**Robert Johnson**

**Biography**

Though a street singer whose repertoire was not limited to the blues, Robert Johnson is among the first and most influential Delta bluesmen, despite his having recording only 29 songs before dying at the age of 27. He is credited with writing blues standards like "Dust My Broom" (which Elmore James made into a postwar electric-blues anthem), "Sweet Home Chicago," "Ramblin' on My Mind," "Crossroads" (covered by Cream), "Love in Vain" and "Stop Breaking Down" (covered by the Rolling Stones), and "Terraplane Blues" (covered by Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band on *Mirror Man*). Equally important, Johnson's persona and his songs introduced a musical and lyrical vocabulary that are the basis of the modern blues and blues-based rock.

Little was known of Johnson's life until Peter Guralnick set out to discover what truth he could about the bluesman; his *Searching for Robert Johnson* (1988) stands as the closest thing to a definitive biography. Johnson was born to Mrs. Julia Dodds, the product of her extramarital relationship with Noah Johnson. As a young boy he lived with his mother and baby sister in a number of homes, including that of a Charles Spencer, who kept two mistresses, one of whom was Johnson's mother, and their children. Johnson's mother left him in Spencer's care until, at age seven or so, Johnson was deemed too disobedient and was returned to his mother and his new stepfather, Willie "Dusty" Willis. He lived with them in Robinsonville, 40 miles south of Memphis, until young manhood.

He began playing the Jew's harp, then the harmonica. Sometime in his teens he began using the surname of Johnson. Poor eyesight and lack of interest in education led him to quit school. Sometime in the late '20s, he picked up the guitar. He was influenced by pioneering Delta bluesmen like Charley Patton and Willie Brown, as well as any number of journeyman musicians he met.

In 1929, at age 17, he married Virginia Travis; she and their first baby died during childbirth in April 1930. Shortly thereafter Johnson met Son House, who would become an important influence on the young bluesman. It was then that Johnson decided to leave behind the sharecropping life he seemed destined for and take to the road. He returned to his birthplace and there met his mentor, Ike Zinneman, an obscure bluesman. Also in Hazelhurst, he married Calletta Craft, a woman who reportedly worshiped him and allowed him the freedom of spending days and nights in Zinneman's company. The darker, more occult aspects of the Johnson legend first appear here; reputedly, Zinneman learned the blues playing his guitar while sitting atop tombstones. Johnson began writing down his songs, and when not picking cotton, he performed locally in juke joints or on the courthouse steps. Sometime in the early '30s, he left his birthplace for the Mississippi Delta. His wife suffered a breakdown and returned to her home; she died a few years later.

After a brief return to Robinsonville, he settled in Helena, Arkansas, where he met and played with Robert Nighthawk, Elmore James, Honeyboy Edwards, Howlin' Wolf, Calvin Frazier, Memphis Slim, Johnny Shines, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Hacksaw Harney —a virtual who's who of early rural blues. It was at this time that he took up with Estella Coleman and unofficially adopted her son Robert Lockwood Jr., who was to become a respected bluesman himself, using the name Robert Jr. Lockwood. Johnson toured up and down the Mississippi, as far north as New York and Canada. It also was during this time that his stature grew, and he became protective and jealous of his playing style. His repertoire included blues standards, his own compositions, and even such popular tunes of the day as "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds."

Johnson was always attractive to women; as his prowess grew, he was the object of jealousy, from fellow musicians and jilted boyfriends and husbands. He often claimed that he learned to play guitar from the Devil himself, and many of his recordings evince a haunting, otherworldly inspiration. Over the years, he became erratic, often moody, but always ambitious. For years he had wanted to record, and on November 23, 1936, he finally did. The first song he recorded was "Terraplane Blues." It became a best-selling hit for Vocalion, a Columbia Records specialty label. During his lifetime, over the course of three recording sessions that November, Johnson created what is arguably the most influential single artist's catalogue in rock and blues history: "Kindhearted Woman Blues," "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Rambling on My Mind," "When You've Got a Friend," "Come On in My Kitchen," "Phonograph Blues," "Blues," "They're Red Hot," "Dead Shrimp Blues" (never issued), "Cross Road Blues," "Walking Blues," "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," "Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)," "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day," "Stones in My Passway," "I'm a Steady Rollin' Man," "From Four Till Late," "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," and "Milkcow's Calf Blues."

In August 1938 Johnson played the last show of his life. While playing at a roadhouse, he attempted to rekindle a relationship with the owner's wife. Sonny Boy Williamson, who was with him, cautioned him not to drink from an open whiskey bottle he was offered. Johnson refused to heed the warning, and three days later died of strychnine poisoning and pneumonia. He was buried in an unmarked grave.

Despite his comparatively small number of recordings, Johnson has a paramount place in blues history and, though he played acoustically, was a strong influence on such electric bluesmen as Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Johnny Shines, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Robert Nighthawk, and others. There were rumors that Johnson had played electric guitar. Just after his death, producer/manager John Hammond, organizing his first landmark Spirituals to Swing concert, wanted Johnson to perform; unable to locate the late Delta bluesman, Hammond settled for Big Bill Broonzy.

To the surprise of the record industry, the double-CD box set *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* sold over half a million copies and was certified platinum. Over half a century after Johnson's death, the CD package received a Grammy for Best Historical Recording.

*This biography originally appeared in The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll (Simon & Schuster, 2001).*

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***Just for fun…Robert Johnson was also a member of “The 27 Club,” along with…***

* ***Jimi Hendrix***
* ***Janis Joplin***
* ***Jim Morrison***
* ***Kurt Cobain***
* ***Amy Winehouse***