

Anyone interested in blues music, either guitar or piano, know the names of the 'blues legends'. These are the old guys that started it all. None of them had to learn the blues, they lived the blues! Men like Lightnin' Hopkins, Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy come to mind.

It's easy to see how Johnson's legend grew over time. There are only two photographs left, both very similar, and his colleagues that lived to the 70s would talk about his famous rendezvous with Satan at the crossroads. I didn't meet Broonzy, although there are several clips of film left for us to relish, all posted on Youtube.

I was contacted by a man who worked in a band that supported Broonzy while touring the UK in the late 50s. He spoke about a huge man who drank too much, laughed most of the time and told colorful stories a lot of the time. His unique guitar style was impossible to copy, and to this day, almost no-one has managed to emulate Big Bill's sound.

Some years ago, in 1998, I lived in Indiana and was often thirsty for the sound of the blues. I heard that there was a blues bar called 'Buck's Working Man's Pub' in a town about 40 miles away in the town of La Porte. After work, I eagerly climbed into the car and set off.

Given directions by the locals, I drove down main street, turned left at the drugstore and went over the railroad tracks to the more disreputable side of town. At last, I'd get to see the real blues. The bar wasn't up to much. I ordered a drink and found my way to room at the back, drawn by the sound of a loud electric band.

The room wasn't empty, and it wasn't full. This kind of blues wasn't what I was interested in anyway – I was more interested in the old acoustic blues. The old guy at my table said that the locals had hired the band as it was the bar's owner's birthday today. He didn't speak at all after that.

The band wound down and the singer addressed the audience. "Happy Birthday, Pinetop", he yelled, and carried on "Ladies and gentlemen, Pinetop has agreed to play his boogie piano for us." The old man at my table stood up and walked up to the front, sitting down in front of a grand piano. He started a slow boogie which became more and more complex with new bars. My mouth dropped open when I realised I'd been sitting next to a real master, an original bluesman.

Pinetop played only a couple songs and then walked past me out of the room. I never saw him again the rest of the night. With hindsight, I thought questions I could have asked him, but maybe it's just as well. It was the guys birthday and he might have been bothered by a stranger's questions. Legends are just like us, you understand.

Each passing year, the bluesmen are dying out, to be replaced by newer legends. I also recall driving clear across Indiana and Michigan to see a more modern blues legend, who has to remain anonymous, because of his words during our encounter. Enthralled, I suggested that it was a wonderful way to live, to follow in the path of the original blues – travelling around playing the blues.

“Not at all”, he replied “It’s a pain and I’d rather be at home doing something else!” We’ve got to remember – legends are just human.