterious message than the El Barranca Bar location, it said that Jimi would play with Robert and that Jimi said Robert was a really big deal. Those who cared tried to work out who Robert was, which Robert it could be that had Jimi Hendrix promoting him. None of the guys named Robert they could think of would go to the El Barranca Bar or even to San-O-fuckin’ zzzaaa, that’s for sure. All up and down the Haight, along Columbus, over across the Bay on Telegraph, on all the Avenues this was the talk.

“Now today is supposed to be the day, but, you know, we never even saw it on a poster, nothin’, not anywhere, not even a hand-out, let’s blow it off.”

And only the VW van and a few others made the journey. Including later in the evening a few Hells Angels, they and the hippies still got along thanks to drug-taking tough-guy Oregon farm-boy Ken Kesey, and where was Kesey anyway?

“Hiding out in Mexico,” someone said. “That’s a drag man, that’s a real drag.” Rat Lands, Kesey later called Mexico, but everyone else thought he was fortunate to have a place so close by to run to and hide out.

The owner of El Barranca Bar had once been to Hawaii and was extremely fond of tropical chi chi. Bamboo lattice hung down over the bar, miniature surf boards and dusty stuffed parrots hung from string. Everything was covered with a patina of dust and spangled with cobwebs. The owner served beer and bourbon and tequila. If you wanted something else you went somewhere else, no debate. There was red wine in a large unlabeled jug, but the stuff was so vile that no-one drank more than one glass of that.

The hippies as they drifted in said “Wow,” and felt right at home. “Jimi is right on man. How’d he find this place?” Low-fidelity ranchero music blasted on the juke box. As with the booze there was no other choice of music.

The Hispanics at the bar and their tables raised their eyebrows, shrugged and said, “Que pasa,” and went right on drinking. Those guys in the funny clothes looked too limp to fight and anyway who would bother with their women who except for that fat one didn’t have any meat on their bones?

Of course the tiny stage was framed in bamboo lattice too. It was about 4” above the bar floor, and in a pinch a four-piece band could all fit on the stage. By 10 PM the room was full and the owner who was also bartender was selling more booze than he had ever had in his long history of running the bar, beer which he would never run out of, but they kept ordering *Southern Comfort* of which he only had two dusty bottles. So he sent his oldest son to search liquor stores for more bottles of the sweet vile stuff. What was it with gringos and *Southern Comfort*?

Then Jimi Hendrix came in the back door of the El Barranca Bar carrying his already famous guitar. People in the crowd knew him and called out.

“Hello.”

“How the hell are you?”

“Good ta see ya!”

Jimi wore that red-white-blue get-up that pissed off so many straight people. He had a red sash tied around his head with a long dark-brown striped feather stuck into it.

“What’s with the feather?” someone asked.

“I heard he got it from an Apache Indian who said it was a wild-turkey feather and that the wild-turkey is the great Native American bird. It’s from the wilderness of the Gila where the Apaches lived — you know, like in Gila Bend — and that even Ben Franklin knew the turkey was a more significant bird than the bald eagle, and that anyhow Jimi would have his skinny ass arrested the second he came out in public wearing an eagle feather.”

The bourbon *Wild Turkey* then had a run like with *Southern Comfort*, hippies and Hells Angels doing shots and beers, and the bartender as mystified as ever sent his second son to bring back all the damn bottles of *Wild Turkey* he could locate. He hoped they stuck with

what they were drinking; he had no more sons old enough to send on liquor expeditions. Washing glasses as fast as he could his youngest son stared wide-eyed at the crowd. And the bartender himself was sticking with the bar as long as they were buying anything, to hell with closing laws. If the cops came, he had already decided what he would say.

“Shit man, it’s Jimi Hendrix man. Don’t you know nothin’? It’s Jimi and we just havin’ a little private party here.”

Behind Jimi was a thin narrow-faced young black man wearing a zoot suit, a long incredibly baggy striped zoot suit, about 20 to 30 years out of fashion. It took the hippies so used to being outrageous entirely by surprise, what did he think: it was 1940 in Los Angeles of all the god-damn places? The hippies eventually recovered enough to say, far-fucking-out, but they were not sure what this kid was up to. Could this be Robert? No fucking way! He carried an electric guitar too but without that absolute authority that Hendrix had. He looked nervous, ill at ease, sick or something — who ever heard of a pale black man? His finger-nails were long and furrowed and white.

“Robert who?” a girl said to a boy who shrugged and sucked at his beer.

“Think we got time to go outside for a J? Or is it OK in here?”

The kid in the funny clothes sat down near the stage at a table Jimi had cleared for him, moving people there to sit somewhere else. Jimi then went ahead and hooked up both guitars while others plugged in the amps, just giving each instrument a twang or two to see that they were live. Then Jimi went up to the bar, held up two fingers in a peace sign, nodded to the bartender when asked in a question, “Two beers?” Days later people claimed to have noticed the careful respect with which Jimi placed a beer in front of the black kid in the zoot suit. Ranchero music was still pounding out of the juke box as Jimi leaned over to speak to the kid, Robert, Roberto, whatever the hell his name was. Then Hendrix signaled the bartender who amazingly switched off the music. This was a first so far as the regulars knew. He tapped and blew into the mike, popping sounds.

“Hello, glad you came out. You maybe came to see me so here’s a song.”

The El Barranca Bar filled with Purple Haze.

*Purple haze all in my brain.  
Lately things don’t seem the same.  
I feel funny but I don’t know why.  
Excuse me while I kiss the sky.*

The audience went mad while he was singing, here was the next huge thing in rock-n-roll, Jimi Fucking Hendrix! In San O Whatever!

“OK, that’s that. Now I want to introduce a guy who played many years ago but he hasn’t been on stage for a while. Please say hello to my friend Robert Johnson! I think you’ll find he plays pretty good guitar.”

“You all may think you don’t know this guy, but he wrote stuff that turned out to be what we play now. Some guys do *Crossroads*. Yeah, ya heard of it? No shit! Well Robert wrote that and other stuff too. He’s a little shy til he gets ta know ya, and this here’s his

first electric guitar. He says he don't like it but I don't believe him. So I'll pull in with him on the next number."

And then these two guys played *Crossroads*, the shy smile on Robert's angular face vanishing into the incredible wails of that electric being bottle-necked, was that with a steak bone? Hippies, at least those who could hear music, sat open-mouthed, not even drinking their beer or their Janis Joplin sweetened bourbon and the Hells Angels at the bar slapped the broad scarred solid surface, loud flat-handed slaps. (Don't laugh at them, it isn't worth your life.) The Hispanics weren't sure about the guy in the red-white-and-blue outfit, but damn, that black skinny kid in the zoot suit can play and sing, shit he's somethin'.

When *Crossroads* started, the girl told the boy who still wanted to go outside for smoke, "No, I'm staying inside to hear this. You do what you want. This.... It's.... This...is.... Wow...."

*Standin' at the crossroads,  
I tried to flag a ride.*

*Don't nobody seem to know me,  
Everybody passed me by.*

And that was pretty much everyone's reaction, wow. Robert Johnson, far out. Whoever knew this guy existed? His long bony hands slid up and down the guitar, long twisted fingernails stroking the strings. This was the blues. One guy who haunted music stores on Haight and Telegraph and who knew old music said, "Yeah, Robert Johnson. But he is dead, been dead for a long time."

"Bullshit," his amused friend said. "Just look on stage. Is that alive or not? That dude's alive!"

Then Jimi said, "I'll get out now," and he stepped off the four-inch ledge to sit down at the nearby table.

And Robert said someting, well he mumbled, no-one could hear or understand what he said. But the song he next played grabbed the crowd by the throat. The spare guitar notes filled and framed an emptiness and hopelessness that tore everyone apart.

*You better come in my kitchen,  
It's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.  
You better come in my kitchen,  
Cause it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

*Went up the mountain,  
Far as I could see.  
Some other man gots my woman,  
Lonesome blues got me.*

They were in the South in a hot humid day, sweating in the shadows while a big thunderstorm was about to break. Erratic bursts of heavy wind shook the temporary shelter.

That's what we all want in life, all we are allowed to ask for, just a stop-in, that's what our relationships are, that's all life is. Robert moaned, his guitar wailed, cried out, gave out solace, took it back and twisted everything it had out onto the ground, again and again. The man before them was born to play an electric guitar, electric guitars had been invented for him, never mind those who say he was dead years before electrics came to earth.

Late in the night Robert was drinking bourbon by the water-glass full, and he got Jimi to play back-up on a song. Jimi had to repeat what Robert said.

"The next song is by someone I learnt from. Blind Lemon Jefferson. He learnt from Texas Alexander."

Jimi didn't know the song and when the sparse hard-hit notes came, a twisting burst-silence-burst and the words crashed out in their own explosions, Jimi Hendrix was playing this strange music too, hitting ringing striding wrenching notes that would have on paper looked entirely wrong.

*I been sittin' here wonderin'  
with a matchbox on my clothes.  
Well I been here wonderin'  
with a matchbox on my clothes.*

*I ain't got so many matches,  
But ohh I got so far to go.*

And Robert sang another Blind Lemon song about Texas.

*Blues came through Texas  
Lopin' like a mule*

You could hear and smell the Texas terrain: the blues ran up to the mule, ran alongside for a spell, then passed him on by, the music stretching across the hot level plains and wastes of Texas. People were lost in the music.

No-one really remembers the end of that night. The Hells Angels gave acid to the bartender who fell in love with the black girl wearing an Hawaiian shirt with bright macaws on it. Those birds just flew off her shirt, feathers brilliant black, fluorescent pulsating orange, all of it, wings shirt tropical night exotic beautiful woman, it wrapped around him, gathered him in, and carried him away. The fact that he made it home a day-and-a-half late caused him a good deal of trouble with his wife. Robert stopped being shy after enough bourbon and the girl who stayed inside to hear him was seen talking with him. It is believed that they went down the street to a ratty hotel, and so far as anyone knows neither of them were seen again. The desk clerk there was an alcoholic who couldn't be counted on to sign everyone in or to recall much of anything that happened.

And Jimi, Jimi said he just met this guy in a bar in Oakland and that he believed Robert was who he said he was. "Didn't you hear him play?" And he said Robert Johnson picked El Barranca Bar.