

## Fallen Fret Excerpt

Pass by the barstools of Harlem's Backbeat tavern on a Friday evening and you'll overhear talk of stolen trills, unpaid gigs, and narcissistic bandmates. To hear a better tale, stay for a slow drink and listen to the bluesman sing his ballad of the O'Malley sisters; a song with thundering chords and lyrics of greed, jealousy, and murder.

In 2009, Sarah, the older O'Malley sister, met the man who would compose the ballad. An investigative writer by trade, she requested an interview after finding his name on a yellowed session card tucked in the jacket of a library book. He suggested they meet at Mim's, a renowned Lower Manhattan nightclub. Waiting in the walnut paneled hallway, she ignored the original artwork and focused on a row of framed newspaper and magazine articles on the wall. A 1950 *New York Times* review described saxophonist Charlie Parker's exhilarating Mim's performance despite arriving hours late with his horn in a rumpled paper bag. Another article described saxophone god John Coltrane's exhausting three hour performance on Mim's stage. Unsettled by a wayward note, he fine-tuned musical scales in the men's room during intermission. An August 1969 *Jazz Beat* article described the afternoon Miles Davis turned his back to Mim's audience and trumpeted his first jazz fusion notes outside a studio. A 1969 *Music Life* review reported on the winter night blues guitarist Jimi Hendrix singed Mim's wall varnish during his four hour set.

A barmaid carrying a folding chair told Sarah to leave because the club was closed until first show seating at six p.m. Sarah mentioned her meeting with Chaz Russell. The barmaid resentfully pointed the chair leg toward the Sanctuary, a concert room cluttered with skinny chairs and spindly tables with pizza box size tops.

Sarah sat in a maroon velvet chair in the alcove, facing a windowed wall with views of tailgating cars and hurrying pedestrians. A few minutes later, Chaz introduced himself, kissed her outstretched hand, and sat on a Victorian couch backed to the windows. Sunlight brightened the shoulders of his white silk shirt. When he smiled, tightly-trimmed, chalky, beard whiskers framed his intermittent gold teeth. His white Egyptian linen pants showed fraying at the pocket entrances and cuffs. Seconds after he sat, Sarah caught a puff of manly cologne.

He apologized when his loafer bumped her heel, then he rubbed his eyes and complained about a lack of sleep caused by playing an early morning encore. "Why would a dolled-up white girl want to interview a seventy-year-old black musician?" he asked. "You still in high school? Writing a blues book? Let me give some advice: you can't describe the blues with words, you have live it."

"I hit thirty in a few years." Sarah said. "I'm here because your name came up in my research. I'm writing a book about Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix, two famous musicians who knew each other, but never recorded together, so they say. How'd you become a bluesman and hang with people like them?"

“I’ll tell you my life story if you have a few days.”

“Let’s do the one minute version.”

“Sugar, I do a hundred interviews a year. They’ve written my story many times. Born in ‘44 on a Mississippi cotton farm. Great-grandparents were freed slaves. Age ten, got good playing a two-string guitar made from a cigar box bolted to a canoe paddle. At seventeen, hitched a freight train to Chicago. Got a job painting a record company office. A studio musician got sick, I filled in. Led to steady work with Muddy Waters. Got tired of Mud, so I formed my own band. We’ve played all over America and Europe. It’s a typical bluesman life of fame, fortune, misfortune, no fortune, little fortune. You’ve heard my story, what’s yours?”

Sarah rested the tip of a plastic ball point pen on her reporter’s notebook. She ran a few fingers through her long black hair. “Last two years,” she said, “I’ve covered the city jazz and blues scene for *National Vibe*. Spare time, I’m working on my book. Trying to explain why the greatest blues guitarist and the greatest jazz musician didn’t record together. Any thoughts on Miles and Jimi?”

“Loved them both. Miles, little guy, big attitude, flashy clothes. Saw him drag race his Ferrari down Broadway. Changed the whole jazz scene four or five times. Could play his trumpet loud as a firecracker or soft as a lover’s whisper. Got more out of a pause than some get from a ten bar blast. Rode jazz from bebop to jazz fusion and beyond.”

“What about Hendrix?”

“Sweet guy. If he didn’t choke to death or get strangled in ’70, he’d have recorded a hundred albums by now. His studio was across the street. Guy reinvented electric guitar. Before Jimi, blues guitarists just copied bluesman like Robert Johnson and Otis Rush. Jimi mixed blues with funk and fuzz. They call him the ‘Greatest Rock Guitarist’ which isn’t right; Jimi had blues bones.”

“The books say, in ‘69,” Sarah said, “Hendrix and Davis booked a studio, lined up a few musicians to join them in a recording session. Night before, Miles asked for fifty thousand dollars. Hendrix cancelled the session.”

Chaz slid over to a shaded section of the couch, tight to his weathered guitar case. “Sugar, you only know part of the story. Jimi was like catnip to woman. More than a few times, Jimi got too friendly with Betty, Miles wife. Cooled things between Jimi and Miles. Miles was working on getting Betty back.”

“So that’s what happened. Did blues and jazz musicians jam together?”

“Not often. Slow nights, at the union hall, jazz and blues musicians tossed around a few trills. Blues musicians improvised, jazz musicians sampled blues, but never at a gig. Jazz clubs wanted jazz, blues clubs wanted blues. I was here the night Hendrix played Mim’s, longhairs in ripped jeans scared away the tweed and hairspray crowd. The longhairs came in with a foreign buzz, stoned on weed, didn’t buy drinks. Mim counted her receipts and never brought Hendrix back. She catered to the jazz crowd who wore snappy clothes, paid stiff covers with a smile, and

drank over-priced Manhattans. Over in the blues clubs, ladies in sparkly dresses snuggled in the booths with guys and carried the action to the dance floor.”