The Devil’s Sermon of Ryan Coogler in Sinners

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See, I’m full of the blues, holy water too – Preacher Boy

At the time of death, legendary Delta blues musician, Robert Johnson, was only 27. He had disappeared quietly, so quiet that the world did not hear a word about it until nearly three decades later, when a researcher stumbled upon his death certificate somewhere in Mississippi. Though his music had garnered very little interest beyond the chitlin circuit up until his mysterious passing in 1938, he would later be credited with helping to pioneer rock and roll, directly inspiring mainstream white acts like Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton and Led Zeppelin. The circumstances surrounding his death are uncertain, though theories abound: complications from untreated syphilis, naphthalene poisoning by a mistress’ jealous husband, and aortic dissection from a genetic disorder. Many have claimed in particular that his death was natural comeuppance for making a deal with the devil, selling his soul in exchange for musical talents of wild proportions.

When white audiences discovered Johnson’s music and the Satanic legend, they would latch onto it, spreading the myth like wildfire so that his reputation would forever be cast in that Mephistophelean light. This legend, and the peculiar politics surrounding its endurance, is emblematic of the precarity of Black art in the face of white narratives. After all, the demonization of Black genius is not an unusual phenomenon in culture. It is premised on the belief of black intellectual inferiority. It is a myth sustained by a sheer belief that if such a genius exists at all, that oxymoronic phenomenon (a gifted negro) must have come from some nefarious ether only explicable by the illogic of Satanism. This ghostly history hangs over the latest cinematic offering from American director, Ryan Coogler.

The first time the world met Coogler, it was through *Fruitvale Station* (2013), named after the Bay Area transit station where 22-year-old Oscar Grant had been murdered four years prior by police officer Johannes Mehserle. Set in Coogler’s hometown of Oakland, California, the film is a morbid entry in the day-in-the-life genre, chronicling the last hours in Grant’s (Michael B. Jordan) young life, culminating in his eventual murder. Coogler’s auterial eye captures the city, its deathly streets

and festive skies, in a way only a truly gifted local can. In the twelve years since then, he has directed two Marvel blockbusters and a spin-off from the Oscar-winning *Rocky* series. And though he is now far removed from the status of indie-adjacent auteur whose projects seem designed for the festival circuit, his new movie, *Sinners* (2025), proves that his artistic vision remains firmly grounded in his concern for the Black condition.

This time, the spatial canvas for Coogler's imagination is neither the Afrofuturistic dreamland of Wakanda nor the gritty underworld of present-day Los Angeles; it is Robert Johnson's Mississippi. And what a glorious sight it is, thanks to cinematographer Autumn Cheyenne Durald, whose keen eye captures the Mississippi Delta in all its grand stature, at once gallant and terrifying. This time, there are no flying aquatic creatures or boxing legends; the antagonists to Coogler's flawed heroes are blood suckers led by a white man with a thirst for bringing souls under his command. While this might seem to be a much too thin metaphor on the surface, the story's conceit, thankfully, does not rest on lazy interpretations of vampiric interracial dynamics.

Contrary to what all the promotional materials and his top-billed status would suggest, our protagonist is neither of the charismatic twins played by Jordan. It is the young and spirited musician, Preacher Boy/Sammie Moore, played to dizzying perfection by newcomer Miles Canton. Preacher Boy is a talented musician whose one passion in this world, besides show-stopping cunnilingus, is playing the blues. His pursuit of this passion is heavily discouraged by his preacher-father, who considers the blues to be a conduit for the devil (a historically accurate story element that mirrors the Black church's perception of the blues). But more on that later.

The main story kicks off when notorious twins Smoke and Stack return from Chicago with a not-so-clever plan to open a juke joint in an impoverished part of town, the hooded shadow of the Ku Klux Klan looming over them. They recruit musicians including their cousin Preacher Boy for the opening of the new establishment. As they interact with new characters, their humanity unfurls underneath all that tough-guy posterior. We find out that Smoke and Stack's initial exit from the Delta was accentuated by grief: Smoke left his wife Annie following the death of their only child, and Stack left his white-passing girlfriend Mary (Hailee Steinfeld), whose life would have been endangered by being romantically affiliated with him.

A still from the trailer

The opening of the juke joint appears to be a roaring success, reaching a peak when Preacher Boy hits the stage for a spiritually invigorating rendition of "I Lied To You," directed to his father, who stands in for the Christian demonization of Black expression. In this aesthetically and rhetorically

perfect scene, Preacher Boy inadvertently calls upon the spirits of the Black ancestors and the unborn to participate in the merriment. The surreality of the moment, its vivid celebration of vast generations of Blackness in a manner free from the limits of logic, mirrors the kind of spacework being done today by Black artists such as Morgan Parker in her poem, "It Was Summer Now and the Colored People Came Out Into the Sunshine." But while Parker's compass points to war, Preacher Boy's invocation is a riotously festive affair: lit Black college girls, Sun Ra-inspired futuristic guitarists, pre-colonial West African drummers, 90s West Coast rappers, all that goddamn Black swag. But war finds him and the doomed partygoers, nonetheless. Preacher Boy's blues seemingly vindicate his father's dogmatic views when they attract the attention of the "devil," Remmick, a 600-year-old Irish vampire with a vague backstory and a desire to add more souls to his horde of nightwalkers. Remmick's argument is not entirely unconvincing: You get conditional immortality and a sick ability to carry a tune. (The vampires' covers of "Will Ye Go Lassie, Go?" and "Rocky Road to Dublin" are already cinematic highlights of the year).

As the events unfold, it is revealed that the juke joint was always death space masquerading as a safe haven. The juke joint is Fruitvale Station, an excited Grant taking the train to see the fireworks and celebrate the New Year; it is a precolonial African village abuzz with song and color; it is the slave quarters where the slaves sing and dance during their few moments of reprieve. But the spell is broken and the truth of it all is laid bare when Coogler reminds us that the cops soon invade Frutivale and pull the breath out of Grant's body, that the British soon invade that African village, killing and looting until all that is left of it is smoke and blood, that the slaves' reprieve ends the moment the overseer comes in with his whip —reminding them that there is no joy for them in this world. Black joy, specifically Black joy borne from a sense of belonging, is directly detrimental to whiteness because whiteness as a social force defines itself in relation to its distortion of Black self-image. And while the juke joint represents that temporal space in which joy seems to exist in its fullness, trust three undead creatures in white bodies to puncture that fantasy.

Remmick's ultimate plan is to use Preacher Boy's musical gifts to find the others and increase the numbers. This plays into the tendency to appropriate Black gifts for the propagation of whiteness. In America specifically, Black art (blues, jazz, hiphop, soul, rock and roll) has shaped the culture without much credit for its vast influence on our modern understanding of Americana. In much of West Africa, the colonizers used the existing Black political structures to consolidate their power and transform Black bodies into extension of European civilizations. They converted them into Bible-thumping creatures speaking foreign tongues and winning souls for the god of their captors. But the story is more complicated than that. There is some defiance in there. Just like many figures chose to do (Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo and the nameless martyrs of the Igbo Landing come to mind), characters like Annie would rather die than have their agency taken from them.

In the third act's definitive scene, Preacher Boy's father, seeing him blood-drenched, as shattered as the ghost-guitar he carries, asks him, "Drop the guitar, Sammie, in the name of God!" In the end, in spite of the horror it has brought him, Preacher Boy chooses to hold on to his music and make his scars into a conspicuous beauty mark, like the sub-Saharan African art of scarification.

This way, Preacher Boy represents the Black diaspora's stubborn insistence on clinging to the sounds of their past, the Soul that makes them special, even as the influence of whiteness continues to weigh on them—the Black world has been forever transformed by its encounter with whiteness; in fact, their consciousness of as Black is predicated on that unfortunate encounter. What they have become in the aftermath of that encounter is part of the story. Like Preacher Boy sings, Black people are full of the blues—their heritage— and holy water too—the presence of whiteness in their history. Coogler's spacework appears to establish that in the eyes of whiteness, Black acceptance of self will always make us unclean, uncivilized, unsanctified beings. We are all Robert Johnson, and what you hear in the distance, that sound of rebellion, that refusal to be subsumed into someone else's

civilization, is the devil’s music. And he calls us to sing it with him.

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