



Sweet Home Chicago

When prompted to create mixed media with a musical component, I began by searching for “music” through my first choice for primary and secondary sources, the PBS docuseries archives. I stumbled across Ken Burns’ 2001 series *Jazz*, and within minutes of watching, I was inspired to delve deeper. At that time, my intended project focus would be on jazz, and I decided to capture images of musical instruments. A quick Google, and it turned out that located just down the road from me was a Sam Ash store.

I packed one multipurpose lens (a Canon EF-S 18-55mm) and off I went. Thanks to the friendly Sam Ash staff, I was able to get up close and personal with pianos, saxophones, and symbols, all typical in early jazz. Since Sam Ash is, first and foremost a guitar store, I took a handful of close-up photos of acoustic guitars, in an attempt to showcase their unique materials and textures. The next items to tackle were choosing a singular song for messaging purposes and historical background to interweave.

I initially chose two photos for my substrate, one that showcased stacked drum symbols, and another featuring a saxophone. Millennial style, I went back to Google to search “greatest jazz saxophonists” and the first result was John Coltrane. I listened to several Coltrane songs on Spotify, but none resonated with my photos. I went back to the Ken Burns’ documentary, and was inspired to focus on jazz’s earliest roots, the blues. I hate to admit to a subsequent Google search of “greatest blues musicians,” but that turned up Robert Johnson. I went to Spotify to check out Johnson’s catalogue, and I noticed one of my favorite song titles by Steve Miller Band “Sweet Home Chicago,” also by Johnson, but from 1937. At this point, I decided to go down the rabbit hole, fully.

It was quite an experience delving into the song’s origin story. The song title search in Spotify brings up iterations by rock and roll’s who’s who: Eric Clapton, The Blues Brothers, and more. But the number one spot (and original credit) belonged to Robert Johnson. I finally had a connection. I explored Johnson’s history, and it was like reading a ghost story. An early member of music’s infamous “27 Club,” Johnson’s musical talents were, as history tells it, the result of selling his soul to the devil.¹ Johnson’s life ended abruptly after an affair with another man’s woman and a glass of poisoned whiskey, followed by a burial in an unmarked grave. A badass story for a badass man.

Only three photographs of Johnson are known to history.² To me, the one that best encapsulates his biography features the musician with a cigarette in his mouth. I felt it matched his raspy voice, especially when closely cropped. I used one of my close-up images of guitars as a background and added Johnson’s portrait as a faded-out overlay in Photoshop. I loved the misty, ambiguous result so much that I went to the Library of Congress’ digital archives to find another photo from the time period to complete my diptych. My intent was to use a photo of the Chicago skyline for a literal pairing, but in researching Chicago in the time period, my journey took an interesting turn.

The LOC archives’ “Chicago” photographs from the 1930s are numerous; most are untitled, and most are credited as unprinted negatives from the Farm Security Administration. This government-sponsored program (part of FDR’s Depression-era New Deal) served as “an extensive pictorial record of American life between 1935 and 1944.”³ Unfortunately, most of these programs were to get white Americans back to work, leaving 50% of all African Americans out of work and desperate. When Robert Johnson crooned the words “Baby, don’t you want to go... to my sweet home Chicago” he painted a portrait of that moment in time.

As a black man from Mississippi in 1936, life was unsure and transient for Johnson. He wasn’t in Chicago, nor his home in Mississippi when he recorded “Sweet Home Chicago,” he was in San Antonio, Texas. His future was as unsure as the child in Jack Delano’s FSA photograph selling copies of *The Chicago Defender* on a Chicago street corner. I used the child’s portrait as an overlay the same way I created my first picture, and the results were extremely rich in metaphor.

The final step in my process was to decide the photo’s color, or lack thereof. Ultimately, I made both images black and white, and gave them a translucent navy overlay because in my mind, a photo narrative about the blues should quite literally be blue.

¹ Rolling Stone: *The 27 Club, A Brief History* (2019)

² Barry Coulter: *The Third Photograph of Robert Johnson* (2020)

³ Ibid

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