

Hellhound On My Trail

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 05 July 2011 20:37 - Last Updated Tuesday, 17 March 2015 14:30

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One of the greatest blues artist of all time, the legendary **Robert Johnson** recorded only enough music to fit onto two CDs. After his death at the age of 27 in 1938, Johnson had only 12 known 78rpm records (42 tracks in total if you include alternate takes) under his belt. But those records would go on to influence the world of blues and rock & roll like no other recordings and become an essential influence to Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, and Keith Richards (to name just three).

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Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, probably on May 8, 1911. Still nothing was known of Johnson's early life. The noted blues researcher Mack McCormick began researching his family background, but he was never ready to publish. Eventually McCormick's research became as much a legend as Johnson himself.



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Robert Johnson

According to a legend known to modern Blues fans, Robert Johnson was a young black man living on a plantation in rural Mississippi. Branded with a burning desire to become a great blues musician, he was instructed to take his guitar to a crossroad near Dockery's plantation at midnight. There he was met by a large black man (the Devil) who took the guitar from Johnson and tuned it, giving him mastery of the guitar, and handed it back to him in return for his soul. Within 10 year's time, in exchange for his everlasting soul, Robert Johnson became the king of the Delta blues singers, able to play, sing, and create the greatest blues anyone had ever heard.

Johnson seems to have claimed occasionally that he had sold his soul to the Devil, but it is not clear that he meant it seriously. The crossroads detail was widely believed to come from Johnson himself, as it would explain his high emotions and religious fervor in "**Cross Road Blues**" when simply hitchhiking at night; the myth offers a literal explanation.



Clarksdale, Crossroads

This myth was established in mass consciousness in 1986 by the film *Crossroads*. There are

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now tourist attractions claiming to be "The Crossroads" at Clarksdale and in Memphis. The film *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

by the Coen Brothers incorporates the crossroads legend and a young African-American blues guitarist named Tommy Johnson, with no other biographical similarity to the real Tommy Johnson or to Robert Johnson.



Robert Johnson

"Hellhound on My Trail" is an original blues song recorded by a young drifter from the Mississippi Delta, Robert Johnson, in Dallas, Texas on Sunday, June 20, 1937, one of ten songs recorded in his second and last recording session for RCA.

This song fuels the mystery and lore surrounding him as it suggests a man in the grip of evil, and his deal with the devil has become part of popular culture. Rolling Stone magazine considers Johnson's version of the song *"essential listening"*.



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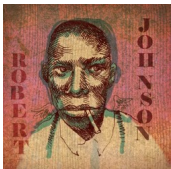
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His guitar was in open E minor tuning with the lower strings providing a droning accompaniment. Muddy Waters told Alan Lomax that he admired Johnson and had once seen him perform.

Although this is a twelve bar blues song in structure, it is unique in melody and verse form. The first and last verses may be the finest found in the blues, according to music historian Samuel Charters. The poetic imagery is brilliant and intense with a feeling of personal frenzy.

The song's lyrics reflect an agonized spirit for whom there is no escape. The vision of the hounds of hell coming to catch sinners was prevalent in southern churches at that time, and this may have been the image in Johnson's mind.



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The song is listed as one of NPR's 100 most important American musical works of the 20th century because of its profound impact on the evolution of the blues.

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Considered by some to be the "Grandfather of Rock 'n' Roll", his vocal phrasing, original songs, and guitar style have influenced a broad range of musicians, including Muddy Waters, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Jeff Beck, Jack White and Eric Clapton, who called Johnson *"the most important blues musician who ever lived."* He was also ranked fifth in Rolling Stone's list of 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time.

He is an inductee of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.



Robert Johnson

Hellhound On My Trail, lyrics (Eric Clapton version):

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving Blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail Mmm, blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail And the day keeps on remindin' me, there's a hellhound on my trail Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail If today was Christmas eve, if today was Christmas eve And tomorrow was Christmas day If today was Christmas eve and tomorrow was Christmas day All I would need is my little sweet rider Just to pass the time away, to pass the time away You sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm, around my door All around my door You sprinkled hot foot powder, all around your daddy's door It keeps me with ramblin' mind rider Every old place I go, every old place I go I can tell

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the wind is risin', the leaves tremblin' on the tree Tremblin' on the tree I can tell the wind is risin', leaves tremblin' on the tree All I need is my little sweet woman And to keep my company, hey, hey, hey, hey, my company



Robert Johnson