

Landmark Blues Musician Robert Leroy Johnson (May 8, 1911 – August 16, 1938) was an American blues singer and musician. His landmark recordings from 1936–1937 display a remarkable combination of singing, guitar skills, and songwriting talent that have influenced generations of musicians. Johnson's shadowy, poorly documented life and death at age 27 have given rise to much legend, including a Faustian myth.

Johnson's songs, vocal phrasing and guitar style have influenced a broad range of musicians; Eric Clapton has called Johnson "the most important blues singer that ever lived". Johnson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an "Early Influence" in their first induction ceremony in 1986. He was ranked fifth in *Rolling Stone's* list of 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time.

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Early life

Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, probably on May 8, 1911 or 1912, to Julia Major Dodds (born October 1874) and Noah Johnson (born December 1884). Julia was married to Charles Dodds (born February 1865), a relatively prosperous landowner and furniture maker with whom she gave birth to 10 children. Dodds had been forced by a lynch mob to leave Hazlehurst following a dispute with white landowners. Julia herself left Hazlehurst with baby Robert, but after some two years, sent him to live in Memphis with Dodds, who had changed his name to Charles Spencer.^[5]

Around 1919, Robert rejoined his mother in the area around Tunica and Robinsonville, Mississippi. Julia's new husband was known as Dusty Willis; he was 24 years younger than she. Robert was remembered by some residents as "Little Robert Dusty."^[6] However, he was registered at the Indian Creek School in Tunica as Robert Spencer. He is listed as Robert Spencer in the 1920 census with Will and Julia Willis in Lucas, Arkansas, where they lived for a short time. Robert was at school in 1924 and 1927^[7] and the quality of his signature on his marriage certificate^[8] suggests that he studied continuously and was relatively well

educated for a boy of his background. One school friend, Willie Coffee, has been discovered and filmed. He recalls that Robert was already noted for playing the harmonica and jaw harp.^[9] After school, Robert adopted the surname of his natural father, signing himself as Robert Johnson on the certificate of his marriage to sixteen-year-old Virginia Travis in February 1929. She died shortly after in childbirth.^[10]

Around this time, the noted blues musician Son House moved to Robinsonville where his musical partner, Willie Brown, already lived. Late in life, House remembered Johnson as a boy who had followed him around and tried unsuccessfully to copy him. But when House moved to Robinsonville in 1930, Johnson was a young adult, already married and widowed. Johnson then left the Robinsonville area, reappearing after a few months with a miraculous guitar technique.^[11] He was living near Hazlehurst when he married for the second time.^[12]

From this base Johnson began travelling up and down the Delta as an itinerant musician.

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Performing career

When Johnson arrived in a new town, he would play for tips on street corners or in front of the local barbershop or a restaurant. Musical associates stated that in live performances Johnson often did not focus on his dark and complex original compositions, but instead pleased audiences by performing more well-known pop standards of the day^[13] and not necessarily blues. With an ability to pick up tunes at first hearing, Johnson had no trouble giving his audiences what they wanted, and certain of his contemporaries later remarked on Johnson's interest in jazz and country. Johnson also had an uncanny ability to establish a rapport with his audience

in every town in which he stopped, Johnson would establish ties to the local community that would serve him well when he passed through again a month or a year later.

Fellow musician Johnny Shines was 17 when he met Johnson in 1933. He estimated that Johnson was maybe a year older than himself. In Samuel Charters' *Robert Johnson*, the author quotes Shines as saying:

"Robert was a very friendly person, even though he was sulky at times, you know. And I hung around Robert for quite a while. One evening he disappeared. He was kind of a peculiar fellow. Robert'd be standing up playing some place, playing like nobody's business. At about that time it was a hustle with him as well as a pleasure. And money'd be coming from all directions. But Robert'd just pick up and walk off and leave you standing there playing. And you wouldn't see Robert no more maybe in two or three weeks . . . So Robert and I, we began journeying off. I was just, matter of fact, tagging along."

During this time Johnson established what would be a relatively long-term relationship with Estella Coleman, a woman who was about fifteen years his elder and the mother of musician Robert Lockwood, Jr. But Johnson reportedly cultivated a woman to look after him in each town he played in. Johnson supposedly asked homely young women living in the country with their families whether he could go home with them, and in most cases the answer was 'yes' until a boyfriend arrived or Johnson was ready to move on.

Robert Johnson's First Landmark Recordings

In 1941, Alan Lomax learned from Muddy Waters that Johnson had performed in the Clarksdale, Mississippi area.^[14] By 1959, Samuel Charters could only add that Will Shade of the Memphis Jug Band remembered Johnson had once briefly played with him in West Memphis, Arkansas.^[15] In the last year of his life, Johnson is believed to have traveled to St. Louis and possibly Illinois, and then to some states in the East. He spent some time in Memphis and traveled through the Mississippi Delta and Arkansas.

In 1938, Columbia Records producer John H. Hammond, who owned some of Johnson's records, sought him out to book him for the first "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall in New York. On learning of Johnson's death,

Hammond replaced him with Big Bill Broonzy, but still played two of Johnson's records from the stage.

Delta Blues Guitar King - Robert Johnson Video - Crossroads

Recording sessions

Main article: Robert Johnson's recording sessions

Around 1936, Johnson sought out H. C. Speir in Jackson, Mississippi, who ran a general store and doubled as a talent scout. Speir put Johnson in touch with Ernie Oertle, who offered to record the young musician in San Antonio, Texas. At the recording session, held November 23, 1936 in room 414 at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio^{[17][18][19]} which Brunswick Records had set up as a temporary studio, Johnson reportedly performed facing the wall. This has been cited as evidence he was a shy man and reserved performer, a conclusion played up in the inaccurate liner notes of the 1961 album *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. In the ensuing three-day session, Johnson played sixteen selections, and recorded alternate takes for most of these. Among the songs Johnson recorded in San Antonio were "Come On In My Kitchen", "Kind Hearted Woman Blues", "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" and "Cross Road Blues". The first songs to appear were "Terraplane Blues" and "Last Fair Deal Gone Down", probably the only recordings of his that he would live to hear. "Terraplane Blues" became a moderate regional hit, selling 5,000 copies.

His first recorded song, "Kind Hearted Woman Blues", was part of a cycle of spin-offs and response songs that began with Leroy Carr's "Mean Mistreater Mama" (1934). According to Wald, it was "the most musically complex in the cycle"^[20] and stood apart from most rural blues as a through-composed lyric, rather than an arbitrary collection of more-or-less unrelated verses.^[21] In contrast to most Delta players, Johnson had absorbed the idea of fitting a composed song into the three minutes of a 78 RPM side.^[22] Most of Johnson's "somber and introspective" songs and performances come from his second recording session.^[23]

In 1937, Johnson traveled to Dallas, Texas, for another recording session in a makeshift studio at the Brunswick Record Building, 508 Park Avenue.^[24] Eleven records from this session would be released within the following year. Because Johnson did two takes of most songs during these sessions, and recordings of those takes survived, more opportunity exists to compare different performances of a single song by Johnson than for any other blues performer of his time and place.^[25] By the time he died, at least six of his records had been released in the South as race records.

Playback issues in extant recordings

The accuracy of the pitch and speed of the extant recordings has been questioned. In *The Guardian's* music blog from May 2010, Jon Wilde states that "the common consensus among musicologists is that we've been listening to [Robert] Johnson at least 20% too fast;" i.e., that "the recordings were accidentally speeded up when first committed to 78 [rpm records], or else were deliberately speeded up to make them sound more exciting."^[26] He does not give a source for this statement. Former Sonymusic executive Lawrence Cohn, who won a Grammy for the label's 1991 reissue of Johnson's works, "acknowledges there's a possibility Johnson's 1936-37 recordings were sped up, since the OKeh/Vocalion family of labels, which originally issued the material, was 'notorious' for altering the speed of its releases. 'Sometimes it was 78 rpms, sometimes it was 81 rpms,' he says. It's impossible to check the original sources, since the metal stampers used to duplicate the original 78 discs disappeared years ago."^[27]

Death

Johnson died on August 16, 1938, at the age of 27, near Greenwood, Mississippi. He had been playing for a few weeks at a country dance in a town about 15 miles (24 km) from Greenwood. Differing accounts and theories attempt to shed light on the events preceding his death. A story often told is that one evening Johnson began flirting with a woman at a dance; the wife of the juke joint owner, according to rumor, unaware that the bottle of whiskey she gave to Johnson had been poisoned by her husband. In another version, she was a married woman unrelated to the juke joint owner. Johnson was allegedly offered an open bottle of whiskey

that was laced with strychnine. Fellow blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson allegedly advised him never to drink from an offered bottle that had already been opened. According to Williamson, Johnson replied, "Don't ever knock a bottle out of my hand." Soon after, he was offered another open bottle of whiskey, also laced with strychnine, and accepted it. Johnson is reported to have begun feeling ill the evening after drinking from the bottle and had to be helped back to his room in the early morning hours. Over the next three days, his condition steadily worsened and witnesses reported that he died in a convulsive state of severe pain symptoms which are consistent with strychnine poisoning.

Musicologist Robert "Mack" McCormick claims to have tracked down the man who murdered Johnson, and to have obtained a confession from him in a personal interview. McCormick has declined to reveal the man's name however.^[28]

In his book *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson*, Tom Graves uses expert testimony from toxicologists to dispute the notion that Johnson died of strychnine poisoning. He states that strychnine has such a distinctive odor and taste that it cannot be disguised, even in strong liquor (according to the CDC, strychnine is bitter but odorless.^[29]). He also claims that a significant amount of strychnine would have to be consumed in one sitting to be fatal, and that death from the poison would occur within hours, not days.

Graves

The precise location of his grave is officially unknown; three different markers have been erected at supposed burial sites outside of Greenwood.^[30]

- Research in the 1980s and 1990s strongly suggests Johnson was buried in the graveyard of the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church near Morgan City, Mississippi, not far from Greenwood, in an unmarked grave. A one-ton cenotaph memorial in the shape of an obelisk, listing all of Johnson's song titles, with a central inscription by Peter Guralnick, was placed at this location in 1990, paid for by Columbia Records and numerous smaller contributions made through the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund.
- In 1990 a small marker with the epitaph "Resting in the Blues" was placed in the cemetery of Payne Chapel near Quito, Mississippi, by the cemetery's owner. This alleged burial site, in an apparent attempt to strengthen a claim, happens to be located in the center of Richard Johnson's family plot.
- More recent research by Stephen LaVere (including statements from Rosie Eskridge, the wife of the supposed gravedigger) indicates that the actual grave site is under a big pecan tree in the cemetery of the Little Zion Church north of Greenwood along Money Road. Sony Music has placed a marker at this site.

Devil legend

According to legend, as a young black man living on a plantation in rural Mississippi, Robert Johnson was branded with a burning desire to become a great blues musician. He was "instructed" to take his guitar to a crossroad near Dockery Plantation at midnight. There he was met by a large black man (the Devil) who took the guitar and tuned it. The "Devil" played a few songs and then returned the guitar to Johnson, giving him mastery of the instrument. This was, in effect, a deal with the Devil mirroring the legend of Faust. In exchange for his soul, Robert Johnson was able to create the blues for which he became famous.

Various accounts

This legend was developed over time, and has been chronicled by Gayle Dean Wardlow,^[31] Edward Komara^[32] and Elijah Wald, who sees the legend as largely dating from Johnson's rediscovery by white fans more than two decades after his death.^[33] Son House once told the story to Pete Welding as an explanation of Johnson's astonishingly rapid mastery of the guitar. Welding reported it as a serious belief in a widely read article in *Down Beat* in 1966.^[34] Other interviewers failed to elicit any confirmation from House and there were fully two years between House's observation of Johnson as first a novice and then a master.

Further details were absorbed from the imaginative retellings by Greil Marcus^[35] and Robert Palmer.^[36] Most significantly, the detail was added that Johnson received his gift from a large black man at a crossroads. There is dispute as to how and when the crossroads detail was attached to the Robert Johnson story. All the published evidence, including a full chapter on the subject in the biography *Crossroads* by Tom Graves, suggests an origin in the story of Tommy Johnson. This story was collected from his musical associate Ishman Bracey and his elder brother Ledell in the 1960s.^[37] One version of Ledell Johnson's account was published in 1971 David Evans's biography of Tommy,^[38] and was repeated in print in 1982 alongside Son House's story in the widely read *Searching for Robert Johnson*.^[39]

In another version, Ledell placed the meeting not at a crossroads but in a graveyard. This resembles the story told to Steve LaVere that Ike Zimmerman of Hazelhurst, Mississippi learned to play the guitar at midnight while sitting on tombstones. Zimmerman is believed to have influenced the playing of the young Robert Johnson.^[40] Recent research by blues scholar Bruce Conforth uncovered Ike Zimmerman's daughter and the story becomes much clearer, including the fact that Johnson and Zimmerman did practice in a graveyard at night (because it was quiet and no one would disturb them) but that it was not the Hazlehurst cemetery as had been believed. Johnson spent about a year living with, and learning from, Zimmerman, who ultimately accompanied Johnson back up to the Delta to look after him. Conforth's article in *Living Blues* magazine goes into much greater detail.^[41]

The film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* by the Coen Brothers incorporates the crossroads legend and a young African American blues guitarist named Tommy Johnson, with no other biographical similarity to the real Tommy Johnson or to Robert Johnson. There are now tourist attractions claiming to be "The Crossroads" at Clarksdale and in Memphis.^[42] His own account

Johnson seems to have claimed occasionally that he had sold his soul to the Devil, but it is not clear that he meant it seriously, and these claims are strongly disputed in Tom Graves' biography of Johnson, *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson*, published in 2008. The crossroads detail was widely believed to come from Johnson himself, probably because it appeared to explain the discrepancy in "Cross Road Blues". Johnson's high emotion and religious fervor are hard to explain as resulting from the mundane situation described, unsuccessful hitchhiking as night falls. The crossroads myth offers a simple literal explanation for both the religion and the anguish.

In "Me And The Devil" he began, "Early this morning when you knocked upon my door/Early this morning, umb, when you knocked upon my door/And I said, 'Hello, Satan, I believe it's time to go,'" before leading into "You may bury my body down by the highway side/You may bury my body, uumh, down by the highway side/So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride."

The song "Crossroads" by British psychedelic blues rock band Cream is a cover version of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues", about the legend of Johnson selling his

soul to the Devil at the crossroads, although Johnson's original lyrics ("Standin' at the crossroads, tried to flag a ride") suggest he was merely hitchhiking rather than signing away his soul to Lucifer in exchange for being a great blues musician.

Interpretations

The Devil in these songs may not solely refer to the Christian model of Satan, but equally to the African trickster god, Legba, himself associated with crossroads though author Tom Graves deems the connection to African deities tenuous.^[43] This contention could stem from a lack of familiarity with the pervasive retention of African religious roots among Southern Blacks early in the 20th century. As folklorist Harry M. Hyatt discovered, during his research in the South from 1935–1939, when African-Americans born in the 19th or early-20th century said they or anyone else had "sold their soul to the devil at the crossroads," they had a different meaning in mind. Ample evidence indicates African religious retentions surrounding Legba and the making of a "deal" (not selling the soul in the same sense as in the Faustian tradition cited by Graves) with this so-called "devil" at the crossroads.^[44]

Folk tales of bargains with the Devil have long existed in African American and European traditions, and were adapted into literature by, amongst others, Washington Irving in "The Devil and Tom Walker" in 1824, and by Stephen Vincent Benet in "The Devil and Daniel Webster" in 1936. In the 1930s the folklorist Harry Middleton Hyatt recorded many tales of banjo players, fiddlers, card sharks, and dice sharks selling their souls at crossroads, along with guitarists and one accordionist. The folklorist Alan Lomax considered that every African American secular musician was "in the opinion of both himself and his peers, a child of the Devil, a consequence of the black view of the European dance embrace as sinful in the extreme".^[45]

Musical style

Robert Johnson is today considered a master of the blues, particularly of the Delta blues style. As Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones said in 1990 "You want to know how good the blues can get? Well, this is it."^[46] But according to Elijah Wald, in his book *Escaping the Delta*, Johnson in his own time was most respected for his ability to play in such a wide variety of styles – from raw country slide guitar to jazz and pop licks – and to pick up guitar parts almost instantly upon hearing a song.^[47]

His first recorded song, "Kind Hearted Woman Blues," in contrast to the prevailing Delta style of the time, more resembled the style of Chicago or St. Louis, with "a full-fledged, abundantly varied musical arrangement."^[48] Unusual for a Delta player of the time, a recording exhibits what Johnson could do entirely outside of a blues style. "They're Red Hot," from his first recording session, shows that he was also comfortable with an "uptown" swing or ragtime sound similar to the Harlem Hamfats but, as Wald remarks, "no record company was heading to Mississippi in search of a down-home Ink Spots. . . [H]e could undoubtedly have come up with a lot more songs in this style if the producers had wanted them."^[49]

Voice

An important aspect of Johnson's singing was his use of microtonality. These subtle inflections of pitch help explain why his singing conveys such powerful emotion. Eric Clapton described Johnson's music as "the most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice." In two takes of "Me and the Devil Blues" he shows a high degree of precision in the complex vocal delivery of the last verse: "The range of tone he can pack into a few lines is astonishing."^[50] The song's "hip humor and sophistication" is often overlooked. "[G]enerations of blues writers in search of wild Delta primitivism," writes Wald, have been inclined to overlook or undervalue aspects that show Johnson as a polished professional performer.^[51]

Instrument

Johnson mastered the guitar, being considered today one of the all-time greats on the instrument. His approach was highly complex and extremely advanced musically. When Keith Richards was first introduced to Johnson's music by his band mate Brian Jones, he replied, "Who is the other guy playing with him?", not realizing it was Johnson playing on one guitar. "I was hearing two guitars, and it took a long time to actually realise he was doing it all by himself," said Richards.^[52] Johnson would sometimes sing over the triplets in his guitar playing, using them as an instrumental break; his chord progression not being quite a standard Twelve-bar blues.^[53]

Influences

Johnson fused approaches specific to Delta blues to those from the broader music world. The slide guitar work on "Rambling on My Mind" is pure Delta and Johnson's

vocal there has "a touch of . . . Son House rawness," but the train imitation on the bridge is not at all typical of Delta blues, and is more like something out of minstrel show music or vaudeville.^[54] Johnson did record versions of "Preaching the Blues" and "Walking Blues" in the older bluesman's vocal and guitar style (House's chronology is questioned by Guralnick). As with the first take of "Come On In My Kitchen," the influence of Skip James is evident in James's "Devil Got My Woman", but the lyrics rise to the level of first-rate poetry, and Johnson sings with a strained voice found nowhere else in his recorded output.^[55]

The sad, romantic "Love in Vain" successfully blends several of Johnson's disparate influences. The form, including the wordless last verse, follows Leroy Carr's last hit "When the Sun Goes Down"; the words of the last sung verse come directly from a song Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded in 1926.^[56] Johnson's last-ever recording, "Milkcow's Calf Blues" is his most direct tribute to Kokomo Arnold, who wrote "Milkcow Blues" and who influenced Johnson's vocal style.^[57]

"From Four Until Late" shows Johnson's mastery of a blues style not usually associated with the Delta. He croons the lyrics in manner reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson, and his guitar style is more that of a ragtime-influenced player like Blind Blake.^[58] Lonnie Johnson's influence on Robert Johnson is even clearer in two other departures from the usual Delta style: "Malted Milk" and "Drunken Hearted Man". Both copy the arrangement of Lonnie Johnson's "Life Saver Blues".^[59] The two takes of "Me and the Devil Blues" show the influence of Peetie Wheatstraw, calling into question the interpretation of this piece as "the spontaneous heart-cry of a demon-driven folk artist."^[51]

Legacy

Robert Johnson has had enormous impact on music and musicians that came after him. This particularly considering he was an itinerant performer playing mostly on street corners, in juke joints, and at Saturday night dances who worked in a then undervalued style of music, and who died young after recording only a handful of songs. Johnson, though well-traveled and admired in his performances, was little noted in his own time and place; his records even less so. "Terraplane Blues", sometimes described as Johnson's only hit record, outsold his others but was still only a minor success.

If one had asked black blues fans about Robert Johnson in the first twenty years after his death, writes Elijah Wald, "the response in the vast majority of cases would have been a puzzled 'Robert who?'" This lack of recognition extended to black musicians:

"As far as the evolution of black music goes, Robert Johnson was an extremely minor figure, and very little that happened in the decades following his death would have been affected if he had never played a note."^[60]

With the album *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, a compilation of Johnson's recordings, Columbia Records introduced his work to a much wider audience fame and recognition he only received long after his death.

Source: wikipedia.org

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