Robert Johnson: Lost and Found (Music in American Life)

by

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**Synopsis**

Even with just forty-one recordings to his credit, Robert Johnson (1911-38) is a towering figure in the history of the blues. His vast influence on twentieth-century American music, combined with his mysterious death at the age of twenty-seven, still encourage the speculation and myth that have long obscured the facts about his life. The most famous legend depicts a young Johnson meeting the Devil at a dusty Mississippi crossroads at midnight and selling his soul in exchange for prodigious guitar skills. Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch examine the full range of writings about Johnson and weigh the conflicting accounts of Johnson's life story against interviews with blues musicians and others who knew the man. Their extensive research uncovers a life every bit as compelling as the fabrications and exaggerations that have sprung up around it. In examining the bluesman's life and music, and the ways in which both have been reinvented and interpreted by other artists, critics, and fans, Robert Johnson: Lost and Found charts the cultural forces that have mediated the expression of African American artistic traditions.
Preface

In May 2001, just outside Clarksdale, Mississippi, Bill McCulloch sat in the commissary bar at Hopson Plantation, chatting with a group that included Tommy Polk, a Nashville songwriter. At some point Bill mentioned this book, which was then an unfinished manuscript being shopped to publishers. “So what’s it going to be,” Tommy wanted to know, “a definitive biography of Robert Johnson?” No, Bill said, it would be more along the lines of an investigation—examining what had been said and written about Johnson with the aim of showing whether popular legends about the bluesman, particularly the story that he acquired his talent in a trade with the devil, were based on reality or pulled out of thin air. “Awww, no,” Polk replied with obvious disappointment, “why would you want to go and do a thing like that?”

Tommy Polk’s spontaneous protest will undoubtedly turn out to have presaged the reactions of many of Johnson’s fans in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Nobody loves a debunker, especially when the debunking involves one of the most captivating legends in American music history. Mindful of that reaction, we start by offering a couple of disclaimers: First, we did not pursue this investigation with the idea of razing the Johnson legend and installing historical truth, whatever that is, in its place. Second, we had no intention to hand down a stone tablet inscribed with the one politically correct response to Johnson’s art. The simple reality is that the Johnson legend—the whole selling-his-soul-at-the-crossroads business—cannot be eradicated at this late date; it belongs to the people now, and the fact that people embrace it as a part of American music history is as important as the question of whether it is true. Similarly, blues fans and researchers alike have found an astonishing variety of ways to interpret, enjoy, and otherwise respond to Johnson’s lyrics and performance styles. Most latter-day fans are unlikely to attach great importance to the question of whether their responses match the responses of Johnson’s original audience or whether their interpretations of Johnson’s lyrics are informed by historical context. That said, we will own up to some biases. We are suspicious of both the
process by which the Johnson legend appears to have been constructed and the timing of the construction project. We are incredulous at some of the supposedly informed readings of Johnson's blues poetry. We cling doggedly to the notion that Johnson and his music are best understood in the recollections of his peers and in the context of rural African American culture as it existed during the lean times of the twenties and thirties. We hope latter-day fans and interpreters will be at least willing to consider an alternative view of Johnson's life and art. It's always possible that their enjoyment and appreciation of Johnson will be deepened and enriched, not diminished. In that regard, we urge that this work be considered as a companion and counterpoint to all the other writings about Johnson. First, it is a chronicle of image making. Second, it is a forum to address such issues as motivation, methodology, and racial justice. Finally, it asks a simple question: how did things ever get so out of hand?

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a collaboration between a folklorist and a journalist. It is also the product of a friendship that began some forty years ago when we discovered a shared interest in the music that had evolved during the first half of the twentieth century in the African American communities of the rural South and Southeast. As the years went by our interest was enriched by encounters and, in a few cases, friendships with artists who were the inheritors of that musical legacy. While this book focuses mainly on one artist, Robert Johnson, it also attempts to acknowledge the creativity, ingenuity, and fierce independence of all the African American musicians who took their songs and instrumental styles to rural jooks, house parties, suppers, urban clubs, bawdy houses, street corners, and anyplace else they could draw a crowd during the lean days of the Great Depression.

This book draws from interviews with blues musicians conducted over the past thirty-three years in Ann Arbor, Chicago, and throughout the South. The nuts and bolts of this particular project were first assembled during a program at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife entitled “Roots of Rhythm and Blues: A Tribute to the Robert Johnson Era” and a similarly titled sound recording published by Columbia (which also happened to be Robert Johnson's label from the sixties on). The goal of that dual presentation—the same as this book's—was to reconnect Robert Johnson and his music to the cultural roots that informed his art. Some of the research and ideas in this book were shared earlier in papers presented to the American Folklore Society in 1992, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in 1998, and the Delta Blues Symposium in 2001.

Judith McCulloh, assistant director and executive editor at the University of Illinois Press, believed in the potential of this book almost from the moment she read our first letter of inquiry. That put her into a very select group. She was a savvy guide throughout the project. Steve Abbott shared an interview that he and Harry Tufts did with Johnny Shines in 1973. Segrid Pearson O’Dell, Elizabeth Pearson, and Betty Wineke helped prepare material used in the writing of the manuscript. David Dunton, a New York-based literary agent, read an early version of the manuscript, said it ought to be published, and recommended that it be submitted to the University of Illinois Press. M. Carolyn Cooper suggested ways to make the manuscript clearer and more scholarly. Krista Jones, a graphic artist and
designer in Columbus, Georgia, consented to the use of her folk-art-style image of Robert Johnson as the basis for a book cover. Jean C. Blackwell, a user-services librarian at the University of North Carolina, conducted searches for references to Robert Johnson in books and periodicals. Others whose contributions, both direct and indirect, deserve mention include the following: Lawrence Cohen, Frank Driggs, David Edwards, David Evans, Tom Freeland, Alan Greenberg, Edward Komara, Stephen LaVere, Robert “Junior” Lockwood, Jas Obrecht, Diana Parker, Tommy Polk, Ralph Rinzler, Johnny Shines, Chris Strachwitz, Henry Townsend, Paul Vernon, Gayle Dean Wardlow, and Jon Waxman, all of whom gave willingly of their time, counsel, and knowledge as this project moved through the various transitions leading to publication. And finally, thanks to John Cephas, Craig Jones, William Lightfoot, Charlie Musselwhite, Rob Riley, Peter Seiler, Robert Terwilliger, and Phil Wiggins, legendary musicians one and all. Robert Johnson \ The Making of a Paper Trail 

The literature on Johnson, already voluminous and still piling up, reads like an ongoing detective novel with Johnson ... as the missing person whose trail leads everywhere but to himself.”—Francis Davis, The History of the Blues

Lord knows, he tried to be a family man, but something always drew him back—or drove him back—to the road. He spent most of his adult life traveling from town to town, playing guitar and singing for gatherings on street corners, at suppers and house parties, and in rural roadhouses and urban clubs. Although his travels took him to most regions of the United States, he remained a virtual unknown outside the racially segregated venues of the Deep South, where his music was most at home. He made a few records, but only one of them sold very well—mainly in the South. He died in 1938, three months after his twenty-seventh birthday. Decades after his death this slightly built African American drifter named Robert Johnson rose from obscurity to become an all-American musical icon, the best-known although least understood exemplar of the Mississippi Delta blues tradition. He was celebrated by a small circle of jazz buffs who discovered his recordings in the thirties and forties and thought his music echoed the pure origins of jazz. He was a revered cult figure to a new generation of folk-music fans who discovered blues in the sixties. Later he was among the first thirteen musicians to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He won a Grammy Award. He was lionized in novels, screenplays, books, and hundreds of articles. Because of his exalted status, his life and music were researched, reviewed, and analyzed with singular intensity. Starting with the fledgling efforts of Samuel Charters in the fifties, a determined procession of researchers—Pete Welding, Gayle Dean Wardlow, Stephen Calt, Mack McCormick, Peter Guralnick, Stephen LaVere, and others—tracked down bits and pieces of information about Johnson. People who had actually known Johnson, particularly the blues musicians who had heard him and worked with him, were exhaustively debriefed in scores of interviews. As a result, we now have access to more facts, documents, and first-person recollections about Robert Johnson than we have about all but a handful of other blues musicians. Yet we are confronted with a paradox. Even those most familiar with the facts—indeed, some of the researchers who helped dig out the facts—have too often misrepresented Johnson as a mythic figure, an enigma. In some
respects the biographical images that have emerged since Johnson's death have moved progressively farther into romantic fantasy even as the published body of factual information has grown. In the earliest attempts to construct a picture of Johnson, he was portrayed as an authentic folk genius, a shy farmhand who had never known life away from the plantation and whose enormous talent found its way to a recording studio largely by a stroke of luck. In later biographical sketches Johnson was transformed into something akin to a demented street person, a deeply troubled loner driven by forces dark enough to make him potentially violent who wandered from place to place revealing through his music the psychic pain and inner demons that tormented him. Discussions of Johnson's music paralleled these early biographical images. They presented his art as the last and most highly evolved example of an older style—a dying echo of one of the primitive building blocks from which jazz was constructed; as a breathtaking and sometimes eerie departure from the older style; and finally, as the first faint rumblings of the rock-and-roll revolution. The image of Johnson prevailing today—the Johnson legend—borders on allegory. He has been cast as the unsophisticated but ambitious young musician who, in one fateful moment, sells his soul to the devil, or at least chooses to believe he has, and who thereafter flashes all too briefly across the American musical landscape, a genius possessed by self-destructive impulses who leaves behind a small but utterly singular musical legacy: blues lyrics laced with Faustian imagery, recordings of a voice imbued with supernatural foreboding, and little else. This is truly the stuff of legend. But it is not Robert Johnson. It is doubtful that any of Johnson's wives, friends, or fellow musicians would recognize him based on such a composite. So where did all the romantic fantasy come from? To find out, we must examine a paper trail that spans over sixty years. The trail, sad to say, is strewn with examples of dubious research, farfetched interpretation, and unsupported assertion. But it is informative to study how misinformation about Johnson was recycled, how myth became accepted as fact, and most significantly, how Johnson's most respected chroniclers too often shaped or invented facts to serve their own needs. For the most part we will examine the paper trail chronologically, showing how each of the biographical images of Robert Johnson emerged and how the various images evolved, faded, or intermingled with the passing of time. To provide a reality check, we will occasionally visit the recollections of musicians and others who knew Johnson to see whether their memories support or contradict the published biographical images. In the end, we believe, the evidence will show that the best-known images of Johnson were the product of ignorance and economics: white ignorance about African American traditions and culture and the desire to find ways to market Johnson's music to new generations of mostly white blues fans long after Johnson's death. As we review the biographical reconstructions of Robert Johnson, four patterns emerge: First, a small core of anecdotes became the primary grist for Johnson's early biographers. The anecdotes survived for decades, even though they tended to portray Johnson in ways that were clearly at odds with who he really was. Second, because they found it difficult to unearth factual information about Johnson, early biographers chose to characterize the
artist as a riddle or mystery, at times a vaguely menacing mystery. The artist-as-enigma approach became so much a part of the Johnson legend that it survives to this day, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Third, caught in a factual vacuum, each new wave of biographers rewrote what had been written by earlier writers. The only way to freshen the same old stories about Johnson (and avoid obvious plagiarism) was to resort to escalating levels of excited prose. Misinformation and dubious anecdotes were thus compounded by hyperbole. (A few of Johnson's fellow musicians also were prone to embroidery and invention.) And fourth, having recycled and exhausted the limited biographical material, some researchers turned to Johnson's song lyrics as the key to his life and personality. Most of these writers knew very little about Johnson's culture or the blues tradition, so they applied their own cultural references to the lyrics, often with reckless abandon. In the process they removed Johnson from any relevant context and churned out reams of subjective “imaginings” about what his life might have been and what his songs might mean. These flawed analyses now constitute a disproportionate share of the literature on Johnson. The crowning result of all this was reverse alchemy. Valuable information about Johnson and his music was debased, distorted, or just ignored; a counterfeit story line emerged in which Johnson was cast as a twentieth-century Faust, relinquishing his soul and perhaps his sanity in an unholy trade for musical knowledge. Why was Johnson—and only Johnson—treated this way? Even after examining the paper trail and weighing all the evidence, it is doubtful that we can fully answer that question. Nor can we fully explain why his presence and music affect us so deeply, for he truly does rank among the finest blues poets ever. But we can begin to show how the Johnson legend was created, who created it, and why it has always been so difficult for us to accept Robert Johnson's simple humanity and artistic quality at face value. Our hero got rambling ... I got rambling all on my mind.—Robert Johnson, “Rambling on My Mind” (1936) Even as the body of romantic mythology about Robert Johnson grew in the decades following his death, so, too, did the volume of carefully researched facts and first-person recollections. For readers who know little or nothing about this storied blues artist, this chapter offers a short biographical outline. Based on public records, court documents, the memories of Johnson's contemporaries, and the work of such biographers as Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow, Mack McCormick, Peter Guralnick, Jas Obrecht, Stephen LaVere, and Tom Freeland, the outline is intended to provide helpful reference points for the investigation that follows. Readers who are familiar with the generally accepted facts and suppositions about Johnson's life may choose to skip to chapter 3. One cautionary note: In the early years of blues scholarship, the literature was often replete with dubious information either recycled from dubious prior research or conjectured from sparse facts. We made a diligent effort throughout this book to avoid presenting such information as fact, but we are not naïve enough to believe that we weren't fooled in a number of instances. Most accounts say that Robert Leroy Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, on May 8, 1911, the illegitimate son of Julia Major Dodds and Noah Johnson, a farmhand. By the time Robert was born, Julia Dodds already had ten children by her husband, Charles
Dodds, but most of them were no longer living in Hazelhurst. They had moved to Memphis to be with Charles Dodds, who had fled from Hazelhurst in 1909 or 1910 after getting into a bitter dispute with another local landowner and losing his farm in a mortgage foreclosure. After moving Dodds changed his last name to Spencer and started a new family made up of all the children from his marriage to Julia plus two children he had fathered with a woman who had been his mistress back in Hazelhurst. Robert went to Memphis to live with Spencer around the age of three. He returned to Mississippi about four years later to live with his mother and her second husband near Robinsonville, in the far northwest corner of the state. He attended the Indian Creek School but was hampered by poor eyesight, possibly caused by a “defective” left eye that fellow musicians described many years later. One of Johnson’s friends from that era recalled that young Robert was often gone for long periods, probably because he was still living part time with Spencer in Memphis. Some accounts say Robert’s first stringed instrument was a diddley bow, traditionally made by stretching a strand or two of wire between nails hammered into the side of a shed or some other wood structure. The youngster later picked up a few guitar chords from one of his brothers while in Memphis, and his interest in music grew as he was exposed to the playing of such early blues guitarists as Charley Patton, Ernest “Whiskey Red” Brown, Harvey “Hard Rock” Glenn, and Myles Robson. His desire to earn a living as a musician was fueled by exposure to the rigors of farmwork—something he grudgingly tried when he lived with his mother and step-father and again later after his marriage to Virginia Travis in 1929, just as the Great Depression, already a fact of life in rural America, began to cripple most sectors of the U.S. economy. In April 1930 Johnson’s wife, who was still in her teens, experienced complications during the birth of her first child. Both she and the baby died. It was also around 1930 that one of the most powerful early blues artists, Son House, came to Robinsonville and began playing what he described as “Saturday night balls” in partnership with Willie Brown, also a fine blues singer and guitarist. House later remembered Johnson as a “little boy” who could play a passable harmonica but who would “drive the people nuts” whenever he tried to play guitar at parties, something he often did when House and Brown took breaks. In late 1930 or early 1931 Johnson moved to the area around Martinsville, a lumber town in the southern part of Mississippi, not far from his birthplace, supposedly looking for his real father. Using the music he had absorbed from House and Brown, he began playing house parties and jook joints—rural markets or general stores that doubled as nightclubs on weekends—with a new guitar mentor, Ike Zinnerman. (A recently discovered source, interviewed by Gayle Wardlow, recalled that Ike had a brother, Herman, who could also play guitar, and the two often played together, so Johnson may have learned from both of them.) Johnson began seeing a young woman, Vergie Mae Smith, who gave birth to a son in December 1931; decades later Smith’s child was ruled to be Johnson’s only legal heir. While living in the Martinsville area, Johnson also began a relationship with Calletta Craft, an older woman who had been married twice before and who had three children. Johnson and Craft were married in May 1931, not long after Vergie Smith became
pregnant. In 1932 the couple moved north to the Delta town of Clarksdale, where Calletta fell on poor health and soon was abandoned by Johnson. Most accounts agree that at this point Johnson took to the road, launching the itinerant existence that would be his trademark for the next few years. But some accounts also suggest that Johnson paused at least long enough to return to Robinsonville, where he again encountered House and Brown at a weekend party. As House recalled it many years later, he and Brown were impressed by the progress Johnson had made as a guitar player and singer—a quantum leap that would eventually stoke the imaginations of researchers and critics alike as they studied Johnson's life and art. Vergie Smith claimed many years afterward that Johnson returned to the Martinsville area twice in 1932, hoping to persuade her to travel with him. She said she refused and never saw Johnson again. Now well on his way to becoming a polished professional, Johnson established a base in Helena, Arkansas, and worked extensively throughout the South as a walking musician, traveling sometimes alone and sometimes with other guitar players, such as Johnny Shines or Calvin Frazier. He frequently traveled and played under assumed names, a habit that complicated later efforts to construct an accurate biography. It was during this time, between his late teens and midtwenties, that Johnson began to absorb, blend, and refine particular stylistic nuances—drawn from piano as well as guitar—that would eventually help redefine blues for a new generation of musicians who left the South and moved to St. Louis, Detroit, and most prominently, Chicago. It was also during this time that Johnson entered a common-law relationship with Estella Coleman in Helena. Her son, Robert Lockwood, learned guitar from Johnson and eventually became a prominent bluesman in his own right; performing as Robert “Junior” Lockwood, he continued to play much of Johnson’s repertoire along with his own for decades after Johnson’s death. Although Johnson was well known in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee by the midthirties, he yearned to record, as many of his mentors and influences already had. So, according to most accounts, he traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, to audition for H. C. Speir, a music-store owner whose ear for talent had led to recording sessions for a veritable who's who of important regional blues artists during the twenties and thirties. Speir put Johnson in touch with Ernie Oertle, a salesman and scout for the American Record Corporation (ARC), and Oertle twice took (or sent) Johnson to Texas to record. In Texas Johnson was turned over to Don Law, British-born regional manager for ARC. Law, ten years Johnson's senior, had immigrated to the United States in 1924, securing work in Dallas with Brunswick Records, which later became part of ARC and, still later, of Columbia. Johnson's recordings were issued first on ARC, then on Vocalion (a label owned by ARC), and finally, long after Johnson's death, on Columbia. Under Law's supervision Johnson began recording on November 23, 1936, in a San Antonio hotel. All told he recorded sixteen songs in three sessions spread over five days. Included among the songs was “Terraplane Blues,” the closest he ever came to a genuine hit during his lifetime. Seven months later in Dallas, with Law again serving as A&R supervisor, Johnson recorded thirteen songs, ten of them in a single session in sweltering heat on June 20. Nearly a dozen songs from the Dallas sessions were issued,
though none of them ever matched the popularity of “Terraplane.” After the two June sessions in 1937, Johnson resumed the life of an itinerant musician, turning up later that year in Greenwood, Mississippi, which may have been a regular summer stop for him. Blues artist David “Honeyboy” Edwards, then about twenty-two, was living in Greenwood and recalled that Johnson created quite a stir while playing on the street one afternoon when he was asked if he knew “Terraplane Blues.” Johnson’s rendition made it clear to everyone within earshot that he was indeed the musician who had made the popular record. Johnson was showered with small change.10 According to Edwards, Johnson returned to Greenwood the following summer and was offered a gig playing on two consecutive Saturday nights at a country jook located in a convenience store (or “grab-all,” as some locals called it) known as the Three Forks, outside Greenwood.11 Most narratives used to say that Johnson was hired to play the first two Saturdays in August, but Johnson’s death certificate states that he last worked as a musician in July, which is plausible given all the evidence now in hand. After the first Saturday, Edwards said, Johnson began seeing the wife of the man who owned the jook.12 It was a typically brazen act on Johnson’s part, but in this instance, a fatal one. While the facts about Johnson’s death and burial remain shrouded by legend and invention, the testimony of Edwards and other musicians suggests that Johnson was slipped some poisoned whiskey at the jook on the second Saturday night, and he became too sick to play.13 Around two in the morning he was moved to a bed or pallet in the jook. From this point on, the accounts differ. One witness who claimed to have been at the jook said that Johnson was laid out on “a little old piece of cotton cloth,” died at the jook early Sunday morning, and was buried by the county on Monday.14 According to other reports, a man known as Tush Hog drove Johnson from the jook back to the “Baptist Town” section of Greenwood, where he watched over Johnson for the next two days before the musician died on Tuesday.15 Newer research by Stephen LaVere and others suggests that Johnson had been staying at a rooming house in Baptist Town that July and that he was taken there after he became sick. Johnson actually survived the poisoning, according to LaVere’s findings, but was so debilitated that he contracted an infection, most likely pneumonia, for which there was no cure at that time. As the infection progressed, Johnson was moved from the rooming house to Tush Hog’s residence, which was located not in Baptist Town but on Star of the West Plantation, just north of town. There, on August 16, 1938, Johnson died. His body probably was buried at Little Zion M. B. Church, a little under two miles from the residence where he died. A monument, commissioned by LaVere, now stands in the churchyard.16 There is conflicting testimony as to whether any members of Johnson’s family were able to get to Greenwood for the burial, but most sources agree that his sister Carrie eventually claimed his guitar and other belongings. Among the items supposedly found at Tush Hog’s residence was a note, which some researchers believe was handwritten by Johnson. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of Jerusalem, I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He will call me from the Grave.” Although most researchers and many of Johnson’s contemporaries eventually concluded that Johnson had been the victim of foul play, no one was ever charged in
connection with the death. By the time Johnson died, his recordings had attracted the
attention of a small group of New York–based music critics and jazz promoters. Their well-
intentioned efforts to construct a biography of the blues artist focused on information
gleaned from his two recording sessions, stories about his death, and clues combed from
his song lyrics. From a historian’s point of view, the results were calamitous.3 The
AnecdotesI knew him only from his blues records and from the tall, exciting tales the
recording engineers and supervisors used to bring about him from … Dallas and San
Antonio.—John HammondDon Law, the British producer who recorded Johnson, was a key
source of early information about the blues artist. H. C. Speir and Ernie Oertle, the two
talent scouts who put Johnson in touch with Law, also provided recollections, but Law was
the initial and primary source. His anecdotes, unchallenged for thirty years, were recycled
over and over again by Johnson's early biographers. By the time he recorded Johnson, Law
had already presided over a number of blues sessions in both Mississippi and Texas. He
had also tried his hand at promoting blues to merchants who sold “race records,” the
common term at that time for music aimed at the African American market. Law is best
known, however, for his recording of country and western music, so most of the testimony
concerning his approach to A&R work comes from country music artists. Ray Price, for
one, said Law was a producer who would “let an artist be an artist.” In that vein, Law was
remembered for letting members of the Bob Wills band record in their underwear on a
particularly hot day, for letting that same band play louder than usual at their request, and
for letting certain artists loose the muse with whiskey—all in the name of getting as much
material as possible out of each session.1We do not know whether Johnson's sessions
were similarly equitable, whether Johnson, too, recorded in his underwear or under the
influence of alcohol. But legend leads us to believe that Johnson set Law's recording
microphone in a corner of the room and played facing the wall. Even if Law misinterpreted
this move, as evidence suggests he did, the fact that he allowed it lends credence to his
reputation for cooperation and collaboration. Other evidence, though, suggests that Law
considered Johnson to be naïve and unprofessional and was, to some degree,
exasperated by Johnson’s out-of-studio behavior. Given all the evidence, it seems fair to
say that Law was not a reliable source of information about Robert Johnson. The blues
researcher and record producer Samuel Charters, for example, relied heavily on Law's
recollections of the 1936 sessions, citing Law's testimony that Johnson “was very reticent
and very shy. This was the first time he'd been to what he considered a big city, the first
time he had ever been off the plantation.”2 Law apparently conveyed a similar impression
to impresario John H. Hammond Jr., who wanted Johnson to perform in concert at
Carnegie Hall in New York. Law argued that Johnson was too shy and would die of
fright.3In fact, Johnson was an accomplished street performer, earning a living in the
middle of the depression by engaging and entertaining strangers. He was also
remembered for his ability to connect with jook-joint audiences. And he was already well
traveled. As a walking musician, he followed an orbit that included the Delta and the
connecting cities of Jackson, Mississippi; Helena and West Memphis, Arkansas; Memphis;
and St. Louis. Occasionally trips took him as far as Canada and Brooklyn, New York. His on-again, off-again partner Johnny Shines recalled the wanderings: "Robert liked to travel. You could wake up anytime of night and say “Let's go” and he was ready. He never asked you where or why or anything. He would get up and get dressed and get ready to go. And I often say, I guess him and I were the first hippies because we didn't care when, where or how. If we wanted to go someplace, we went. We didn't care how we went. We'd ride, walk. If you asked us where we were going we didn't know. Just anywhere." "Are you going north?" “Yeah.” "Get in." "We'd get in and go.

As for Johnson's shyness, Law appears to have based this impression at least in part on Johnson's preference for facing the wall while recording. Law turned this into a touching anecdote, which eventually grew into a blues legend, in which he portrayed Johnson as so shy he could play only by turning his back on a group of Mexican musicians who were scheduled to record at the same session. But Johnny Shines, among other contemporaries, said this was typical of Johnson's demeanor around musicians: "So Robert was playing some of the stuff that I wanted to play, and making chords that I was lacking. ... So I began to follow him around, you know, to hear him play—not to hear him play but to watch him play. And he would catch me watching him, looking at him, watching his fingers, and he turned his back on me. And that went on for close to a year. He'd catch me watching him and he'd walk away. He'd just disappear. Just got swallowed up in the crowd." "So what Law interpreted as stage fright was more likely possessiveness: Johnson wanted to prevent other guitar players from stealing his licks. (Several musicians have suggested an alternative explanation, that Johnson preferred the acoustics he got when playing toward the wall.) Interestingly, Law's impression of Johnson as a raw primitive who would be out of place in a big city remained unshaken even in the face of two incidents that later became part of Law's anecdotal legacy. The British A&R man claimed his dinner was interrupted by two calls from Johnson the night before the initial recording session. First Johnson got into a scrape with local police, was beaten and jailed, and called to ask for bail money. Later he needed money to pay a prostitute. Even if taken with the requisite grain of salt, such anecdotes seem to describe someone who was street hardened and more than a little worldly. That's exactly how Johnson was described many years later by Law's son, Don Law Jr., who said it was obvious, at least in retrospect, that Johnson was a pretty slick operator who “knew how to move around.”

But in 1936 the apparent inconsistency did not prompt the senior Law to revise his impressions of Johnson to any noticeable degree, nor did it daunt the researchers who later relied on Law's testimony. Law's impressions of the unsullied rustic were passed along to John Hammond and resurfaced in a public elegy in Hammond's 1938 Carnegie Hall production “From Spirituals to Swing.” Hammond wanted Johnson for the New York show but learned from the ARC salesman and talent scout Oertle that he had recently died. In his onstage elegy Hammond told the audience: “Robert Johnson was going to be the big surprise of the evening. I knew him only from his blues records and from the tall, exciting tales the recording engineers and supervisors used to bring about him from the improvised studios in Dallas and San Antonio. I don't believe that Johnson
had ever worked as a professional musician anywhere, and it still knocks me over when I think of how lucky it is that a talent like his ever found his way to phonograph records."8A fetching story, but as we now know, Johnson was a professional of several years' standing who found his way to phonograph records less by luck than by using the right connections. Anyway, Hammond went on: “Johnson died last week at the precise moment when Vocalion scouts finally reached him and told him that he was booked to appear at Carnegie Hall on December 23.”Dramatic, but not true. No evidence suggests that Vocalion scouts approached Johnson on his deathbed. Rather, Oertle heard through the grapevine that Johnson was dead and passed the word to Hammond, who, in the spirit of the “tall, exciting tales” he so enjoyed, couldn't resist touching up the artist's demise with a little imagined drama.9Hammond was not alone in this regard. Because Robert Johnson was not well known outside the African American community, news of his death traveled mainly by word of mouth. Son House, one of Johnson's early mentors, said he heard first that Johnson had been stabbed to death and then that he had been poisoned. Johnny Shines, Johnson's occasional traveling companion, said he first heard that Johnson had died in Eudora, Mississippi, that “black arts” were somehow involved, and that Johnson had died on his hands and knees, barking like a dog.10 Few people seemed to know exactly when and where the death had occurred. As late as 1959, when John Hammond's “Spirituals to Swing” concerts were reissued on vinyl,11 Hammond's liner notes reported that Johnson had been “murdered in a Mississippi barroom brawl” shortly after he signed to appear at the 1938 concert (but omitted the deathbed scene). That same year Samuel Charters wrote that Johnson had been murdered in San Antonio in 1937. Wrong place, wrong year. But Charters, unlike some others, should not be found guilty of fanciful invention—at least not on this particular score. Charters believed that San Antonio was the last place Johnson had been seen by recording personnel, who were then still considered a reliable source of information, and he had heard from the musicians' grapevine that Johnson had been murdered. His detective work was faulty, but he was making a legitimate attempt to piece together the sparse bits of real information that were available in the late fifties.12 In the early sixties the researcher and record executive Nick Perls told another researcher that he had interviewed a “Negro named Sol Henderson in Robbinsonville [sic] Mississippi” who claimed he and Johnson played together in Friars Point in 1937 or 1938 when Johnson was killed, stabbed by a girlfriend he had slapped, and that he died on a Sunday.13 The English-language version of the German critic Joachim Berendt's work The Jazz Book: From New Orleans to Rock and Free Jazz, published in 1975, identified Johnson as a bluesman who came from Mississippi and was poisoned in Texas.14 And Hammond's autobiography, published in 1977, reported that Johnson “had been killed by his girl friend.”15

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Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues, Up Jumped the Devil:

What people say about this book

Kevin Fontenot, “When Legend becomes Fact.. Robert Johnson might be the most famous of all country bluesman. But we actually know very little about the man himself and what we think we know (the selling his soul at the crossroads story and forever being demon haunted) was a late addition to the legend. Pearson and McCulloch peel back the layers of what commentators have said about Johnson to reveal what we can really know about him—and it is not very much. They then tackle the literature on Johnson and show how a legend is created through wishful thinking, academic desire, and faulty deconstruction of lyrics. This is a wonderfully written, intelligent book that exposes the flaws of some methods of interpreting entertainers and the danger of interpreting them outside of the artist's culture. Johnson emerges as a human not such much chased by demons, but who chases women and whiskey too much. A fantastic study that should serve as both a model and a warning for all who write about entertainers.”

Bruce, “Very interesting book!. This is a very interesting look at the ‘myth’ of Robert Johnson. The authors put everything in perspective in a well researched, informative way....bottom line...Robert Johnson was a gifted musician, a product of his time (like any other great artist).... a wonderful Blues Guitarist/Singer.Very well written! I bought a 'used' copy and it is in pristine condition.Bruce”

grasshopper4, “Finding the Real Deal. Pearson and McCulloch demythologize the stories about Robert Johnson in this well researched and fascinating study. The authors convincingly demonstrate that the story of Johnson's Faustian pact never appeared in print until decades after Johnson's death. They further debunk the legend by showing that even most of those who were closely associated with him also viewed the story with either a wry skepticism or total disdain. Although it's fun to talk about the legends that have been associated with this blues man, Pearson and McCulloch also argue that a gullible acceptance of the stories prevents blues fans from truly understanding the man and his music. I came away from reading this book with a better understanding of his life and a far greater appreciation for Johnson's abilities. In this respect, the book provides an excellent resource for learning to listen to blues music by clearing away the highly exoticized and even patronizing presuppositions that we may bring to the art form. In this fine study, a fine folklorist and journalist partner up to give us the real deal of Johnson.”

1969mets, “Authors to debunk "Clapton is God" myth in next book. It never occurred to me that there were people who actually believed that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads. I had always thought the great bluesman's story to be a legend
along the lines of Paul Bunyan and Babe Ruth's pointed shot. When I'd read Pete Welding, Samuel Charters, Greil Marcus, and Robert Palmer on Johnson, I assumed they were re-telling a fairy tale, or perhaps--at a stretch--writing metaphorically. For me, the legend was finally put to rest with the surfacing of the photographs of Johnson. (Oh, he's just a regular guy!) The rather kooky premise of this book by Pearson and McCulloch is that the writers/critics mentioned above (and others) were, in effect, part of a vast white-wing conspiracy to promote the devil myth. The smarmy viciousness of the author's attacks on these conspirators is completely unnecessary, sort of like beating a dead hellhound. That being said, this is about as good an overview of the Robert Johnson legend as you're ever gonna find.”

Hazel1985, “I bought this a christmas present for my mum. .... I bought this a christmas present for my mum. She said she loves it. No very helpful to you guys though.”

The book by Barry Lee Pearson has a rating of 5 out of 4.1. 13 people have provided feedback.
Book Information

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