

One Hundred Years at the Crossroads: The Delta Blues of Robert Johnson

By Scott Ainslie

Introduction

Robert Leroy Johnson was born into a tangled family history in the southern Mississippi town of Hazlehurst on May 8, 1911. Even before he arrived, there was trouble waiting for him.

Born into a Mississippi that led the nation in the lynching of African Americans, Johnson rose from a fragile family, that was broken up before his birth by a conflict with local Whites, to become what musician Eric Clapton called, “The most important blues musician who ever lived.”

In just a few years – between 1930 and 1936 (when he made his first recordings for the American Record Company) – Johnson mastered the musical language and guitar techniques of the Delta. Before his untimely death in 1938, Robert Johnson had cut out a place for himself in music history. But, it would be decades before most people knew it.

The year 2011 brings both the 100th anniversary of Johnson’s birth and the 25th anniversary of his first recordings of songs that – thirty years after his death – would change the course of popular music history.

In Scott Ainslie’s performance and these study materials, we will explore these questions:

- Who was Robert Johnson?
- What were his songs and the Blues about?
- Who and what influenced his music?
- What were the times he lived in like?
- Where did he grow up?
- How were Johnson’s recordings made?
- What about Johnson’s death and legacy?

I hope you’ll enjoy the history here.

Who was Robert Johnson?

Robert Johnson was a young, ambitious African-American musician who was born in 1911, poisoned at a juke joint outside of Greenwood, Mississippi, and shortly died at the age of 27 in 1938. Johnson recorded 29 different songs when he was 25 and 26 years old. His recordings met with modest success during his brief career. In his time, Johnson’s playing and recordings influenced the playing of blues greats Muddy Waters, Elmore James and others, but it was in 1962 (and again in 1971, and 1994), when Johnson’s recordings were re-issued that his music gained its widest audience.

The first of these collections, Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers (Columbia Records, 1962) quickly fell into the hands of early rock and rollers Eric Clapton (The Yardbirds, John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, Cream, Blind Faith), Keith Richards (The Rolling Stones), Robert Plant and Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin), among others. The 1960s English invasion of blues-influenced rock was peppered with musicians who had heard and were deeply influenced by the re-issue of some of Robert Johnson’s 1936 and 1937 recordings, along with the recordings of other blues musicians John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Big Bill Broonzy and others.

Asked about when he first heard Robert Johnson’s music, Clapton responded:

“...I was 15 or 16. He was the full ticket all right, but you had to get to him in steps. You started out with someone like Chuck Berry and you worked your way further back, deeper and deeper, until you got to Robert Johnson. I was confused and a bit intimidated when I initially heard him. It was so powerful it was almost unlistenable at first. But eventually I was ready.”¹

Johnson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 and honored in their Music Masters Series with a three day conference in September, 1998. The first release of Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings (released in 1990) rose to #80 in the Billboard Top 200, sold over a million copies, and won Johnson a Grammy fifty-two years after his death.

In the liner notes to the box set, Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings (Columbia Records, 1990), disciple Eric Clapton said:

¹ See: http://www.uncut.co.uk/music/eric_clapton/interviews/29

“Robert Johnson to me is the most important blues musician who ever lived....I have never found anything more deeply soulful than Robert Johnson. His music remains the most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice.”

Eric Clapton may have done the most to popularize Johnson’s music. With Cream in San Francisco in 1968, Clapton recorded a live version of Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” that sent Cream to the top of the charts and guaranteed Johnson a wide audience.

What were Robert Johnson’s songs and the Blues about?

Johnson was working within an artistic language and a musical and social culture that – by the time Johnson began playing music – included both oral sources and commercial recordings. Johnson was sure to have witnessed first hand performances by many of his mentors, including Eddie ‘Son’ House, Charley Patton, Willie Brown, and Skip James, among many others, and was also clearly paying close attention to the successful Blues 78 r.p.m recordings of his day.

The themes of Johnson’s Blues cover a wide range of emotions – from funny and light-hearted hokum blues like ‘They’re Red Hot’ to the almost-supernaturally dark tunes like ‘Hell Hound On My Trail’ or the ‘Cross Road Blues,’ which was covered by Eric Clapton with Cream in a 1968.

12 Bar Blues verse structure and imagery

Most of Johnson’s Blues are written in a customary West African, now African-American and American three line verse structure. Following on an African use of English, employing images to convey meaning in a poetic use of language, the imagery of Johnson’s writing can be quite arresting. A good example comes from ‘Hell Hound On My Trail,’ a song using a common tent show evangelist’s metaphor, the Hell Hound, in secular setting:

*I gotta keep movin’, gotta keep movin’, Blues fallin’ down like hail...
I gotta keep movin’, blues fallin’ down like hail.
And the day keeps on my need with a hell hound on my trail...*

*I can hear the wind is rising. The leaves are trembling on the trees.
I can hear the wind is rising. The leaves are trembling on the trees.
All I need’s my little sweet rider to keep me company, (ah, me company).*

Many of the best Blues verses pair the external with the internal: a keen observation of the external/natural world with an intimate detail from the more internal/emotional world of the singer and of the listeners. In the example above, the external leads. Below, from Johnson’s ‘Terraplane Blues’ this order is reversed. The internal leads:

*Well, I feel so lonesome. You hear me when I moan.
Yes, I feel so lonesome. You hear me when I moan.
Who’s been driving my Terraplane for you since I been gone?*

Double entendre

The practice of saying one thing while meaning another, especially when the meaning is somewhat risqué is called by a French term, *double entendre*. This has always been important in the Blues.

The use of ‘coded speech’ is the practice of using commonly understood words and phrases to hide from one group of listeners while conveying to another a secondary, cloaked meaning. Coded speech has long been a survival technique for Blacks in America. This creative and self-protective use of language continues today. Black artists continue to generate slang that is often gradually absorbed into more general usage by speakers of other races. From Blues to Jazz to Hip Hop, popular slang has almost always followed these Black musical styles and the speech of the musicians who create them.

Who and what influenced Robert Johnson’s music?

Robert Johnson inherited a musical language with significant lyrical and musical African elements that were combined with important European elements, instruments and harmonies. The call and response structure of the musical settings, the verse’s AAB structure with the repeated first line, and the use of syncopated and varying rhythms all mark the music as part of existing African traditions that were preserved in the oral traditions of African-Americans. All these elements remain vital and active

today in Rap and Hip Hop, and can be found other American popular musics as well (including rock, country, heavy metal, bluegrass, southern old-time, gospel, and jazz).

Musical Raw Material: African and European Musical Scales

In the Blues, we hear a collision of two complimentary, but very different musical scales, one of African and one of European descent merging in the South.

The standard do-re-mi major scale out of western European musical traditions is a seven note, diatonic scale:

E F# G# A B C# D#

The African scale is a minor pentatonic, having just five different notes:

E G A B D

Happily, the first, fourth and fifth notes of the European diatonic scale, E-A-B agree with the strongest harmonic notes of the African pentatonic. (This is not a surprise, as these notes are the first harmonics generated in the harmonic series of the fundamental E. You will find more on the harmonic series when you explore the physics of sound.)

Looking through a European lens, we see here flatted-third and a flatted-seventh scale tones in this African minor pentatonic scale. These are known as ‘Blue notes’ and signify to contemporary listener that we are hearing Blues. These members of the pentatonic scale come to us out of African musical scales. Their use and sound can be thought of as distinct African additions to our musical language.

You can go to a keyboard or piano and play a strong E in the bass and either (or both) of these two notes – the G-natural or D-natural – and hear the sound of Blues. This is a sound of Africa.

Using the African scale for vocals and soloing, while employing harmonies build out of the European scale creates a certain cultural and musical ambiguity within the music which we now all instantly know to be Blues. You may not be able to define it in musical terms, but you’ll know it when you hear it. Try it.

Precedents for Johnson’s Music

A CD sampler has been put together that shows some of the roots of Johnson’s music. “The Roots of Robert Johnson,” has samples of songs that were likely antecedents to Johnson’s recordings, song settings and lyrical precedents. Hearing these recordings helps us place Robert Johnson firmly within the artistic language, commercial and musical traditions of the Delta.

Both piano players and other guitarists influenced Johnson’s playing styles. Nearly all of Johnson’s songs have melodic precedents, which is not uncommon in the tradition. As in Hip Hop and Rap music today, in Blues there is a sound that identifies the form. Like other performers, Johnson was using the raw material of the artistic language around him, personalizing it, and creating new, related works and performances that would be at once familiar and new to his listeners.

Some of the artists that one can hear represented in Johnson’s work include, but are certainly not be limited to:

Leroy Carr	Kokomo Arnold	Eddie ‘Son’ House
Blind Blake	Hambone Willie Newbern	The Mississippi Sheiks
Lonnie Johnson	Tommy Johnson	Scrapper Blackwell
Charley Patton		

What were the times Robert Johnson lived in like?

In order to have any understanding of Mississippi Blues and the music of Robert Johnson, we need some understanding of the times and the places in which he lived, as well as what his world was like: both how he found it and how he left it.

Robert faced obstacles that were commonplace for black boys and men in Mississippi. These obstacles deformed and complicated his own family history. We’ll begin with some of Robert’s personal history and integrate those details into the larger context of his time.



Robert's Mother: Julia Ann Major

Robert's mother, Julia Ann Major was born in October, 1874. Julia was a child of former slaves. In 1889, at the age of 15, Julia married 24-year-old Charles Dodds. Charles was born into slavery in North Carolina in February, 1865, just two months before General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House and the end of the Civil War. Charles was a relatively prosperous furniture maker and landowner – things quite rare in the South – with whom Julia eventually had ten children.

By 1909, Charles had built his growing family a well crafted, 1500 square foot, seven room house in the town of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, in Copiah County, thirty miles south of Jackson. Dodds's house had a double parlor, a long front porch, and a pump that allowed water to flow into the kitchen, a modern convenience that, according to Executive Director of the Copiah County office of Cultural Affairs Janet Schriver, was unheard of in Black homes of the time.

JOHNSON BIRTH HOUSE: As of 2008, seventy years after Johnson's death, the town of Hazlehurst owns this house where Robert Johnson was born. The property has been moved twice and was neglected for years. The house now rests on a lot near the Copiah County Courthouse and the town is working to raise \$250,000 to restore the home to its original condition and save one of the few known material landmarks of the legendary bluesman's early life.

In the midst of their relative prosperity, a dispute with local Whites was about to break up the Dodds family and push Julia back into poverty.

Trouble in Hazelhurst: 1909

Today, at their website, <http://www.hazlehurstmiss.com/index.htm>, Hazlehurst describes itself this way:

Home of the famous blues guitarist and singer, Robert Johnson and the setting for Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Crimes of the Heart.

The City of Hazlehurst is one of the oldest cities in Mississippi, founded in 1865 by George Hazlehurst, the chief engineer of the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad.

Remnants of the city's age are evidenced by its paved brick streets and its stately old houses that date back to the mid 1800's. The setting for this Old Deep South community is a beautifully timbered landscape of pine, pecans, and oaks with lightly rolling hills and plentiful ponds and lakes—a sportsman's paradise. The atmosphere is slow and easy.

Hazlehurst is one of those places where you can give someone your telephone number in four digits, where going to church on Sunday is a highlight, where the family still comes first, and where there is little fear of serious crime. The town has heart. It is known throughout the region for the training it gives to the blind.

As the seat of Copiah County, Hazlehurst is a center of economic and political activity. In this role, the city is reputed for harmoniously bringing together a diverse group of people whose mutual intent is the betterment of the community.

But, back in 1909, Blacks were still struggling to realize hopes awakened by the Union victory in the Civil War, while the Whites of Mississippi – and elsewhere across the South – were determined to preserve their supremacy by consolidating their economic, political and social control of the South by any means necessary.

By manipulating the sharecropping system, capricious application of the debt peonage laws, the enactment of Black Codes, disenfranchisement of Black voters, and frequent arbitrary, personal violence and terrorism, White Citizens Leagues, the Ku Klux Klan, and local White land owners tightly controlled Southern society for nearly a century after the Civil War. The success of White Supremacy was brought at a high cost by the personal, economic, social, and political oppression of Blacks.

The fragility of Black family life in the Deep South would be difficult to overstate. Any conflict between Whites and Blacks – real or imagined – could cost Black lives and devastate a Black family.

Breaking the family

In the context of brutally enforced White Supremacy, it is likely that the plain fact of Charles Dodds' relative financial success was viewed as a threat to the established order/White domination in Hazlehurst. Perhaps he was 'uppity.'

Simply succeeding could mark a black man for trouble.

And while Dodds may have been marked for taking down by his talent and hard work, it was a reported dispute over a woman that triggered the violence that undid him. Both Dodds and one of the Marchetti brothers in Hazlehurst were interested in the same woman. Apparently, both men turned up at her house at the same time. Words were exchanged and, as Marchetti reportedly went for a gun, Dodds reportedly drew a razor, cut him, and ran. Given their races, even self-defense in these circumstances would have earned Dodds a lynching – something he no doubt knew.

A member of the Marchetti family told blues researcher Steven LaVere that they had 'chased Dodds into the river where he drowned' – later allowing that they had heard that he'd escaped to Memphis.

According to Dodds family legend, Charles fled Hazlehurst in the middle of the night dressed as a woman, with a crowd led by the Marchettis in hot pursuit. In Memphis, Dodds started a new life under the alias of 'Spencer,' having left Julia behind in Hazlehurst to try to hold onto their property and house while she tended to their ten children.

As Charles's exile from Hazlehurst stretched on, Julia surreptitiously sent the older children to live with her husband, now Charles 'Spencer,' who was living with a mistress in Memphis.

For company and protection, Julia also took up with another partner, a sharecropper named Noah Johnson. It was with Noah that Julia conceived Robert in late 1910. Shortly after Robert's birth, Julia lost the house, and moved north from Hazlehurst up into the Delta, finding work in its migratory labor camps, with little Robert and his half-sister Carrie, Charles's last child with Julia, in tow.

Eventually, Julia tried to reunite with Charles in Memphis, moving in with him and his mistress, her other children and their children. The women are reported to have gotten along, but Robert – another man's child – remained a stumbling block. Eventually, it became too much for them.

Given the tension of the situation, Julia disappeared for a while. During her absence, the family heard that she had died. After more than a year, Robert's half-sister Carrie spotted Julia on the street in Memphis: "That's Momma," she said. Julia had come back to Memphis to ask Charles' permission to remarry. He consented – provided she take Robert with her.

So, Julia, Robert and her new husband, Willie 'Dusty' Willis moved back into the Delta, 40 miles south to Commerce, near Robinsonville, where Robert grew up and began working the fields. In his teens, Robert began to play harmonica and visit the juke joints – both against his step-father's wishes.

At seventeen, Johnson married Virginia Travis, a girl of 15. Virginia became pregnant and Johnson apparently treasured the thought of having a family with her, something he had never known in his own life. He is reported to have doted on her and settled in to thinking of himself more as a field hand than a musician, staying away from the jukes.

In April of 1930, both Virginia and the baby died in childbirth. She was 16. Johnson's attachment to the idea of being a father and having a family life – something he had never really had himself – seems to have died with them. About a month later, Delta blues giant Son House moved to the area. Johnson went back to the joints. Broken hearted, he dreaded the idea of a life defined by sharecropping and fieldwork. Music was the only viable alternative to that life, and Johnson took to it with a vengeance. He had learned his biological father's name and was by now referring to himself variously as R. L. Spencer, Bob Spencer and Robert or Bob Johnson.

Having had rocky relationships with two different step-fathers, shortly after Virginia's death Johnson moved back down to Hazlehurst, MS, hoping to find his biological father, Noah Johnson. In Hazlehurst, Johnson ran into two well-versed Blues guitarists, Ike Zimmerman and his brother Henry. Johnson began to perform in the juke joints and on the steps of the Copiah County Courthouse on Saturday afternoons when the town was crowded with Blacks who had come in from the surrounding fields to shop and visit. By 1931, he considered himself a musician.

Robert Johnson's times

Johnson was born into a society that was made extremely dangerous and unstable by the confining forces of poverty, lack of adequate education, brutally enforced White supremacy, and the extra-judicial violence against Blacks. Given Charles Dodds' run-in with the Marchettis, the danger to his life would have been predictable and grimly familiar to him.

Between 1910-1919, there were an average of 62 African-Americans lynched each year in the United States. The vast majority of lynchings occurred in Mississippi.

Getting an accurate count of the number of these killings is difficult, but according to conservative estimates there were between 3,437 and 4400 African Americans lynched between 1882 and 1955. The chart below shows lynching statistics compiled by the Tuskegee Institute for both Blacks (in Red) and Whites (in Black).

"The NAACP lynching statistics tend to be slightly higher than the Tuskegee Institute figures, which some historians consider 'conservative.' For example, in 1914, Tuskegee Institute reported fifty-two lynchings for the year, the Chicago Tribune reported fifty-four, and The Crisis, the official organ of the NAACP, gave the number as seventy-four."[2]

While lynchings occurred in almost every state of the Union at the time, according to social economist Gunnar Myrdal:

"The Southern states account for nine-tenths of the lynchings. More than two-thirds of the remaining one-tenth occurred in the six states which immediately border the South: Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kansas."[3]

"Mississippi, Georgia, Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama were the leading lynching states. These five states furnished nearly half the total victims. Mississippi had the highest incidence of lynchings in the South as well as the highest for the nation, with Georgia and Texas taking second and third places, respectively. However, there were lynchings in the North and West. In fact, every state in the continental United States – with the exception of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Vermont – has had lynching casualties."[4]

There was a spike in these extra-judicial killings following the return of Black veterans from World War I, who had fought in France for freedom and were returning with understandably higher expectations than the Jim Crow south would allow (and often with their rifles from the service).

It was also around this time that the postbellum Ku Klux Klan of the 1870s was reborn. This so-called 'second' Ku Klux Klan, founded by William J. Simmons just outside of Atlanta at Stone Mountain, GA, was inspired in part by the heavily fictionalized and false portrayal of the 'first' Klan in the 1915 D. W. Griffith film, 'Birth of A Nation.' (Unbelievably, this explicitly racist film is still being used as a recruitment tool for hate groups and the Ku Klux Klan today.)

Modern studies of lynchings have shown that between 1865 and 1965, nearly 4,000 lynchings have been documented, not for alleged Felonies like rape or murder, but specifically for violations of the social codes of the Jim Crow South, like not yielding the sidewalk to whites, or looking at or speaking to a white woman without significant deference. Social lynchings were specifically used to terrorize the local black population into abject submission.

The movement of Blacks out of Mississippi and the South began around this time and accelerated through the second World War. Blacks were both removing themselves from the violence and repression of the South and choosing better economic, social and political lives for themselves and their families in the urban centers in the North. Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, New York as well as cities like Kansas City, MO received large influxes of southern Blacks.

Dislocated Southerners provided a lucrative market for recordings of music from back home, and that music was Blues.

Early Recordings

The first machine to record and produce sound on cylinders was invented by Thomas Alva Edison in 1877. Edison was experimenting with how to record and play back telegraph signals. Alexander Graham Bell purchased Edison's patent and formed the Columbia Phonograph Company.

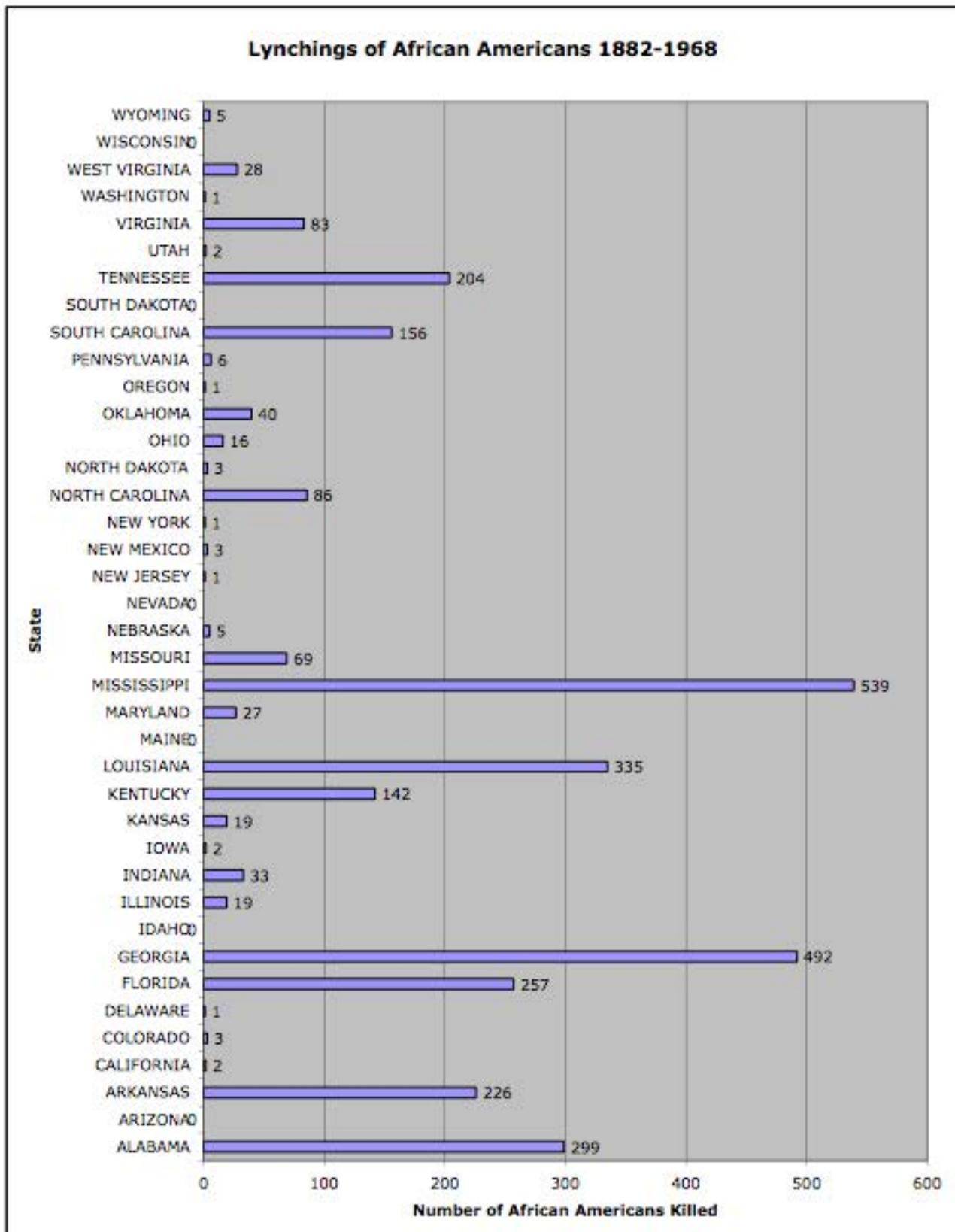
² Edward B. Reverter, *The American Race Problem* (New York, 1927), p. 367.

³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), pp. 560-561.

⁴ see: <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html>

In 1887, Emile Berliner, who founded the Victor Talking Machine Company, developed a system for recording on flat discs, rather than the Edison cylinders.

Between 1890 and 1911, developments in record players eventually yielded table top spring or weight driven, wind-up 'Victrolas' featuring an internal acoustic horn for amplification and a hollow 'tone arm' with a metal needle to ride in the record grooves. As the price of these machines fell, a record industry was born.



Acoustic Recording

Initially, recording was a profoundly physical, acoustic process. Sound was collected in a large funnel shaped horn, which vibrated in response to the sound and physically cut the pattern of vibrations in either wax or a shellac disc. A mold would be made from this master, and then duplicates would be pressed from the mold. The play back mechanisms simply reversed the process: a hollow tone-arm holding a metal needle riding in the groove of the recording would convey the vibrations to an acoustic horn that amplified the vibrations by moving the air touching the horn. The energy generated a sound wave that would travel through the surrounding air to reach your ear.

In order to record a musical group, musicians would have to be physically situated at different distances from the acoustic horn, in order to govern the loudness of each part in the final recording. Singing or playing into a horn which decreases in diameter is a bit like singing into a megaphone in reverse: the sound waves are literally compressed as the sound approaches the tone arm and cutting needle. This gives these early acoustic recordings a distinctly compressed sound. You can roll up a cone of stiff paper and sing into it to replicate this compressed tone and compare this to recordings made prior to 1925.

In 1925, electronic recording became available with microphones, magnetic fields and wires connecting the musicians to the recording consoles that were cutting the masters. Acoustic playback machines were still the norm and would remain so for decades rural areas. This would change only as rural electrification moved across the country.

On Location Recording

In 1922, Okeh Records became the first sound recording company to pioneer the practice of 'location recording,' hauling recording gear out to various locations to record artists who would not come to established recording studios in large cities like Chicago or New York. These portable recording teams captured a wealth of jazz, blues, early country music, mariachi bands, polkas and other vernacular music being made outside the large cities in rural America.

According to country music and recording discographer Tony Russell:

"Between the summer of 1923 and the summer of 1927, the five major record companies, Victor, Columbia, Okeh, Brunswick and Gennett, conducted forty-four recording trips, visiting thirteen cities in eleven states: from Atlanta, New Orleans and Dallas to St Louis, Salt Lake City and Buffalo.

"These forty-four trips produced a total of 2,067 recordings. Some were of country music, or, as it was often called at that period, 'old-time music'; some were of African-American or, as it was then labeled by the record companies, 'race' music, predominantly blues, gospel and jazz; some were of jazz and other kinds of dance music by white players; and some of standard popular songs. Certain locations offered regional specialties: part of the reason why Gennett Records went to St Paul, Minnesota, in May 1927 was to record the fiddle and accordion music of Norwegian Americans in and around the Twin Cities.

"Of those 2,067 recordings, approximately 40 per cent are of old-time music. It is by some degree the largest category. African-American blues, gospel and jazz account for 25 per cent, and the remainder is a motley collection of popular songs, dance music by white bands, non-Anglophone vernacular music, and a small percentage of unidentified masters. That last category may be deduced from numerical gaps in the record companies' master lists, where recordings were presumably made but damaged, lost or found to be technically inadequate; at any rate, they were never issued. Some of those unrecoverable recordings must also have been by performers of old-time music, so the final proportion of old-time music, in the total of location recordings, must approach 50 per cent."⁵

How did Robert Johnson's come to make his first recordings?

There was a real scramble going on in the developing recording business, companies came into being and were gobbled up with stunning frequency and rapidity.

The American Record Corporation (ARC) was started in August 1929 with the merger of three New York companies: Cameo, Pathe, and Plaza. In 1930, ARC was bought by Consolidated Film Industries (CFI) who also purchased from Warner Brothers the Brunswick, Vocalion and Melotone labels in 1931. The Brunswick division of ARC purchased Columbia and Okeh in 1934. Brunswick as, in turn, purchased by Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1938 and became Columbia Recording Corporation.

⁵ See Russell's "Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost," Oxford University Press, 2007.

In the fall of 1936, at the age of 25, Robert Johnson made his way to the one man known throughout the Delta to be a conduit to the record companies: furniture and record store owner H. C. Speir in Jackson, MS.

Speir sold phonographs, furniture and records. In order to sell phonographs and records, he needed recordings that the local music loving public wanted to hear. So, Speir became a talent scout for the American Record Company. On what Speir called “a good day”—a Saturday—he could sell 600-700 78 r.p.m. records to local tenant and sharecropping blacks in the mid-1930s at the height of the Great Depression. Music was critically important to these people.

He had a record cutting machine on the second floor of his Farish Street establishment, where he recorded promising musicians who came through his door. Speir was responsible for sending Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, The Mississippi Sheiks, Tommy Johnson, and practically every other Delta musician of note to the record companies. Robert Johnson became one of them. He auditioned with his song, “Kind Hearted Woman.” (This was also to be the first song he recorded when he had a chance to sit down in a make-shift but professional studio.)

The closest rendez-vous with a location recording team, in both time and space was in San Antonio, Texas, in November, 1936. Robert was carried out there for the sessions by Ernie Oertle, the ARC representative for Louisiana and Mississippi. The studio where he recorded is long thought to have been set up in the Gunter Hotel in downtown San Antonio.

The location recording sessions could be chaotic and busy:

“According to a report in the San Antonio Light on November 23rd, ARC’s sister label ‘(the) Brunswick recording crew here figures it set a record when it got under the wire with 105 recordings made in the first three days of its San Antonio set-up.”⁶

In 1937, Johnson was recorded by ARC again by a mobile recording team set-up in Dallas, TX. Johnson’s recordings from these two sets of recording sessions in 1936 and 1937 are listed chronologically below. His song ‘Terraplane’ from his first day of recording became a modest success, selling around 5,000 copies. ‘Terraplane’ sales figures justified Johnson’s call back for the second round of recordings in 1937.

Robert Johnson: 1936 Sessions

Gunter Hotel
San Antonio, TX
Chronological Order

Monday, Nov. 23, 1936

Kindhearted Woman Blues
I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom
Sweet Home Chicago
Ramblin’ On My Mind
When You Got A Good Friend
Come On In My Kitchen
Terraplane Blues
Phonograph Blues

Thursday, Nov. 26, 1936

32-20 Blues

Friday, Nov. 27, 1936

They’re Red Hot
Dead Shrimp Blues
Cross Road Blues
Walking Blues
Last Fair Deal Gone Down
Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)
If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day

⁶ See “Robert Johnson/At The Crossroads,” Scott Ainslie, Hal Leonard, 1992.

Robert Johnson: 1937 Sessions

Warner Brothers Film Exchange
508 Park Avenue
Dallas, TX

Saturday, June 19, 1937

Stones In My Passway
Steady Rollin' Man
From Four Till Late

Sunday, June 20, 1937

Hellhound On My Trail
Little Queen of Spades
Malted Milk
Drunken Hearted Man
Me And The Devil Blues
Stop Breakin' Down
Traveling Riverside Blues
Honeymoon Blues
Love In Vain
Milk Cow's Calf Blues

Robert Johnson's death

The so-called justice system of the Mississippi where Robert Johnson met his end was inexorably tilted against Blacks, whether harmed by Whites or Blacks. Robert's own murder went uninvestigated and no written report of it was made to local authorities until 1974, when the details of his killing were unearthed by Mack McCormick, a Blues researcher.

The most reliable account of Johnson's death comes from McCormick. His extensive interviews, reportedly including and interview with the man who poisoned Johnson, shows that Robert was poisoned by a jealous husband and juke joint owner in a juke outside of Greenwood, Mississippi on Saturday night, August 13th, 1938, as Johnson was finishing up entertaining a crowd in the joint for a second weekend in a row.

Johnson reportedly took sick with cramps, couldn't play any more, and then collapsed. He was carried to a house in the Baptist Town section of Greenwood, where he had a room. He may have been carried back out into the country to another house on Monday or Tuesday. On August 16, 1938 at the age of just 27, Robert Johnson died and was buried within days. According to eyewitness Rosie Eskridge, Robert is buried in the graveyard of Mt. Zion AME Baptist Church, just outside of Greenwood, where Ms. Eskridge remained a member all her life. She remember walking across the fields to bring water to her husband Tom while he was digging Johnson's grave. She remembered Johnson's coffin lying underneath the oak there at the side of the church. Eskridge didn't approve of Johnson's being a Blues musician, nor his music. She was unimpressed. Her remembrance is creditable.

It now appears that all three of them, Robert, Rosie and her husband Tom are all buried in the same church yard.

Justice and Jim Crow

Robert Johnson was born, grew up, spent, and lost his life in what is known as the 'Jim Crow' South.

According to "Jim Crow Legislation Overview" a research article by Susan Falck, M.A., Research Associate at California State University in Northridge, California:

"More than 400 state laws, constitutional amendments, and city ordinances legalizing segregation and discrimination were passed in the United States between 1865 and 1967. These laws governed nearly every aspect of daily life, from education to public transportation, from health care and housing to the use of public facilities. African-American children got their first taste of racial discrimination when they found themselves barred from attending school with white children, and being sent, instead, to inferior facilities.

"Growing up, these children learned that their lives were equally restricted outside the classroom. They were forbidden from sharing a bus seat with a white passenger or to ride in the same compartment of a train. They

were denied access to public parks and restaurants, and, in some states, were forced to enter public amusements like the circus through a separate entrance. Black movie theater patrons were seated in the balcony, separated from white customers in what was commonly referred to as 'Nigger heaven.'

*"When they went to work, African-Americans were forced to use separate entrances and bathrooms and to collect their paychecks at separate windows. Even in death, legislation ensured that the races would remain separate. Several states prohibited hearses from carrying both races, and cemeteries were required to maintain separate graveyards."*⁷

Discriminatory acquittals of Whites guilty of murdering Blacks were common across the South and were not limited to Mississippi. Right up to and including the 1979 KKK shootings of anti-Klan demonstrators in Greensboro, NC, Whites guilty of murder and violence have routinely been acquitted by a justice system blind to the crimes of Whites when committed against Blacks (or against Whites guilty of helping Blacks).

Begun in 2006, the Civil Rights Cold-Case Initiative is currently seeking information on over 100 unsolved murders committed during the struggles for the Civil Rights of African-Americans.

Anyone with information concerning these cases is urged to contact their local FBI office.

Unsolved Murders: A Partial List of Civil Rights Victims

Louis Allen, January 31, 1964, Liberty, Mississippi
Benjamin Brown, May 10, 1967, Jackson, Mississippi
Charles Brown, June 20, 1957, Yazoo City, Mississippi
Jessie Brown, January 13, 1965, Winona, Mississippi
Silas Caston, March 1, 1964, Jackson, Mississippi
Vincent Dahmon, May-July 1966, Natchez, Mississippi
Roman Ducksworth, April 1961 or 1962, Taylorsville, Mississippi
Jimmie Griffen (Griffin), September 24, 1965, near Sturgis, Mississippi
Paul Guihard, September 30, 1962, Oxford, Mississippi
Wharlest Jackson, February 27, 1967, Natchez, Mississippi
George Lee, May 7, 1955, Belzoni, Mississippi
Sylvester Maxwell, Body discovered January 17, 1963, Canton, Mississippi
Robert McNair, November 6, 1964, Pelahatchie, Mississippi
Clinton Melton, December 3, 1955, Tallahatchie, Mississippi
Booker Mixon, October 12, 1959, Clarksdale, Mississippi
Mack Parker, April 25, 1959, Poplarville, Mississippi
William Prather, November 1, 1959, Corinth, Mississippi
Johnny Queen, August 8, 1965, Fayette, Mississippi
Donald Raspberry, February 1965, Okolona, Mississippi
Jessie Shelby, January 29, 1956, Yazoo City, Mississippi
Ed Smith, April 27, 1958, State Line, Mississippi
Lamar Smith, August 13, 1955, Brookhaven, Mississippi
Eddie Stewart, July 9, 1966, Jackson or Crystal Springs, Mississippi
Saleam Triggs, January 23, 1965, Hattiesburg, Mississippi
Clifton Walker, February 28, 1964, Woodville or Natchez, Mississippi
Willie Edwards, January 23, 1957, Montgomery, Alabama
Rogers Hamilton, October 22, 1957, Fort Deposit, Alabama
Mattie Green, May 19, 1960, Ringgold, Georgia
Willie Joe Sanford, March 1, 1957, Hawkinsville, Georgia
Izell Henry, 1954, Greensburg, Louisiana
Oneal Moore, June 2, 1965, Varnado, Louisiana
Frank Morris, December 10, 1964, Ferriday, Louisiana
Robert Wilder or John Wesley Wilder, July 17, 1965, Ruston, Louisiana
Ladislado Urese, April 22, 1953, San Antonio, Texas
Harry Moore, December 25, 1951, Mims, Florida
Harriette Moore, January 3, 1952, Mims, Florida⁸

⁷ See: http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/lessonplans/hs_es_jim_crow_laws.htm

⁸ See: http://crime.about.com/od/history/a/civil_rights.htm

After Effects: Robert Johnson's legacy

As Robert Johnson lay dying in a tenant farmer's shack outside of Greenwood, Mississippi in August of 1938, legendary Artist & Repertoire man John Hammond, Sr. was looking for Johnson to include him in the now famous 'From Spirituals to Swing' concert, held on December 23rd, 1938 in New York City's Carnegie Hall.

Johnson had eleven records in print when he died and more tracks were issued after his death. Hammond had taken notice of his recordings and had written about him in Billboard Magazine as "Hot Spring's rising star." Upon notice of Johnson's death, Hammond chose Big Bill Broonzy to take Johnson's place in the concert, and it made Broonzy's career.

Since Johnson was mentioned in the advance publicity, Hammond played two of Johnson's recordings ('The Walkin' Blues' and 'Preachin' Blues') from the stage and read a eulogy to him in the middle of the live concert. With that, Johnson seemed to pass into history. Until popular interest in acoustic blues surfaced again with the folk music revival of the early 1960s.

*"With the exception of a handful of blues researchers and Delta musicians, Johnson's relative obscurity lasted until 1962 when Columbia Records issued sixteen of Robert's recordings on Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers. Volume II was released in 1971. With these recordings, the torch was passed to a new generation of musicians – the likes of the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton."*⁹

In addition to his influence in the 1960s rock and roll of Clapton, the Stones, Led Zeppelin, and many others, Robert Johnson has been cited as an inspiration by countless Rock, Heavy Metal and Country guitarists both acoustic and electric. Johnson's work has been covered by Jazz singers and has been cited and sampled by Hip Hop and Rap artists, as well. The musical part of Johnson's influence is undeniable, but there is also the romantic power of myth at work.

Faustian Bargains, The Crossroads and the Romanticizing of Robert Johnson

According to a classic German legend reworked by Goethe, Faust (or Faustus: Latin for "auspicious" or "lucky") makes a deal with the Devil, exchanging his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures.

Sadly, in circumstances that remained mysterious for decades, Robert Johnson learned his craft quickly, left behind brilliant recordings, and died young: a perfect blank slate for anyone inclined to distort or romanticize his life.

One can read that Robert Johnson was fresh off the farm, an untutored genius who had never played a gig; that he sold his soul to the Devil at the crossroads in exchange for the ability to play anything he wanted on the guitar – a bargain that clearly came due; that he crawled on his hands and knees and barked like a dog before he died...and much more.

With song titles like "Me & The Devil" and "Hell Hound On My Trail," it hasn't taken much to bring Mephistopheles into the picture, where he seems to have durably set up housekeeping in the imagination of American culture. Entire books have been written to refute the nonsense that has collected around Johnson's actual life¹⁰, but people love a good story more than the truth. If nothing else, we know that to be irrefutably true. The irony of this seems lost to our awareness. Johnson remains a Rorschach test, an ambiguous surface upon which everyone seems to see what they most long to see.

If Robert Johnson was cursed, this would seem to be it: his life has become a blank screen which succeeding generations of romantic music fans color with their own projections. Paying homage to Ralph Ellison's remarkable book, Johnson remains in some sense an 'Invisible Man.'

Conclusion

Robert Johnson was an ambitious, young, partially developed artist who at 25 and 26 made recordings that went on to have an expanding influence on American popular music. His music shows the marks of successful commercial recordings of other Blues artists of his time, while some of it presents us with very savvy and original twists and content that tantalizes us with the artist Johnson may have become, had he lived.

⁹ See "Robert Johnson/At The Crossroads," Scott Ainslie, Hal Leonard, 1992.

¹⁰ See: Elijah Wald's wonderful, "Escaping the Delta" Amistad, 2004.

His recordings, like a gateway drug for Delta Blues, present us with a survey of different styles, a bold and interesting introduction to various regional and commercial styles of Blues conveniently found in one artist. The truth of this has become clear over time as more and more pre-war Blues have been released and explored.

Johnson can be said to have had the dubious good fortune to die young in mysterious circumstances, and to have his music re-issued, his lyrics and the force of his solo acoustic recordings amplified in every way by young, talented rock and rollers, born a decade and more after his passing.

There are any number of other artists who might have served to bring this music to our attention, and some who outlived Johnson by many decades who deserved to have the acclaim that seems to belong only to him: David 'Honeyboy' Edwards, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Robert Lockwood, Jr., Tommy Johnson, Johnny Shines, Skip James, Lonnie Johnson, Snooks Eaglin, Son House...the list can be nearly endless.

But, as history, the recording industry, talented English rockers, and fate would have it – it is Robert Johnson who represents for most of us the music of an entire region, the struggle of a people, and the brilliance of a young musician striving to break away from a life of suffering and menial, agricultural labor that seemed to be ordained for him and millions like him.

Without any romantic mythology, this is something authentic to celebrate: however briefly, in his own life, Johnson did break out of the life to which he was born.

Today, our attention – rather than resting on the myths and romantic doggerel that have accumulated around Johnson – is better spent attending to the vibrations he cut into wax discs in makeshift recording studios back in Texas in the mid-1930s. That is where our reward lies. And that is where whatever burning mysteries about Robert Johnson will always find their fuel: in the music in the air.

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For educational use, contact: Scott Ainslie, Cattail Music, Ltd., 101 Washington St., Brattleboro VT 05301 USA
scott@CattailMusic.com, <http://CattailMusic.com>.