Robert Johnson

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Background information

Birth name	Robert Leroy Johnson
Born	May 8, 1911
	Hazlehurst, Mississippi
Died	August 16, 1938 (aged 27)
	Greenwood, Mississippi
Genres	Delta blues
Occupation(s)	Musician, songwriter
Instruments	Guitar, vocals, harmonica
Years active	1929 – 1938

Notable instruments Gibson L-1

Robert Leroy Johnson (May 8, 1911 – August 16, 1938) was an American singer-songwriter and musician. His landmark recordings in 1936 and 1937, display a combination of singing, guitar skills, and songwriting talent that has influenced later generations of musicians. Johnson's shadowy, poorly documented life and death at age 27 have given rise to much legend, including the Faustian myth that he sold his soul at a crossroads to achieve success. As an itinerant performer who played mostly on street corners, in juke joints, and at Saturday night dances, Johnson had little commercial success or public recognition in his lifetime.

It was only after the reissue of his recordings in 1961, on the LP King of the Delta Blues Singers that his work reached a wider audience. Johnson is now recognized as a master of the blues, particularly of the Mississippi Delta blues style. He is credited by many rock musicians as an important influence; 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. In 2010, David Fricke ranked Johnson fifth in Rolling Stone’s list of the 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time.

Life and career

Early life

Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi possibly on May 8, 1911, 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 had ten children. Charles Dodds had been forced by a mob to leave Hazlehurst following a dispute with white landowners. Julia left Hazlehurst with baby Robert but after some two years sent him to live in Memphis with her husband, who had changed his name to Charles Spencer.

Circa 1919, Robert rejoined his mother in the Mississippi Delta area around Tunica and Robinsonville, Mississippi. Julia's new husband was known as Dusty Willis; he was 24 years her junior. Robert was remembered by some residents as "Little Robert Dusty," but he was registered at Tunica's Indian Creek School as Robert Spencer. In the 1920 census he is listed as Robert Spencer, living in Lucas, Arkansas, with Will and Julia Willis. Robert was at school in 1924 and 1927 and the quality of his signature on his marriage certificate suggests that he was relatively well educated for a boy of his background. One school friend, Willie Coffee, has been discovered and filmed, recalling that Robert was already noted for playing the harmonica and jaw harp. He also remembers that Robert was absent for long periods, which suggests that he may have been living and studying in Memphis.

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 in childbirth shortly after. Surviving relatives of Virginia told the blues researcher Robert "Mack" McCormick that this was a divine punishment for Robert's decision

to sing secular songs, known as "selling your soul to the Devil". McCormick believes that Johnson himself accepted the phrase as a description of his resolve to abandon the settled life of a husband and farmer to become a full-time blues musician.

Around this time, the blues musician Son House moved to Robinsonville where his musical partner, Willie Brown, lived. Late in life, House remembered Johnson as a "little boy" who was a competent harmonica player but an embarrassingly bad guitarist. Soon after, Johnson left Robinsonville for the area around Martinsville, close to his birthplace Hazlehurst, possibly searching for his natural father. Here he perfected the guitar style of Son House and learned other styles from Isaiah "Ike" Zinnerman.[14] Zinnerman was rumored to have learned supernaturally to play guitar by visiting graveyards at midnight. When Johnson next appeared in Robinsonville, he had seemed to have acquired a miraculous guitar technique. House was interviewed at a time when the legend of Johnson's pact with the Devil was well known among blues researchers. He was asked whether he attributed Johnson's technique to this pact, and his equivocal answers have been taken as confirmation.

While living in Martinsville, Johnson fathered a child with Vergie Mae Smith. He also married Caletta Craft in May 1931. In 1932, the couple moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the Delta. Here Caletta died of childbirth and Johnson left for a career as a "walking" or itinerant musician.

Itinerant musician

From 1932 until his death in 1938, Johnson moved frequently between large cities like Memphis, Tennessee, and Helena, Arkansas, and the smaller towns of the Mississippi Delta and neighboring regions of Mississippi and Arkansas. On occasion, he traveled much farther. Fellow blues musician Johnny Shines accompanied him to Chicago, Texas, New York, Canada, Kentucky, and Indiana. Henry Townsend shared a musical engagement with him in St. Louis. In many places he stayed with members of his large extended family or with women friends. He did not marry again but formed some long term relationships with women to whom he would return periodically. One was Estella Coleman, the mother of the blues musician Robert Lockwood, Jr. In other places he stayed with a woman seduced at his first performance. In each location, Johnson's hosts were largely ignorant of his life elsewhere. He used different names in different places, employing at least eight distinct surnames.

Biographers have looked for consistency from musicians who knew Johnson in different contexts: Shines, who traveled extensively with him; Lockwood who knew him as his mother's partner; David "Honeyboy" Edwards whose cousin Willie Mae Powell had a relationship with Johnson. From a mass of partial, conflicting, and inconsistent eye-witness accounts, biographers have attempted to summarize Johnson's character. "He was well mannered, he was soft spoken, he was indecipherable". "As for his character, everyone seems to agree that, while he was pleasant and outgoing in public, in private he was reserved and liked to go his own way"."Musicians who knew Johnson testified that he was a nice guy and fairly average—except, of course, for his musical talent, his weakness for whiskey and women, and his commitment to the road."

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 have said 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– 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 music. 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 Shines was 17 when he met Johnson in 1933. He estimated Johnson was maybe a year older than himself. In Samuel Charters' Robert Johnson, Shines describes Johnson:

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 about 15 years his senior and the mother of musician Robert Lockwood, Jr. Johnson reportedly cultivated a woman to look after him in each town where he played. He supposedly asked homely young women living in the country with their

families whether he could go home with them, and in most cases he was accepted, until a boyfriend arrived or Johnson was ready to move on.

In 1941, Alan Lomax learned from Muddy Waters that Johnson had performed in the Clarksdale, Mississippi area. By 1959, historian 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. 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. In 1938, Columbia Records producer John H. Hammond, who owned some of Johnson's records, had record producer Don Law seek out Johnson 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.

Recording sessions

Robert Johnson records

Johnson's recordings were released by several record companies: "Milkcow's Calf Blues" on Perfect (top), "Love in Vain Blues" on Vocalion (middle), and "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" by Conqueror (bottom)

In Jackson, Mississippi, around 1936, Johnson sought out H. C. Speir, who ran a general store and doubled as a talent scout. Speir put Johnson in touch with Ernie Oertle, who, as a salesman for the ARC group of labels, introduced Johnson to Don Law to record his first sessions in San Antonio, Texas. The recording session was held on November 23, 1936, in room 414 of the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, which Brunswick Records had set up to be a temporary recording studio. In the ensuing three-day session, Johnson played 16 selections, and recorded alternate takes for most of these. Johnson reportedly performed facing the wall, which has been cited as evidence he was a shy man and reserved performer. This conclusion was played up in the inaccurate liner notes of the 1961 album King of the Delta Blues Singers. Slide guitarist Ry Cooder speculates that Johnson played facing a corner to enhance the sound of the guitar, a technique he calls "corner loading".

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 to be released 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"and stood apart from most rural blues as a through-composed lyric, rather than an arbitrary collection of more-or-less unrelated verses. 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. Most of Johnson's "somber and introspective" songs and performances come from his second recording session.

In 1937, Johnson traveled to Dallas, Texas, for another recording session with Don Law in a makeshift studio at the Vitagraph (Warner Brothers) Building, 508 Park Avenue, where Brunswick Record Corporation was located on the third floor. Eleven records from this session would be released within the following year. Johnson did two takes of most of these songs and recordings of those takes survived. Because of this, there is more opportunity to compare different performances of a single song by Johnson than for any other blues performer of his time and place. Johnson recorded almost half of the 29 songs that make up his entire discography in Dallas.

Playback speed hypothesis

In The Guardian's music blog from May 2010, Jon Wilde speculated that Johnson's recordings may have been "accidentally speeded up when first committed to 78 [rpm records], or else were deliberately speeded up to make them sound more exciting." He does not give a source for this statement. Biographer Elijah Wald and other musicologists strongly dispute this hypothesis on various grounds, including that Johnson's extant recordings were made on five different days, spread across two years at two different studios, making uniform speed changes or malfunctions highly improbable.[44] In addition, fellow musicians, contemporaries and family who had worked with or witnessed Johnson perform spoke of his recordings for more than 70 years preceding Wilde's hypothesis without ever suggesting that the speed of his performances had been altered.

Death

Johnson died on August 16, 1938, at the age of 27, near Greenwood, Mississippi. Although the cause of death is still unknown, there have been a number of theories offered, based on several differing accounts about the events preceding his death. Johnson had been playing for a few weeks at a country dance in a town about 15 miles (24 km) from Greenwood. According to one theory, Johnson was murdered by the jealous husband of a woman with whom he had flirted. In an account by fellow blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson, Johnson had been flirting with a married woman at a dance, where she gave him a bottle of whiskey poisoned by her husband. When Johnson took the bottle, Williamson knocked it out of his hand, admonishing him to never drink from a bottle that he had not personally seen opened. Johnson replied, "Don't ever knock a bottle out of my hand." Soon after, he was offered another (poisoned) bottle and accepted it. Johnson is reported to have begun feeling ill the evening after 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. 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, but has declined to reveal the man's name.

While strychnine has been suggested as the poison that killed Johnson, at least one scholar has disputed the notion. Tom Graves, in his book Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson, relies on expert testimony from toxicologists to argue that strychnine has such a distinctive odor and taste that it cannot be disguised, even in strong liquor. Graves 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. Contemporary David "Honeyboy" Edwards

similarly noted that the poison couldn't have been strychnine, since Johnson would have died much more rapidly, instead of suffering for three days.

In addition, LeFlore County Registrar Cornelia Jordan, after conducting an investigation into Johnson's death for the state director of Vital Statistics, R.N. Whitfield, wrote on Johnson's death certificate, "I talked with the white man on whose place this negro died and I also talked with a negro woman on the place. The plantation owner said the negro man, seemingly about 26 years old, came from Tunica two or three weeks before he died to play banjo at a negro dance given there on the plantation. He stayed in the house with some of the negroes saying he wanted to pick cotton. The white man did not have a doctor for this negro as he had not worked for him. He was buried in a homemade coffin furnished by the county. The plantation owner said it was his opinion that the negro died of syphilis."

Gravesite

The exact location of his grave is officially unknown; three different markers have been erected at possible church cemetery burial sites outside of Greenwood.

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 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 an Atlanta rock group named the Tombstones, after they saw a photograph in Living Blues magazine of an unmarked spot alleged by one of Johnson's ex-girlfriends to be Johnson's burial site.

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. Through Stephen LaVere Sony Music has placed a marker at this site which bears LaVere's name as well as Johnson's.

An interviewee in the documentary The Search for Robert Johnson (1991) suggests that owing to poverty and lack of transportation Johnson is most likely to have been buried in a pauper's grave (or "potter's field") very near where he died.

Devil legend

According to legend, as a young man living on a plantation in rural Mississippi, Robert Johnson had a tremendous 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 (actually 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, Edward Komara and Elijah Wald, who sees the legend as largely dating from Johnson's rediscovery by white fans more than two decades after his death. 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. 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 and Robert Palmer. 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 blues musician Tommy Johnson. This story was collected from his musical associate Ishman Bracey and his elder brother Ledell in the 1960s. One version of Ledell Johnson's account was published in David Evans's 1971 biography of Tommy, and was repeated in print in 1982 alongside Son House's story in the widely read Searching for Robert Johnson.

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 Zinnerman of Hazlehurst, Mississippi learned to play the guitar at midnight while sitting on tombstones. Zinnerman is believed to have influenced the playing of the young Robert Johnson.

The legendary "Crossroads" at Clarksdale, Mississippi

Recent research by blues scholar Bruce Conforth, in Living Blues magazine, makes the story clearer. Johnson and Ike Zimmerman did practice in a graveyard at night, because it was quiet and no one would disturb them, but it was not the Hazlehurst cemetery as had been believed. Zimmerman (his actual name as it was reportedly spelled on census records for the family going back into the early 1800s, his social security card, social security death notice, funeral program, and by his daughters) was not from Hazlehurst but nearby Beauregard, Mississippi. And he didn't practice in one graveyard, but in several in the area. Johnson spent about a year living with and learning from Zimmerman, who ultimately accompanied Johnson back to the Delta to look after him.

While Dockery, Hazlehurst and Beauregard have each been claimed as the locations of the mythical crossroads, there are also tourist attractions claiming to be "The Crossroads" in both Clarksdale and Memphis. Locals in Rosedale, Mississippi, claim Johnson sold his soul to the Devil at the intersection of highways 1 and 8 in their town, while the 1986 movie Crossroads was filmed in Beulah, Mississippi. Blues historian Steve Cheseborough writes that it may be impossible to discover the exact location of the mythical crossroads, because "Robert Johnson was a rambling guy".

Interpretations

Folklorist Alan Lomax was instrumental in preserving Johnson's recordings and spreading the mythology around his skill.

Some scholars have argued that the devil in these songs may not refer only to the Christian story of Satan, but also to the African trickster god Legba, himself associated with crossroads. Folklorist Harry M. Hyatt wrote that, 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. Hyatt claimed there was evidence indicating 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.

The Blues and the Blues singer has really special powers over women, especially. It is said that the Blues singer could possess women and have any woman they wanted. And so when Robert Johnson came back, having left his community as an apparently mediocre musician, with a clear genius in his guitar style and lyrics, people said he must have sold his soul to the devil. And that fits in with this old African association with the crossroads where you find wisdom: you go down to the crossroads to learn, and in his case to learn in a Faustian pact, with the devil. You sell your soul to become the greatest musician in history.

This view that the devil in Johnson's songs is derived from an African deity was strenuously challenged by blues scholar David Evans. In an essay published in 1999, Demythologizing the Blues, Evans wrote:

There are ... several serious problems with this crossroads myth. The devil imagery found in the blues is thoroughly familiar from western folklore, and nowhere do blues singers ever mention Legba or any other African deity in their songs or other lore. The actual African music connected with cults of Legba and similar trickster deities sounds nothing like the blues, but rather features polyrhythmic percussion and choral call-and-response singing.

Musicologist Alan Lomax dismissed the myth by stating "In fact, every blues fiddler, banjo picker, harp blower, piano strummer and guitar framer 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".

Musical style

Robert Johnson is today considered a master of the blues, particularly of the Delta blues style; Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones said in 1990, "You want to know how good the blues can get? Well, this is it." 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. 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." 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." Myers adds:

To the uninitiated, Johnson's recordings may sound like just another dusty Delta blues musician wailing away. But a careful listen reveals that Johnson was a revisionist in his time... Johnson's tortured soul vocals and anxiety-ridden guitar playing aren't found in the cotton-field blues of his contemporaries.

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."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.

Johnson is also known for using the guitar as 'the other vocalist in the song', a technique later perfected by B. B. King and his personified guitar known as 'Lucille': "In Africa and in Afro-American tradition, there is the tradition of the talking instrument, beginning with the drums ... the one-strand and then the six-strings with bottleneck-style performance; it becomes a competing voice ...or a complementary voice ... in the performance."

Bob Dylan wrote that "When Johnson started singing, he seemed like a guy who could have sprung from the head of Zeus in full armor. I immediately differentiated between him and anyone else I had ever heard. The songs weren't customary blues songs. They were so utterly fluid. At first they went by quick, too quick to even get. They jumped all over the place in range and subject matter, short punchy verses that resulted in some panoramic story-fires of mankind blasting off the surface of this spinning piece of plastic."

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 bandmate 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, who would later add "Robert Johnson was like an orchestra all by himself." "As for his guitar technique, it's politely reedy but ambitiously eclectic—moving effortlessly from hen-picking and bottleneck slides to a full deck of chucka-chucka rhythm figures."

Lyrics[edit]

In The Story with Dick Gordon, Bill Ferris of American Public Media said: "Robert Johnson I think of in the same way I think of the British Romantic poets, Keats and Shelley, who burned out early, who were geniuses at wordsmithing poetry ... The Blues, if anything, are deeply sexual. You know, 'my car doesn't run, I'm gonna check my oil' ... 'if you don't like my apples, don't shake my tree'. Every verse has sexuality associated with it."

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. 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.

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. 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.

"From Four Until Late" shows Johnson's mastery of a blues style not usually associated with the Delta. He croons the lyrics in a manner reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson, and his guitar style is more that of a ragtime-influenced player like Blind Blake.[78] 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".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."

Legacy

Robert Johnson has had enormous impact on music and musicians—but outside his own time, place, and even genre for which he was famous. His influence on contemporaries was much smaller, due in part to the fact that 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. He also died young after recording only a handful of songs. Johnson, though well-traveled and admired in his performances, was little noted in his lifetime, 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". With the album King of the Delta Blues Singers, a compilation of Johnson's recordings released in 1961, Columbia Records introduced his work to a much wider audience—fame and recognition he only received long after his death.

Rock and roll

Johnson's major influence has been on genres of music that weren't recognized as such until long after his death: rock and roll and rock. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame included four of his songs in a set of 500 they deemed to have shaped the genre:

"Sweet Home Chicago" (1936)

"Cross Road Blues" (1936)

"Hellhound on My Trail" (1937)

"Love in Vain" (1937)

Johnson recorded these songs a decade and a half before the recognized advent of rock and roll, dying a year or two later. The Museum inducted him as an early influence in their first induction ceremony in 1986, almost a half century after his death. Marc Meyers of the Wall Street Journal wrote that, "His 'Stop Breakin' Down Blues' from 1937 is so far ahead of its time that the song could easily have been a rock demo cut in 1954."

Rock music and related genres

Many of the artists who claim to have been influenced by Johnson the most, injecting his revolutionary stylings into their work and recording tribute songs and collections, are prominent rock musicians from the United Kingdom. His impact and influence on these future star musicians from England—who would then come to develop and define both the rock and roll and rock music eras—resulted not from personal appearances or direct fraternization. Instead, the artistic power of his exceptional talents and original compositions would be relayed across the Atlantic many years after his death through the compilation of his works released in 1961 by Columbia Records (King of the Delta Blues Singers).

Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones introduced bandmate Keith Richards to his first Robert Johnson album. The blues master's recordings would have as much impact on him as on Mick Jagger. The group performed his "Walkin' Blues" at the Rock and Roll Circus in 1968. They arranged their own version of "Love in Vain" for their album Let It Bleed and recorded "Stop Breakin' Down Blues" for Exile on Main Street. In addition, Mick Jagger, in his role as Turner in the 1970 film Performance, performs solo excerpts from "Come On In My Kitchen" and "Me and the Devil Blues."

Alexis Korner, referred to as "the Founding Father of British Blues", co-wrote and recorded a song entitled "Robert Johnson" on his The Party Album released in 1978. Other examples of the influence he had on English blues and blues-rock musicians and musical groups include:

Eric Clapton, founder and member of many legendary groups, considered Johnson "the most important blues musician who ever lived." He recorded enough of his songs to make Me and Mr. Johnson, a blues-rock album released in 2004 as a tribute to the legendary bluesman (also made into the film Sessions for Robert J). He'd earlier recorded "Crossroads", an arrangement of "Cross Road Blues", with Cream in 1968, leading some to consider him "the man largely responsible for making Robert Johnson a household name."

Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin referred to him on NPR's Fresh Air (recorded in 2004) as “Robert Johnson, to whom we all owed our existence, in some way.” His group recorded "Traveling Riverside Blues", a song that drew from Johnson's original and quoted a number of Johnson's songs in the lyrics. Not only the lyrics, but the music video was influenced as well—taking images of the 'Delta' that Johnson often wrote about in his own music.

Fleetwood Mac were strongly influenced by Johnson in the group's early years as a British blues band. Guitarist Jeremy Spencer contributed two covers of Johnson-derived songs to the group's early albums, and lead guitarist Peter Green would later go on to record Johnson's entire catalog over the course of two albums, The Robert Johnson Songbook and Hot Foot Powder.

Sam Dunn's documentary Metal Evolution cites that Robert Johnson was the "great grandfather to all things heavy metal" with members of Rush and Slipknot agreeing that he played a major role in the future of rock music.

Bob Dylan wrote of Johnson in his 2004 autobiography Chronicles: Volume One, "If I hadn't heard the Robert Johnson record when I did, there probably would have been hundreds of lines of mine that would have been shut down—that I wouldn't have felt free enough or upraised enough to write."

Guitar technique

Johnson was photographed with an L-1 from Gibson Guitar Company. Gibson eventually reissued an Gibson L-1 as a tribute to Johnson.

His revolutionary guitar playing has led contemporary experts, assessing his talents through the handful of old recordings available, to rate him among the greatest guitar players of all time:

In 1990 Spin magazine rated him first in its 35 Guitar Gods listing—on the 52nd anniversary of his death.

In 2008 Rolling Stone magazine ranked him fifth on their list of the 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time—70 years after he died.

In 2010 Guitar.com ranked him ninth in its list of Gibson.com's Top 50 Guitarists of All Time—72 years after he died.

Musicians who proclaim his profound impact on them, including Keith Richards, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton, all rated in the top ten with him on each of these lists. The boogie bass line he fashioned for "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" has now passed into the standard guitar repertoire. At the time it was completely new, a guitarist's version of something people would only ever have heard on a piano.

Lifetime achievement

The Complete Recordings, a double-disc box set released by Sony/Columbia Legacy on August 28, 1990, containing almost everything Robert Johnson ever recorded, with all 29 recordings (and 12 alternate takes) won a Grammy Award for “Best Historical Album” that year. In 2006 he was awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (accepted by his son Claud).

Problems of biography

“The thing about Robert Johnson was that he only existed on his records. He was pure legend. ”

—Martin Scorsese, Love In Vain: A Vision of Robert Johnson

Very little is known of Johnson's early life with any certainty. Two marriage licenses for Johnson have been located in county records offices. The ages given in these certificates point to different birth dates, as do the entries showing his attendance at Indian Creek School, Tunica, Mississippi. That he was not listed among his mother's children in the 1910 census casts further doubt on these dates. Carrie Thompson claimed that her mother, who was also Robert's mother, remembered his birth date as May 8, 1911. The 1920 census gives his age as 7, suggesting he was born in 1912/13. Five significant dates from his career are documented: Monday, Thursday and Friday, November 23, 26, and 27, 1936, at a recording session in San Antonio, Texas. Seven months later, on Saturday and Sunday, June 19–20, 1937, he was in Dallas at another session. His death certificate was discovered in 1968, and lists the date and location of his death.

The two confirmed images of Johnson were located in 1973, in the possession of the musician's half-sister Carrie Thompson, and were not widely published until the late 1980s. A third photo, purporting to show Johnson posing with fellow blues performer Johnny Shines, was published in the November 2008 edition of Vanity Fair magazine[88] and was authenticated in 2013. The same article claims that other photographs of Johnson, so far unpublished, may exist. "We

don't know much, really . . there's so little known about this musician, other than these recordings that were made, and the fact that he died early, poisoned by the jealous husband of a woman he was hanging out with."

Johnson's records were greatly admired by record collectors from the time of their first release and efforts were made to discover his biography, with virtually no success. Blues researcher Mack McCormick began researching his family background, but was never ready to publish. McCormick's research eventually became as much a legend as Johnson himself. In 1982, McCormick permitted Peter Guralnick to publish a summary in Living Blues (1982), later reprinted in book form as Searching for Robert Johnson. Later research has sought to confirm this account or to add minor details. A revised summary acknowledging major informants was written by Stephen LaVere for the booklet accompanying the compilation album Robert Johnson, The Complete Recordings (1990), and is maintained with updates at the Delta Haze website. The documentary film The Search for Robert Johnson contains accounts by McCormick and Wardlow of what informants have told them: long interviews of David Honeyboy Edwards and Johnny Shines, and short interviews of surviving friends and family. These published biographical sketches achieve coherent narratives, partly by ignoring reminiscences and hearsay accounts which contradict or conflict with other accounts.

A relatively full account of Johnson's brief musical career emerged in the 1960s, largely from accounts by Son House, Johnny Shines, David Honeyboy Edwards and Robert Lockwood. In 1961, the sleeve notes to the album King of the Delta Blues Singers included reminiscences of Don Law who had recorded Johnson in 1936. Law added to the mystique surrounding Johnson, representing him as very young and extraordinarily shy.

Discography

Eleven Johnson 78s were released on the Vocalion label during his lifetime, with a twelfth issued posthumously. Robert Johnson's estate hold the copyrights to his songs.

The Complete Recordings, a double-disc box set, was released on August 28, 1990 and contains almost everything Robert Johnson ever recorded, with all 29 recordings, and 12 alternate takes. (There is one further alternate, of "Traveling Riverside Blues," which was released on Sony's King of the Delta Blues Singers CD and also as an extra in early printings of the paperback edition of Elijah Wald's "Escaping the Delta.")

To celebrate Johnson's 100th birthday, May 8, 2011, Sony Legacy released a re-mastered 2-CD set of all 42 Johnson recordings, titled Robert Johnson: The Centennial Collection. In addition, there were two brief fragments: one where Johnson can be heard practicing a guitar figure; the second when Johnson can be heard saying, presumably to engineer Don Law, "I wanna go on with our next one myself." Reviewers commented that the sound quality of the 2011 release was a substantial improvement on the 1990 release.

Awards and recognitions

Grammy Awards

Year	Category	Title	Genre	Label	Results
1990	Best Historical Album	The Complete Recordings	Blues	Sony/Columbia Legacy	Winner

Grammy Hall of Fame

Year Recorded	Title	Genre	Label	Year Inducted
1936	Cross Road Blues	Blues (Single)	Vocalion	1998

National Recording Registry

The Complete Recordings of Robert Johnson (1936–1937) was included by the National Recording Preservation Board in the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2003. The board selects songs in an annual basis that are "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame included four songs by Johnson in its list of the "500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll". A memorial to Johnson reads: "Robert Johnson stands at the crossroads of American music, much as a popular folk legend has it he once stood at Mississippi crossroads and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for guitar-playing prowess. Year

Recorded	Title
1936	Sweet Home Chicago
1936	Cross Road Blues
1937	Hellhound on My Trail
1937	Love in Vain

The Blues Foundation Awards

Robert Johnson: Blues Music Awards

Year	Category	Title	Result
1991	Vintage or Reissue Album	The Complete Recordings	Winner

Honors and inductions

On September 17, 1994, the U.S. Post Office issued a Robert Johnson 29-cent commemorative postage stamp. Year

	Title	Results	Notes
2006	Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award	Winner	accepted by son Claud Johnson
2000	Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame	Inducted	
1986	Rock and Roll Hall of Fame	Inducted	Early Influences
1980	Blues Hall of Fame	Inducted	

Tribute albums

Tribute albums to Robert Johnson include:

Year	Artist	Album
1998	Peter Green Splinter Group	The Robert Johnson Songbook
2000	Peter Green Splinter Group	Hot Foot Powder

2001	Peter Green Splinter Group	Me and the Devil (A 3-CD set consisting of The Robert Johnson Songbook and Hot Foot Powder with 1 CD of original Robert Johnson recordings)
2003	John Hammond	At the Crossroads
2004	Eric Clapton	Me and Mr. Johnson
2006	Rory Block	The Lady and Mr Johnson (2007 Acoustic Blues Album of the Year)
2006	Thunder	Robert Johnson's Tombstone
2010	Todd Rundgren	Todd Rundgren's Johnson
2011	Big Head Blues Club	100 Years of Robert Johnson