WILL A MATCHBOX HOLD MY CLOTHES?

By Michael Ventura
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I'm sittin' here wonderin', will a matchbox hold my clothes? A line composed long before cardboard matchbooks, when stick matches came in small thin-walled wooden boxes that fit in the palm of the hand. If you were wondering whether your clothes would fold into such a wee box, then not only didn't you have a pot to piss in, you didn't even have a bag for your stuff - and you had nowhere to go, but that didn't matter because leaving was your only option. You'd have to make up your destination as you went along. The blues, jazz, and rock & roll were invented by people to whom this dilemma was all too familiar. Blind Lemon Jefferson was the first to record the matchbox verse, in the late 1920s. In the early Forties a variation showed up in a Billie Holiday song about a man who *had the nerve to put a matchbox on my clothes.* That was his way of throwing her out, his way of saying that she'd get nothing, not from him. And she, too, conveyed that there was never anywhere to go, but you had to go there anyway.

Carl Perkins sang the matchbox verse in 1957 (with Jerry Lee Lewis pounding piano behind him). *I ain't got no matches but I got a long way to go.* A long way to go and a lot of heart were just about all these people had. Going their long way, they gave us this music. It's not enough to say they had talent too. "Talent" is an overrated word that boils down to little more than a kind of artistic dexterity. Many have it and few do much with it. The originators of our music, and the best of their inheritors, are marked by something more important. No matter how bleak or beautiful their vision, no matter how spare or gaudy their method, no matter how original or derivative their style, they have an irreducible sense of urgency. The music must be played, and listened to, *now*, today, tonight, because it's the only way to get from here to there. "Here" may be weird and "there" is unknowable, but staying in place is unthinkable. Most of us don't even know what a matchbox is anymore, not really, not the way Blind Lemon and Billie Holiday and Carl Perkins did, but we have one tough thing in common with them: We still have a long way to go, and no choice but to go there.

And for many of us the music has been crucial to *how* we go. As JoCarol Pierce sings it: *They give their bodies to the music, 'cause the music knows what to do.*

The great New Orleans jazzman Sidney Bechet put it this way:

"The music... that's the thing you gotta trust. You gotta mean it, and you gotta treat it gentle. The music, that's the road. There's good things alongside it, and there's miseries. You stop by the way and you can't ever be sure what you're going to find waiting. But the music itself, the road itself - there's no stopping that. It goes on all the time. It's the thing that brings you to everything else. You have to trust that. There's no one ever came back who can't tell you that."

I write this tonight to say goodbye to Carl Perkins, who died on January 19th at the age of 65. He was a crucial figure in the transition from rhythm & blues to rock & roll. He recorded "Blue Suede Shoes" on December 19, 1955. Elvis' "Heartbreak Hotel," the first rock super-hit (though it was really a pop blues), was on the charts; but it's now largely forgotten that Perkins' rockin' "Blue Suede Shoes" surpassed "Heartbreak Hotel," took the Number One spot on the charts, and sold more records. Elvis couldn't play much guitar ("He couldn't really play a lick," Roy Orbison once told me) while Perkins was one

of the handful of guitarists who initiated a new and still much-imitated style. Elvis didn't compose his own songs; Perkins did. I don't mean to take anything away from Elvis; he was *the* master stylist and showman of the early days of this music. But Perkins was pure gut-bucket rock. Nothing "pop" about him. A musician's musician, an originator, a source. A man who often composed his songs in performance. "I just stood there on-stage makin' up rhymes. Some worked." *All my friends are boppin' the blues; it must be goin' 'round.*

A hard-living but humble man. Though he recorded "Blue Suede Shoes" in only two takes, managing to riff one of the more influential guitar solos in music history, he didn't give himself the credit. "I never had played what I played in the studio that day. I know God said: 'I've held it back, but this is it. Now you get down and get it.'" And three decades later: "Eric Clapton wanted to know how I got that biting sound on the intros. I told him the truth, that I didn't know. That's the way I played 'em that day. I'm s*till* working on 'em, trying to get 'em right."

But... there's the music as recordings, the music as history, and the music as magic in the night, and I'm remembering a night sometime in the spring of 1980, in Austin, up on North Lamar, at the Soap Creek Saloon. It was a much smaller town then. Most of the skyscrapers and housing developments hadn't been built. Rents were low. There were no music or film festivals here. There were only a couple of coffee shops. And not many Yankees. (I was one of the few.) The Austin music scene hadn't yet been hyped in New York and L.A. Carl Perkins and Joe Ely were double-billing at Soap Creek. (Or did they play on consecutive nights, and has memory melded that into one night? My friends and I usually talk about it as one night, but legendary moments have a peculiar physics of time and space, so I wouldn't swear to it.)

Perkins, age 47, hadn't gigged much in a long time. Few Austin people, even among the musicians, had heard him live. *Everybody* came. Bands playing at other clubs dashed up to Soap Creek on their breaks, many asking Perkins for autographs. I can't remember if it was Stevie Vaughan (not yet recorded, and not yet "Stevie Ray") or his drummer Chris Layton who lifted his boot into my face and said, "I got Carl to sign the instep!"

Lives changed that night. Forever. No kidding. I don't know what it was, the alchemy of Perkins and/or Ely (leading that great Lloyd Maines-Jesse Taylor band), the moon, Jesus, the Devil, or all of the above, but every now and again we still talk about that night. The ex-lovers who hadn't spoken intimately for years, who ran into each other in the packed honkytonk and suddenly smiled and said a few quick sentences in the din of the music, confessing how much that long-ago love had meant to them and how they were so proud it had happened and they'd never forget it. (The smile in that woman's eyes when she told me this story years later.) The friend who is no longer my friend, walking in with a blond sad-eyed lady of the lowlands whom I'd never seen before, and how right they looked together, and how fervently I wished my friend had found what he was looking for; but years later she became *my* dream, and no matter how sadly *that* went down I never forgot the first time I saw her, in that club that night, though I can't remember which lyric was playing. Maybe Ely's *You sure look fine tonight, in the beer-sign light.* And on the same night (or was it the next night?) another dream started for me, oh my dear poor pounding heart, *nothing* was ever the same after seeing into the soul that second dream-carrying woman. And of course Big Boy Medlin dancing on the stage with a napkin on his head (why the napkin, Biggie?) and 20 tequilas (you don't have to believe it, it's not your liver) under his belt. And the friends who met that night and later married

and are, somehow, still married. And I could go on. We compare notes on that night as though talking about a storm, a tornado, an earthquake, a flood. And we marvel. "What the *hell* was going on?" It was like all the nights in all the honkytonks mashed into one (or was it two?). "It was *church,* baby."

> All my friends are boppin' the blues, it must be goin' round... I still love love ya, baby, but I'll never be the same.

Even wrote a poem about it, part of which goes:

> We dare happiness, that frightening thing,
>
> To have this dance -
>
> I am dancing in its place for you,
>
> You are dancing in its place for me

I ask you: What in this world is more disruptive than happiness?

During a break Carl Perkins was sitting at the bar, alone, nursing a club soda. A big man. A classic Tennessee mountain face. A graying pompadour. Hard sad eyes. Every now and again someone would get the courage to talk to him. Thank him for the music. "And I mean *all* the music, one lady said in a thick East Texas drawl. (She pronounced "all" as though it was four-syllable word.) "'Preciate it," he'd say solemnly.

"Here" may be weird and "there" may be unknowable, but staying in place is unthinkable. The music isn't about settling for what is. "You are what you settle for," Thelma tells Louise (or Louise tells Thelma, I forget). This has been the music that doesn't settle. That opens a gate in the dark, like that gate we danced through at Soap Creek that night. A night that ended with Joe Ely yell-moaning his version of "Matchbox," a number he always closed his sets with in those days, *sittin' here wondering... I sure got a long way to go.* And so we still do. Lots of things end, but not that. And there's Carl Perkins, eyes fierce on "Dixie Fried."

> "RAVE on, children, I'm with ya."