THE AMERICAN BLUES: MEN, MYTHS, AND MOTIFS

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This could not have been possible without the eclectic inspiration of family, friends, and professors. Thank you for the motivation and support throughout the years. Music will set us free.

INTRODUCTION

"How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string? The thoughts of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the Blues come down like showers of rain." - Robert Palmer[1]

American music, like the country itself, is a melting pot of world traditions and geographical cultures. As Europeans, with their African slaves, invaded and colonized America they brought with them their own unique cultures. These traditional cultures had no choice but to adopt the changing tide of influence brought upon them, thus developing into a completely original culture entirely. As these new "Americans" changed, so did their music. The South, from Mississippi to Texas was dominated by Africans. As the years progressed many of their polyrhythms were fused with European instruments and theories creating new musical variations. The accumulation of these styles would build into the monster of Rock 'n' Roll. But, it was here, in the American South, that the forefather of Rock 'n' Roll music was born. And it went by the name: The Blues.

It is as if the music gods saw this multi-ethnic country and proclaimed a new world music shall emerge. They stood upon a ledge overlooking the expansive valley of music, like surveyors reconnoitering their land. With care they selected a few distinct musical styles: West African Highlife Songs, a touch of Senegal's polyrhythmic ensembles, the Muslim inspired Kora, and here and there Western pentatonic scales, which they mixed into a bowl of Bluegrass and Country to give the world the Blues. It was a conglomeration of styles that often had little in common, save their location and

[1] Leon Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow. (New York: Knopf, 1998), xvii.

availability. Out of this mix came what best characterizes American music: Rock 'n' Roll. All Western music today stems from Rock 'n' Roll. Rock is a hybrid of all these different musical styles and it is the Blues that Rock 'n' Roll owes its existence. It is from this American crossroads of music that groups like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin owe their existence, as do solo acts like Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Bob Marley. Rock 'n' Roll was not an accident. It certainly had its foundations in the Blues. As the man who invented the electric Blues, Muddy Waters, said, "The Blues had a baby and they named the baby Rock 'n' Roll."[2]

The Blues holds the voices of generation after generation of behaviors, beliefs, and social attitudes. It is an oral history of the times. American music is an endless historical account of American culture throughout its rather fledgling existence. From the work song and call and response of slavery, to the use of the European fiddle and early harmonica, through spirituals and Country ballads, and into Blues, Jazz and finally Rock 'n' Roll, American music is as much a mixture of ethnicity as it is completely original. Yet, as Little Richard would say, "Rock and Roll is black music, stands for 'real black.'"[3]

Little Richard may be correct in stating that Rock 'n' Roll is black music, considering the Blues were originally exclusive to the racial hardships and musical abilities of African-Americans. From it one can understand the life of African-Americans in the American South. The music and lyrics give us an inclusive look at the feelings, music, and most importantly the culture of the black American, one whose traditions are

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[2] Muddy Waters, *The Blues Had a Baby and They Called It Rock n' Roll,* from *Hard Again.* Blue Sky Records. 1977, compact disc.

[3] *The History of Rock 'n' Roll,* dir. by Andrew Solt (Time-Life, 1995 dvd).

from different places entirely. From the Blues one can discover the culture of the South during Reconstruction and beyond. The South was a place of old African traditions and new American ones; a completely nascent world on display for the first time. The Blues is often an ignored African-American historiography, which is why this era must have a different sort of historian. The history must come from the Blues musicians themselves: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lead Belly and Robert Johnson. These Blues historians and musicians best represent the culture and traditions of Blues from eastern Texas to the Mississippi River Valley.

It is from Blind Lemon Jefferson we can understand the motifs of blindness and Southern visual characteristics. It is from Lead Belly that the stories of Joe Turner, slavery, and the black hero take the form of a living man. And it is from Robert Johnson, the Blues innovator, that we witness the now long forgotten myths of the trickster. Combined, they represent the lasting mythos of crossroads; a place where the future can be made or destroyed by a man's hand or a trickster named Esu. It is from these empyreal musicians that we get a glimpse of what the Southern black man's life was like after Reconstruction and into the 20th century. The myths and motifs found in their music portray Southern black culture. Despite the plethora of historiography on this era few historians took into account the culture that had once been everything to these transplanted peoples.

This history of the black American, being the cultures of Africa, combined with Western philosophies and religion, thus creating a new indigenous race. While John Lomax and the Slave Narrative Project began to academically research the culture of

Southern black life they were not trusted; viewed as white outsiders, and received contradictory stories about their life and music, what Karl Hagstrom Miller calls a "musical color line."[4] The idea was that what was told, heard, and played to a white audience was not black music at all, but simply a cadence that gave white people what they asked for. Therefore, it is only by investigating the cultures of predominantly Western Africa, in combination with the Southern United States, along with the lives of early Blues musicians and their original songs that one can begin to understand this blooming culture coming from the swampy Reconstruction South.

In order to understand the world of Blues - the voice of the South - we must start at the beginning when Africans were being chained together to cultivate the land of the Americas. That place is described by oral tradition; through music and lyrics. The counterparts to these musicians were the West African Griot who were more than storytellers and musicians; they were oral historians. They were the forefathers of the Blues musicians. They brought with them their traditions, beliefs, and myths, as well as their music. It is through the myths and motifs Blues musicians sang about that their history now unfolds. These stories speak about African-American life in the south, but serve as what Joseph Campbell calls myths: "Stories about the wisdom of life."[5] They represent not only the history of the people, but the feelings and innermost being and reality. Music, like myths and motifs, are moral tales of right behavior, so when a person, or in this case a singer, presents a model for other's lives he "has moved into the sphere of

[4]Karl Hagstrom Miller, Segregating Sound. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 2.
[5] Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988). 11.

being mythologized."[6] This is the case with Robert Johnson, Lemon Jefferson, and Lead Belly. Southern African-American culture can be illuminated through the myths, motifs, and music of these Blues musicians.

The words "myth and "motif" will be used frequently throughout this essay on the historical impact of Blues music in American culture. Myth is differentiated from religion because of its inherent fable-like nature. The African stories of Br'er Rabbit and Esu are less gods than they are tricksters. They are amoral characters who are "at the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself."[7] The stories that accompany tricksters are moral tales; fables if you will. They are not meant to be taken literally, nor are the stories meant to be factual accounts, thus the term "myths" designates them as moral tales. Likewise, the use of the word "motif" is a theme used to represent a Western African, and then African-American, and eventually simply American themes. These cultural beliefs are themes of a cyclical nature that are both found in Africa and again in America upon arrival of African slavery. Motifs like the crossroads and blindness are reoccurring African themes, while the stories of Joe Turner, the devil, and the trickster are deemed myths. It is from the Blues and its creators that these myths and motifs paint the picture of Southern African-American culture through music.

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[6] Ibid, 20.
[7] Paul Radin, The Trickster. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).xxiii.

THE MAKING OF THE BLUES

"Image was important, name was important, behavior was very important, and music was kind of important. The place where the music you played originated was more important." - Peter Frampton.[1]

The Blues begins at the slave crossroads of Africa and America. It is here that American music was born, along with some of the greatest singer songwriters ever to play. The apotheosis of all these musicians was Robert Johnson. Three-quarters of a century ago Johnson changed music with only twenty-nine songs. It is hard to determine the complete influence Johnson had on the evolution of the Blues; without him it may or may not have been just as powerful and universal as it is today. So what is the Blues? It did not start with Robert Johnson, Lemon Jefferson, or Lead Belly for that matter. The Blues originated in places contemporary music often overlooks, Western Africa. What is clear is that the full-bodied guitar changed the shape of Western music into nearly every style of music playing then and today. The Blues continued to be a monster once Les Paul developed the solid-body electric guitar in 1941. It paved the way for some of the greatest guitarists of all time, taking the Blues to the next level. Musicians like Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, and Jimmy Page transcended mere Blues guitar into an entirely different instrument. The electric guitar is the face of Western music today.

Like the guitar is to Western music today, it likewise was the face of the Blues. Without either the guitar, or the Blues, Western music could not have existed as it is

[1] Solt, *The History of Rock 'n' Roll.*

today. Thus, we must look to what the Blues was and is to understand the relationship of western music and its creators. But what is Blues if not indefinable? The Oxford Companion to Music's definition is just as ambiguous and cloudy as to how the Blues began:

> [The Blues] is typically a three-line stanza, the first line is repeated while the singer extemporizes the third, rhyming line, and this is supported by a conventional 12-bar harmonic scheme: four bars to the tonic (two accompanying the first line), often with a flattened 7th in the 4th bar; two on the subdominant (accompanying the 2nd line); two more on the tonic; two on the subdominant 7th (accompanying the rhyming line); and a final two on the tonic.[2]

What Blues really is has little to do with uptight musical jargon and harmonic scales. Few, if any, Delta or Texas Bluesmen knew a lick about music theory. Furthermore, the Oxford Companion to Music quote describes the Blues with European ideas of harmony and melody, which does not translate to African music's polyrhythm. A more simple definition in relation to Robert Johnson's era and Western music was a twelve-chord progression with bent notes in a major scale. These early Blues musicians likely knew only a few chord progressions handed down to them along with a musically fluent movement on the pentatonic scale. Memphis musician and producer Jim Dickinson remembered how to play piano from what a black musician told him as a boy, "Everything in music is made up of codes. Take a note, any note, and you go up three and down four and that's the code."[3] The codes this musician was talking about are chords and the pattern fits with any major chord in the pentatonic scale. Of course, pentatonic was a word this musician had never heard and he knew nothing of western music, but he

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[2] Tom Graves, Crossroads. (Spokane: Demers Books, 2008). 8.
[3] *The Blues,* prod. by Martin Scorsese (PBS, 2003 dvd).

could play the music regardless of his lack of understanding Western musical terms and theory. These early musicians favored practical musical knowledge over theoretical theory. While the pentatonic scale was used, the key difference in African style was the blue note and polyrhythm. Polyrhythm is essentially two or more conflicting rhythms that combine to form a cohesive whole, known as cross-rhythms. This technique can be applied to stringed instruments as well. It is these polyrhythms that take the place of Western melody.

Another distinct Blues and African musical idea is that of the blue note. The blue noteis a note played at a lower level in a major scale; which would result in a flatted note.[4] This unique note brought a sense of melancholy to the music, resulting in an almost lachrymose feeling. A blue note is also fittingly known as a worried note.[5] The Mandinka of West Africa may have the closest resemblance to the bent notes of Blues styles in America. Their equivalence to the guitar was the Kora; a 21-stringed instrument that when played traditionally sounds similar to Delta Blues styles and is also similar in structure to early American guitars and banjos.[6]

Figure 1. The traditional African Kora, inspiration for the banjo and guitar. Bose Photography

[4] Gerhard Kubik, Africa and the Blues. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999). 86
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

Blues as music from the soul is a better definition still. Watching video of Son House from John Lomax's Slave Narrative Project, tight black snow cap on his head, closed, remembering tired eyes, is the personification of the Blues. One can see the music literally coming out of these early Blues musicians. Son House played with his voice. What he sang in his head came out in the music. Something musical theory and training could never do even if it was offered to African-Americans at the time. B.B. King once described his style, "when I wasn't playing I was singing, and when I wasn't singing I was singing through the guitar."[7]

The first use of the term "Blues" was applied to W. C. Handy's song "St. Louis Blues" in 1914. Handy was not a Bluesman at all, he has more relation to Jazz than anything, or more likely still Rag-time. His style was similar to the Big Band sound that became popular in the roaring twenties. Handy played trumpet in the predominately Jazz cities: St. Louis and Chicago. W. C. Handy is the self-proclaimed "Father of the Blues" but what Handy claims as his "discovery" was a form of music incorporating the guitar and West African rhythms, and of course the crucial "blue note."[8] Handy describes how he first encountered the Blues in 1903 in one of the earliest Blues creation stories. Handy had begun to doze off on a Mississippi Delta train platform after waiting for the train to Tutwiler just outside Parchman that had been delayed for nine hours. As he sat on the nearly abandoned platform's concrete floor "a dream-like figure appeared before him: a lean, loose-jointed Negro, his clothes in rags, his shoes in tatters, his face etched with the sadness of ages. On his guitar he strummed a haunting refrain, the weirdest music I ever

[7] Scorsese, *The Blues.*
[8] W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues: An Autobiography. (New York: De Capo Press, 1941).

heard. The tune stayed in my mind."[9]Historian Marybeth Hamilton labels the story as a foundation myth.[10]It was the first of many legends that kicked off a gamut of ever-expanding myths concerning the Blues. It was the myths that made the Blues men and women into who they are remembered today. Their music is enduring, but their names are most often associated with the supernatural and imaginative. Anyone who enjoys American music has heard of the genius of Robert Johnson, but have any of them heard a single one of his recordings? More has been said of Route 61, the crossroads, and selling one's soul to the devil, than the actual Blues music and artists themselves. The Blues did not always exist, nor did it have a single creator. Furthermore, the Blues is not simply music; it is a lifestyle. A lifestyle that has been passed down, altered, and innovated. The Blues took many years to develop and had more than a mere handful of important figures. The Blues is a characteristic of a particular culture. Actually, the Blues is a culture; and its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities make it what it has become.

It is likely there was no Blues originator; no inventor. It was a mongrel of sorts. A combination of fife and drum, string instruments like the diddley bow, and Hawaiian steel guitar playing in the case of the Delta. Nearly all of which originated along the west coast of Africa and was brought here in captivity, just like the bodies the slaves' musical memory was suppressed in. The Blues went without rhythm during the American slave era because slave drums were banned.[11]It was carried on, though, through field hollers, gospels, and folk; all eventually accepting the guitar. Big Bill Broonzy is one of best

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[9]Marybeth Hamilton, "The Blues, the Folk, and African-American History." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, Vol. 11 (2001). 23.
[10]Ibid.
[11] Scorsese, *The Blues*.

known of the true original Bluesmen. Broonzy was a prolific songwriter of African-American traditionals, developing his style in the cotton belt of Arkansas.[12] From that point, musicians in the South like Lead Belly and Blind Lemon began playing this sublime new style that was to become the mainstream sound.

The timeline of the Blues may have its origins in Africa, but the connection is distant. The farther away from West Africa you go the vaguer the commonalities are. The rhythms and contextual lyrics are almost all that has survived the test of time. "West African musical influences on the Blues emphasized intensive polyphony."[13] This layered use of sound and rhythm can still be seen in Blues music today. As noted earlier, banned percussion instruments forced black musicians to incorporate rhythm into their guitar playing, as can be seen in Robert Johnson's "Last Fair Dealing Goin' Down," a cover of the Charlie Patton song. Even without the accompaniment of drums the rhythm is still present. A 4/4 count with syncopated accents can easily be heard. The outlawing of drums had long since been repealed by the time of Johnson's recording in 1936, but this history of restriction and the lack of availability of percussion instruments still played a part in the Blues musical style. One can still feel the driving percussion with the sole guitar playing in Johnson's songs: "Bursts of percussive phrases, repeated the beat of West African drum music, transferred to the guitar."[14]

Robert Johnson was certainly not the first to incorporate the percussive feel into his guitar playing, nor was he the first to use the bottleneck style. The bottleneck guitar

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[12]Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expressions." *Phylon,* Vol. 14, No. 1. (1953). 318.
[13]Peter Rutkoff and Will Scott, "Preaching the Blues." *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005). 132
[14]Ibid, 145.

playing created a wavering effect on the guitar. This style was created by sliding an object, a knife blade or glass bottle, up and down the neck of the guitar to alter the pitch resulting in a melismatic effect. While this style has some origins in West Africa the slide guitar method can be traced back even further to northern Nigeria, Mali and Ghana where Muslim-influenced guitar playing was picked up.[15] By combining this influence with the call and response patterns found in West Africa, Blues musicians began creating a unique, but not original, style. The idea of the slide guitar, which plays a prominent role in Blues music, likely began in Africa, but its influence on Johnson, Patton and Jefferson came from a rather unlikely place: Hawaii.

Hawaiian steel guitar playing was popular in the 1920s and 30s and was immediately picked up in the Delta and Texas during the same time period traveling musicians like Johnson and Patton were riding trains across the South. Joseph Kekuku, born in Oahu in 1874, is often regarded as the inventor of the steel guitar. Kekuku found a place in the American South playing vaudevilles in the early 1920s where he was thoroughly copied.[16] In the early 1930s musicians Jim and Bob and the Genial Hawaiians recorded their popular song "St. Louis Blues" in Chicago to much success. The two guitarists displayed a flawless mixture of Hawaiian steel guitar and Blues.[17] Like many of their fellow Blues musicians what became of the duo shortly after their success is unknown, although there is a great picture of Bob Pauole playing his steel National Tricone guitar and Jim Holstein standing over him with an acoustic Harp-Guitar

[15]Ibid, 132.
[16]Graves. Crossroads. 16.
[17] Gary Anwyl. *Jim and Bob and the Genial Hawaiians*. Plantgaa.com. 04/03/2012.

sometime in the early 1930s. This bottleneck style of guitar playing from across the Pacific and Atlantic suddenly became an almost dominant force in the Delta on the Dobro. Johnson and company simply picked up this style when they moved on from the Diddly Bow.

Figure 2. Jim Holstein standing with his Harp-Guitar. Bob Pauole is seated playing a Dobro in the slide fashion. Gary Anwyl.

While the slide guitar can be found both in the banjo playing of Africa and Hawaii the rhythm of the Blues is what makes it distinct. Ethnomusicologist Richard Waterman would breakdown the commonalities between the emerging Blues music and sub-Saharan African musical characteristics in 1952:

1) Metronomic sense
2) Dominance of percussion
3) Polymeter
4) Off-beat phrasing of melodic accents
5) Overlapping call-and-response[18]

While scholars argue to this day about the magnitude these musical characteristics have throughout Africa, the similarities between West African music and the Blues is obvious. Metronomy simply means both musical styles have a repeated beat, while polymeter music follows a time signature with a varying degree of patterns. Polymeter is quite a unique feature to have sailed across the ocean. This style can clearly be seen in the varying rhythms of African music, and can be seen in America with the cross-rhythm

[18] Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music." *The Black Perspective in Music*, (1974). 4.

three-over-two, or 6/8 time. An example of this would be Johnson's song "32-20 Blues." The off-beat phasing is another way of expressing a syncopated beat. This style is ever-present in early Blues and can be seen in just about every release on the early Blues record label Chess Records. Lastly, the overlapping call and release is an obvious example of African music and early slave songs finding their way into the music of the emancipated black musicians. The five shared musical characteristics Waterman notes can be seen in the catalog of all the Blues musicians discussed in this paper.

The comparisons of the Blues and African music are clear. Butit is myopic to think the Blues, as we know it from the American South, existed in the same nature across the ocean to our counterparts in Europe. What is often overlooked and just as obvious as the African connection, would be that of the European influence on the Blues. Seeing how the musical influence and pedagogy in America was nearly identical to European musical styles the influence it came to have on African slaves and eventual freemen needs not be explained. Musicologist Eileen Southern cites a number of examples from colonial accounts of blacks as early as the seventeenth century mastering European instruments. "In most accounts, blacks were sought out for their peculiar ways of performing. What this suggests is that the slave dance-musicians performed differently than their white counterparts, that they approached the instruments with a certain stylistic bias."[19] This bias being the polyrhythmic style performed in West Africa.

Back in the United States, early African-American Composer Olly Wilson was born in St. Louis the same year of Johnson's infamous recordings. Wilson's opinions

[19]Ibid, 15.

reflect that of Waterman, yet he also points out that polymeter is rare in the western music of Europe and likewise is the difference in harmony, "Western music...in which the most important elements are melody, harmony, and rhythm. The traditional Western notation system reflects this bias. That is why transcribed African or Afro-American music seems a pale distillation of the musical reality - in which factors other than melody and harmony are of as equal, or more, importance."[20]In the development of the Blues it is paramount to be aware of the sphere of influence. While not being African, the Blues are certainly not European. And while the root of this style came from across the Pacific Ocean, the African's direct contact was with that of an entirely different society complete with their own distinct myths, so like the Blues style, its myths would eventually morph with this cultural change.

As the African's homeland was pushed farther and farther out of their minds the music began to change, just as the people themselves. The African myths though, like the music, would linger in their mind. A dominant sound coming from the cotton fields before the American Civil War was a form of call and response. A single voice would carry a mournful, a cappella melody across the hot fields: "Oh, oh, Mary don't ya moan." Then a response in unison would follow: "Oh, Mary don't ya moan. Oh, Martha don't ya moan."[21] These rhythmic calls and their repeating measures are reminiscent of the slaves' African homeland musical styles. It would be labeled call and response in America. Without the availability of percussion or stringed instruments, due to the slave owner's strict rules against African use of fife and drum as possible subliminal slave codes, the

[20]Ibid, 17.
[21]Fisk Jubilee Singers. "Oh Mary Don't You Moan." Alabama State University. Oral Archives.

call and response would take the place of their traditional music and eventually force a metamorphosis between African heritage music and the influence of Western music styles after Emancipation.

Call and response singing would evolve into field hollers, or work songs, which would then eventually incorporate the religion around them into spirituals. Field hollers were similar to call and response singing heard on slave plantations before the Civil War, but usually sung solo. Spirituals were in essence field hollers and call and response, but the lyrics would change. So, spirituals were work songs with different lyrics, liken to either African animism or European Christianity. The traditional call and response lyrics mentioned in the paragraph above would transform into a spiritual:

> Pharaohs Army (solo).
> Pharaohs Army (chorus).
> All of the men got drowned in the sea one day (solo).
> Drown them in the Red Sea (chorus).
> Oh, yes they did (solo).[22]

This adoption of Christianity into African traditionals certainly did not eliminate their traditional beliefs. So, it is crucial to understand this symbiosis that eventually created the sublime music called "Blues." Former slave and Harvard English graduate Sterling Brown explored the notion that spirituals were not African in nature at all, "A large amount of scholarship has proved that the spirituals are not African, either in music or meaning, that the American Negro was influenced by the religious music of rural America from the Great Awakening on...he found to his liking many tunes both doleful

[22] Ibid.

and brisk, and that he took over both tunes and texts and refashioned them more to his taste."[23]

Brown goes on to illuminate the connection between African spirituals and Christian spirituals: "Even when single lines were identical, the Negro made telling changes in the stanza. A new music? Yes."[24] Without this connection between two different philosophies on life and religion the Blues likely would have never come to fruition. Both the religions and lifestyles of White Americans running the plantations and their African servants allowed this cultural assimilation of music.

Spirituals were songs of little joy. Plantations were villages of starving, broken and sore souls finding relief in songs of escape; like Moses' people escaping the Pharaoh the slaves longed for the Promised Land. But as spirituals may have been a more pleasant way for the slaves to look at life it was likely the work and protest songs that drove the engine of Blues' music and myth. The energy and passion expressed is what James Brown would call soul. The Blues, aptly named, could not have existed without the hardship the musicians saw around them. W.E.B DuBois said, "The best of the spirituals are the sorrow-songs of slavery."[25]Slaves' work songs, or social protest songs, are the other half of the Blues; spirituals, or gospel, being the first half. Work songs were simply aids to promote an organized movement to the task at hand. One example would be that of the chain gang working a railroad, singing in unison to a break, during which they would bring their hammers down to the rail ties with a "chink," thus creating a beat to the

[23]Brown, "Negro Folk Expressions." 45.
[24] Ibid.
[25]Ibid, 49.

song while maintaining a group congruency. Work songs were the unabashed soul of the African as he toiled in the hot fields. It is how the slave, or former slave, released the frustration of his current predicament. It is how they dealt with such inhumanities and it is also the creation of the Blues as Frederick Douglas would point out in his personal narrative:

> The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, or miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out - if not in the word, in the sound; - and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone: -
>
> "I am going away to the Great House Farm!
> O, yea! O, yea! O!"
>
> This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.[26]

Douglas sums up both the disconsolate circumstances the slaves found themselves in, as well as the triumph singing which was a lament to their crushed souls. More so than a mere lament, their singing was a way to overcome their sadness; their Blues. Most importantly it was how they meant to change their own, as well as fellow Africans, state of life. Brown makes note of the magnitude of African-American work songs, "More work songs come from the Negro than from any other American folk group."[27] It may

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[26] Frederick Douglas, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas. (New York: Dover, 1995). 8.
[27] Brown, "Negro Folk Expressions." 56.

even be fair to say that work songs existed before the religious symbiosis in the form of field hollers and continued on in the form of protest songs. Big Bill Broonzy gives us a great example of a transformed spiritual into a work song he indubitably picked up while traveling through the south:

> Working side by side with a white man.
> He was getting a dollar an hour,
> when I was making fifty cents.
> If you's black, ah, brother, git back, git back.[28]

These were certainly the songs the Robert Johnsons and Blind Lemons heard growing up in a shot-gun house just a few minutes' walk from the fields they were working in during Reconstruction.

Work songs were not always militant nor did they always confront racism. More important to the task at hand was not only the vast array of different songs coming from different places, but also the continuing rhythmic nature of the songs. The former slave music may have picked up many Western elements of music and culture, but continued to express the African heritage through their own culture and myths explored later, along with the use of poly-rhythms as can be seen in traditional work songs, "The Negro work songs whose rhythm is timed with the swing back and down and the blow of broad-axe, pick, hammer, or tamper. The short lines are punctuated by a grunt as the axe bites into the wood, or the hammer finds the spike-head.

> Dis ole hammer -- hunh.
> Ring like silver -- hunh.
> Shine like gold, baby -- hunh
> Shine like gold -- hunh.[29]

[28]Ibid, 60.
[29]Ibid, 57.

In this case the rhythms follow the form of call and response found in slave songs by using the axe, pick, or hammer as the percussion, represented by the vocal "hunh." Working the hammer was often a death sentence. It represents slavery among the black man, connects with the spike and the ringing sound of steel on steel was the frustration that could not be expressed.

While these forms of music, prior to and after Emancipation, were fundamental in the evolution of the Blues it was Gospel that may have played the greatest role. The church played a dominant role in black life. Not only was it a safe haven for African-Americans to congregate, it became as much a part of their lifestyles as their traditional ceremonies in Africa. More importantly to the Blues though, it was a place to play music. In fact McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, once said that Gospel and the church were the only place to learn the Blues, "In order to sing the Blues you had to go to church to get this particular thing in your soul."[30] This "thing" Waters talks about is not just about music, but also about African-American themes. At this point the black farmers in the Reconstruction South were fervent Christians. They found the Jews to be similar figures in chains. Songs about Moses and the Promised Land were often heard in the little makeshift homes that served as churches just outside Southern plantations.

As the gospels would lament the blacks' social problems they would also bring together the joys of Christian fellowship. These gospels, while not forgetting their malevolent past, were about relief and retribution:

Ain't you glad you got out de wilderness?

[30] Rutkoff and Scott, "Preaching the Blues." 137.

I been bawn of God,
no condemnation; no condemnation in my soul.
I been down in the valley;
Never turn back no mo.[31]

Songs about leaving the valley, or escaping Pharaohs, expressed the desire of returning to the homeland; the promised land. The South, or anywhere in America for that matter, was not a pleasant place for a former slave and his family to live. Desires of a promised land flitted in and out of their dreams and into their music. This theme of the Promised Land began immediately upon their capture, dominated the Gospel and Blues, and continues right up to today. The theme would cause the traveling Bluesman to explore Northern opportunities during The Great Migration as well as being voiced by enigmatic reformers like Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement. Many were looking for a way to authenticate their heritage. African motifs and Christian spirituals found their way into the Blues singers' repertoire because it was what they were accustomed to. It had become their culture. Gospel had become black American folk. These were the types of songs every Southern black man sang and heard, whether born in America or Africa.

Going to church on Sunday was an all-day communal event for most African-Americans and for many Blues musicians it was more than that. The influential Bluesman Charlie Patton's father was a minister, as was Son House's father. For a short period of time Patton was a traveling preacher himself. It was from artists like Patton, that the devil and the more sinister ideas in Christianity would fuse with traditional African beliefs. The symbol of the devil is one of the more dominant figures in forthcoming Blues style. American Studies professors Peter Rutkoff and Will Scott note a song Patton recorded in

[31]Brown, "Negro Folk Expression." 46.

1929 when the bud of the Blues was just flowering, "Patton never parted ways with his religious upbringing, finding ways to insinuate that musical influence into the Blues."[32] In Patton's version of the traditional: "You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die," he not only kept most of the spiritual lyrics, but he also kept the backbone of Gospel as Rutkoff and Scott explain, "[Patton] retained the spiritual's AA - Refrain pattern and added a short sermon in the middle of the song. Patton's rhymed couplets, right from the pulpit, his repetitions of "an...an...an..." distinguished the religious foundations of the song."[33]It is not surprising then that a few years later Robert Johnson would alter Patton's traditional into his own version; a tune about the railroad in "Last Fair Deal Gone Down." While the lyrics are much changed Johnson preserved the religious melody and structure.[34] Johnson's cover, unlike Patton's version, would also establish a time and place. This notion was not found in gospels wrought with ancient religious places. Johnson incorporated life outside of the church. One can see this in his version:

> It's the last fair deal goin' down.
> It's the last fair deal goin' down, Good Lord.
> On that Gulfport Island Road.
> My captains so mean on me.
> I'm working my way back home, Good Lord.
> On this Gulfport Island Road.
> The captain he can see.
> That captain he can see, Good Lord.
> Oh, on that Gulfport Island Road.[35]

While maintaining the original religious melody Johnson brought to light the hard life of a black dock worker at Ship's Island, Mississippi. It was these types of spirituals Patton

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[32]Rutkoff and Scott, "Preaching the Blues." 144.
[33] Ibid.
[34]Ibid, 144.
[35] Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings*. Sony. 1990.

and Johnson, along with Lead Belly and Blind Lemon, would hear and play growing up. It was also this change in music from traditional spirituals that paved the way for the Blues, or as it is called by the more conservative religious people of the time, "devil's tunes."

The devil's tunes were not anti-religious, nor were they exclusive to males, as it may seem so far. Blues and Gospel musician Sister Rosetta Tharpe spent her time between the choir and the front-porch. She could play the guitar better than most Bluesmen and even would strum a chord during church. Her infusion of Gospel and Blues may offer a better glimpse of the connection than any of the male artists. Sister Tharpe's "Up above My Head" is a great example of the two styles converging, along with the fact she is strumming the guitar fast enough to blur her fingers moving from string to string.[36]

It was Mamie Smith and Lucile Bogan before Tharpe that played the Blues guitar with more gusto and virtuoso than their male counterparts. Mamie Smith was the first woman to record the Blues, in 1920. "Crazy Blues" has a horn byline reminiscent of early Jazz, but the listener can certainly hear the Blues coming from her voice and lyrics. If W. C. Handy has been proclaimed the "Father of the Blues," then it is Mamie Smith that would have to be labeled: "Mother of the Blues." The problem with both of these titles is that neither Handy nor Smith could be labeled Blues. The lack of guitar or banjo, along with the dominance of brass instruments and Western musical form would deem their

[36] Sister Rosetta Tharpe, *The Best of Southern Gospel*. Northquest. 2005.

music Jazz. Lucille Bogan, on the other hand, could be called a true Blues singer. Bogan sang about her life, just as her fellow Bluesmen:

> I done staked my man to win and I,
> hope my money will pass.
> He's done pawned my house,
> he got my life at stake,
> And I've got to get it back,
> with that money he gamble and make.[37]

It is crucial to point out at this point the impact that lyrics bring to the picture. Field hollers, work songs, protest songs, and spirituals began to paint a mural with watercolors. Imagine a white canvas with lyrics of spirituals, protests songs and field hollers printed at random across the canvas. Now the artist adds the paint, some of the watercolors represent the West and some Africa, while some of the colors represent a new country entirely: America. As the watercolors run this way and that across the canvas smearing the lyrics and uniting the reds and blues to make purples one can slightly understand the complexity of the Blues. The canvas is now a cacophony of colors and lyrics, all run together. And as the progression of music continued, along with the themes of Africa and the South, the music, lyrics, and myths began to take shape in the form of the Blues. The Blues is a hybrid; a mongrel of sorts.

It is from this hybrid of music that the Blues began to take its present form. At this point musicians were few and far outside of the church, though many of the musicians in the church were beginning to take their music to the outside; to the secular world. The music W. C. Handy heard on the railway stop outside of Parchman Farm Penitentiary was secular. The music may have been a spiritual in form, but the lyrics

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[37] Scorsese, *The Blues.*

were another thing entirely. It was this music that Handy heard that would transform Western music entirely. Before this kind of music was called Blues, it was known by many as devil's tunes. These devil tunes were songs about women, food, politics, and alcohol. The itinerant musicians of the day would play a song about anything. Johnson sang a song about chili peppers, while Lead Belly sang a rather humorous song about tuberculosis. Many of these new devil's songs even replaced lyrics about the sole powerful and omnipotent god with raunchy and nonsensical themes. Many times there was open rejection of biblical mores that would be ecumenically stated as sacrilege. Sterling Brown puts some of the changes in perspective, "Live a humble to the Lord," was changed to "Live a humbug." Bible stories, especially the creation, were spoofed. "Reign, Master Jesus, reign" became "Rain, Mosser, rain hard."[38]Some of the songs went so far as to be completely cynical of Christianity:

> I don't want to ride no golden chariot,
> I don't want no golden crown.
> I want to stay down here and be,
> Just as I am without one plea.[39]

Devil's tunes may have accosted religious themes, but the musicians did not stop there. They were interested in life; all aspects of life. One of those integral themes was sex. To grasp the full scope of these early tunes is to acknowledge that the songs were about every aspect of the Southern black man's life. Of all man's desires women and sex rule dominantly in their lives and it only makes sense that many of the songs that early Bluesmen sang were about just that. Many of these songs were innocent, though usually

[38]Brown, "Negro Folk Expressions." 50.
[39]Ibid.

playful like Johnson's "Come into my Kitchen," while others were more risqué and natural. Devil's tunes were not just anti-religious, but as many churchgoers witnessed, vulgar and sexual. Jelly Roll Morton can attest to such songs, like the one he recreated in New Orleans in the early nineteenth century and later recorded for the Library of Congress in 1938 as "Winin Boy Blues":

> I had a gal, I had her in the grass,
> I had that bitch, had her in the grass.(x2)
> One days she got scared and a snake ran up her big ass.
> I had that bitch, had her on the stump, (x3)
> I fucked her till her pussy stunk.
> I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name.[40]

These type of songs, often sang in houses of prostitution, were a taboo subject to many Americans, but they were natural and real nonetheless. Blues musicians, like Jelly Roll Morton, sang about the things they saw, felt, and did. The Blues often exemplifies the soul of the man. Son House would go as far as to say that the Blues was only about men and women, "There ain't but one kind of Blues. That consists between a male and female that is in love."[41] The secular music that Bluesman were playing consisted of all that they were a part of. Devil tunes were simply the music of the time and place.

The infusion of African and American myths, which concerns the latter part of this paper, begins to take place at this time as well. There was little room for African motifs to fit into Christian Gospel and spirituals, even the call and response songs, as well as the work protests songs which dealt little with such themes. It is possible that these were purposely snuffed out by slave drivers, or just as likely the young slaves

[40] Hamilton, "The Blues." 35.
[41] Scorsese, *The Blues*.

singing on the plantations may have known little of African folk. Traditional African folklore and music would have had to been handed down from the elders who still remembered their past lives. It is also possible these themes took a back-seat to spirituals and protest songs due to the indentured nature of the black man at the time. It is during this time that the predominance of such African themes, along with adopted Western themes, including the human nature of man, began to play a dominant role in Southern black music. It was these notions that accelerated the musical themes that would become the Blues.

At this point the foundations of Blues music had been laid. Not only that but by the turn of the 20th century the Blues was already its own distinct genre, though the only ones that knew about its musical enlightenment were the musicians themselves and the sparse southern audience that went to watch them in the sucky joints, or juke joints. These joints would have make-shift stages that brought a new style and genre that may well have been exacerbated by the lyrics and themes presented by the musicians. Themes of reality, rather than tried and true spirituals, were being sung outside of every southern church. Spirituals could not reflect the hard life of the Southern black man. Juke has an African retention meaning "evil, disorderly, wicked," and the term persisted into America with the redolent theme of sinful pleasure.[42] Juke joints were the place to be every Saturday after a long, tiring work week for little pay. Musicians would play music from around seven at night until three in the morning. It was the plantation workers night club; a place with a bad reputation. Son House once explained the chaotic

[42] Francis Davis, The History of the Blues. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995). 47 - 48.

atmosphere of juke joints as "rough." Bad enough that Robert Johnson's mother attempted to stop him from playing at these "balls."[43] The Blues musician at this time was working as a sharecropper, like Robert Johnson, or a truck-driver like Muddy Waters, or pounded rail on the section gang, like Lead Belly. Playing music did not bring in the money, so while the black female found work easier in the Reconstruction South it was the male who was out of work, until the age of the stage. At this point musicians were no longer playing for their own amusement or for a small company, but as real, working musicians. Vaudevilles opened up many doors not only for black musicians, but for the Blues.

Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton thrived on the stage as Blues biographer Peter Guralnick explains, "[Patton] moved from plantation to plantation, playing at picnics and country suppers and the juke joints out in logging and turpentine camps. It was a rough life, a violent life, and Patton seems to have gotten into his share of trouble. He moved around a lot and built up a considerable local reputation"[44] It was this lifestyle that brought Patton the money for him and his family to live off of. Patton made playing music into a job, when there was not a job to be had. The great music scout H. C. Speir said Patton was one of the first Blues musicians to live off of his music.[45] As the prospect of performing for pay began getting around many Blues musicians picked up their guitars and headed for the road. What they found was both welcoming yet dangerous. The juke joints, where most the southern Bluesmen played, were not unlike

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[43] Graves, Crossroads. 20.
[44] Peter Guralnick, Feel Like Going Home. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1971). 46.
[45] Ibid.

the local white taverns on a Saturday night. Alcohol, music, dancing men and women; often add up to a riotous evening, one that would continue into the morning. Guralnick explains this new environment the Blues musicians found themselves in, "The barrel houses and juke joints, and packed steaming rooms jammed with couples doing the lindy and two-step, the slow drag and buzzard lope, the hard-drinking, boisterous, fierce and exultant atmosphere."[46] The one thing that can make music good is the audience. Until this time the audience was limited, remote, and often ignorant to anything but Gospel. The Blues had been sought out; glorified even, if only to a select ethnic group. But, nonetheless would allow the Blues to eventually enter the realm of popular music. The Bluesman had become a transient, traveling entertainer and the only thing that lay in the way was the rail and the road; the Chitlin Circuit had just begun to come into play. While the Bluesmen and their music would forever be ingrained in the part of the heart reserved only for musical ecstasy.

Figure 3. Exterior of a juke joint in Belle Glade, Florida. Marion Post Wolcott.

The foundations of the Blues had been laid. It had evolved through the strong, black fingers plucking diddley bows and banjos and then those same fingers wrapped around old steel-body acoustic guitars and headed across the humid South. The Blues played in train stops, fish-houses and juke joints along the way to places like Shreveport

[46]Ibid, 47.

and Clarksdale. It hitched rides from Texas lumber camps to the Mississippi cotton fields and slowly moved upriver to the vaudeville circuits of St. Louis and Chicago. The Blues made its home in the American South, but it was adopted throughout the states as a new sound.

There are often many different categories Blues music styles are associated with. The earliest sub-genres are the Country Blues, or the Texas Blues, coming out of the dry, flat land of Eastern Texas and Arkansas, while the Delta Blues is from the dark, rich soul of the Mississippi's alluvial plain. The Country Blues is from a land of corn, peanuts, lumber, and soybeans. The Delta Blues on the other hand is centered on cotton. Even after much of the swamps were drained the land is still a sultry, primordial twilight zone. It is a place that gave birth to many superstitions: Indigenous, Colonial American, and African cultures, dissected by the infamous Highway 61 from New Orleans, through Vicksburg, all the way to Beale Street in Memphis. The land of the Country Blues on the other hand was flat, often dry and sunny, perfect for hitchhiking highway 49 in Clarksdale to the Dallas suburbs immortalized in Lead Belly's "Silver City Born."[47]

William Ferris, co-founder of the Center for Southern Folklore says, "The Country Blues were usually accompanied with a harmonica. Verses were "formulaic" in the sense that verses were shifted at will within a given tune and a gifted musician with a large repertory of verses formulas could perform for three minutes."[48]This formulaic verse use, along with the harmonica may have dominated the Country Blues, but just looking at the Delta man Robert Johnson's mere twenty-nine recordings he incorporated

[47] Kip Lornell, "Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly." *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2000). 28.
[48]William Ferris, "Blues Roots and Development." *The Black Perspective in Music*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1974). 124.

similar musical ideas. Ferris goes on to say that the Country Blues were set in a rural context.[49] While this is true, the Delta Blues was rural in context as well. The Blues did not fit the urban settings when it first began and even after its acceptance in the cities the Blues was still an outsider. Jazz had been accepted by the public due to its popularity. The reason behind this was the 12-Bar AAB structure that followed European music modes. The City Blues could only be found in urban settings that welcomed these types of musicians; cities like Memphis and Chicago, while Jazz was often instrumental and improvised it stuck to a traditional style and progression that had more commonalities to Western music than to Blues. Ferris is correct in describing the Delta Blues, "Characterized by use of heavy gravelly voice and the bottleneck style of playing."[50] Musicians like Charlie Patton and Son House reflect this style. But again, there were many exceptions as itinerant musicians traveled from place to place picking up new styles and leaving some behind. The differences in musical context essentially end there. The styles are so similar that it is not surprising that Lead Belly, out of Louisiana, played with Blind Lemon, from Texas. Blues musicians traveled across the south constantly, from Texas to Mississippi and back again, with many tales to tell. They played with one another, they listened to one another, and they did have one thing in common: They were from the South and their sound had never been heard anywhere else before.

By the time Mamie Smith had recorded the first Blues song, "Crazy Blues" in 1920 on Okeh Records the Blues artist had been born. Is a recording means of invention? Does something have to be documented to become nascent? Of course not,

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

but for the sake of historians and audiophiles 1920 is as good a year as any to say the Blues had finally taken form. If one were to listen to "Crazy Blues" they would likely be astonished to hear it sounded incredibly close to Jazz, or Big Band and it was. Like Handy, Mamie Smith recorded a number of songs that history would label as Blues, but were not even close. There is no hint of the melismatic guitar; in fact there is no guitar at all, nor is there any polyrhythmic percussive accompaniment. If one were to compare Richard Waterman's commonalties between African music and the Blues to "Crazy Blues" there is little the song shares with the Blues. Much of the Jazz inspired "Blues" was only Blues in name.

It could be argued, on music recording alone, that Smith didn't record the first Blues song, but Blind Lemon could certainly take her place with his recordings in the December of 1925. That is because Blind Lemon was the Blues. He played the Blues, he traveled like a Bluesman, and he was blind; a stereotypical Blues musician. But more than any of those things, Blind Lemon played the slide guitar with a tenderness that matched his sad, strained voice; the voice of the Blues. Blind Lemon's recordings in Chicago had Gospel in it like, "I Want to be like Jesus in my Heart," but the Blues can unmistakably be heard in "Dry Southern Blues."[51] Regardless of who first recorded the Blues, one thing is for certain, as the twenties wore on a consumer group had been created, and they wanted the Blues. Jazz and Blues critic for *The Village Voice* Francis Davis said, "The history of the Blues, in one sense, is the history of folk art in the age of

[51] Lemon Henry Jefferson, *The Best of Blind Lemon*. Yazoo. 2000.

mechanical reproduction."[52] Davis also uses the word "titular" in reference to "Crazy Blues," which is exactly what Smith's song is; Blues in title only.[53] The Blues had been around, played in juke joints for years, but it was the recordings that created the genre of "Blues." Smith's "Crazy Blues" sold 75,000 copies within a month of its release.[54] Her recording started a market for "race records," which is exactly what it sounds like. Record companies were certainly taking advantage of the Blues and Jazz musicians, but it also opened the way for their sound to stand the test of time. The Empress of the Blues: Bessie Smith, or Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson for that matter, may have never been heard outside of their traveling range without the leeching efforts of white recording companies insatiable avarice. The twenties are after all, called the Jazz Age and everybody in the fledgling music business was looking to score on the next big music boom.

The differences between the Texas Blues and the Delta Blues can certainly be argued, or ignored for lack of genuine characteristics, as Hamilton suggests. The idea of the Delta Blues was something rather recent, when this "idea" began circulating in the early 1960s, boosted by three seminal LPs: The first Robert Johnson anthology, entitled *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, and two albums put together by record collector Pete Whelan for his Origins Jazz Library label: *The Mississippi Blues* and *Really! The Country Blues*, a compilation of track by Delta-born artists."[55] But to the gramophone owners and record executives the only thing that mattered was that the Blues could be

[52] Davis, The History of the Blues. 8.
[53] Ibid, 57.
[54] Ibid, 62.
[55] Hamilton, "The Blues." 31.

reproduced. Before this, when Johnson was alive, few people had even heard of Robert Johnson. The gravel and dirt roads the Bluesman hitch-hiked before were becoming paved roads and could reduce travel time considerably. The African-Americans living in the backwoods' shotgun house were being connected to the rest of America, for better or worse. Rail tracks crisscrossed the south, heaving up train depots in just about every town it passed. Newspapers were talking music; the Negro press began to include articles on Blues musicians next to Jazz profiles. Paramount Records took off with race records from artists like Blind Lemon in 1926. Blues musicians were playing for an audience in the form of American ballads; Lead Belly even recorded a number of cowboy songs. African myths that followed the musicians began to fade away with new myths, and the church spiritual was only something you sang on Sundays. The rail and road led to big Midwest cities. Sterling Brown likely witnessed this first hand as a child, "Brer Rabbit and Old Jack no long are enough. Increasingly in the churches the spirituals lose favor to singing out of the books or from broadsides, and city-born Blues and jive take over the jook-joints."[56]

While the Blues was making its slow migration north, the heart of the music and its creators still resided in the American South. As previously mentioned the Blues was taking its true form and leaving the confines of its home, often losing a bit of what made it along the way. But, that is not to say that the foundation of the music: Spirituals, work songs, and African and American motifs were discarded or forgotten. It may even have brought a certain resurgence to the music coming out of the Delta and Texas. Author

[56]Brown, "Negro Folk." 60.

Ben Sidran, past member of the Blues-Rock band, the Steve Miller Band, explains this, "The development of rhythmic freedom has generally preceded social freedom for black Americans... The initial rhythmic freedom of black music was immediately restricted upon the institution of slavery. Its gradual return to black music was nothing less than the reemergence of the black ego."[57] Sidran was referring to the acceptance of music that enabled the black man, and his music, to enter mainstream American culture. But, as he also mentions, the lack of cultural freedom, especially during slavery and Reconstruction, hindered the true, complete expression of black musicians.

Music had now become a tool for cultural expression, as well as a way to make money. It was the Blues musician that was laden with the burden of transcending racial and political boundaries by relating their culture and troubles to the mass public, in effect giving the rest of America a glimpse into the African-American past. So while the Blues had shaken off the musical restrictions of their past, it also opened the door for more recent American cultural aspects, as well as their traditional African heritage. And the music reflects this. Robert Johnson sang songs about phonographs and the money to be made in Chicago. He also sang songs about redemption and religion; songs he borrowed from the church, no doubt. Lead Belly not only sang songs about the prison yard, but about current events; Lindbergh was a topic of one song. All the while, the foundations remained intact and the African griot had been reborn. These griots, essentially bards, consoled the mourner and comforted the downcast with music.[58] The griot was a West African traveling musician, "Who served as a community spokesman,

[57] Ben Sidran, Black Talk. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971). 11.
[58] Ferris, "Blues Roots." 122.

clearly an African prototype for the Blues musician."[59] Whether Johnson or Patton knew it they had become the Southern black man's voice. They were the ones meant to bring their culture to the rest of America and they accomplished quite a lot in a short period of time. The Blues past was not dead; it had simply shifted forms - like a trickster. A fitting example is the story of the trickster, Br'er Fox, who aims to take care of his nemesis Br'er Rabbit once and for all by constructing a rabbit-like effigy he called the Tar-Baby:

> Br'er Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.
>
> 'How you come on, den? Is you deaf?' Says Br'er Rabbit...'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gonna bus' you wide open.'
>
> Tar-Baby stay still, en Br'er Fox, he lay low.
>
> Br'er Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nuthin', twel present'y Br'er Rabbit draw back wid his fix', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. His fis' struck, en he can't pull loose...'Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you again,' sez Br'er Rabbit...Den Br'er Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt'er crank sided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck.
>
> 'Howdy, Br'er Rabbit,' sez Br'er Fox, 'you look sorter stuck up dis mawnin'. I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Br'er Rabbit.'[60]

The trickster Br'er Fox, though up to no good, often has a role to play. In this case Br'er Rabbit has been taking advantage of Br'er Fox for days, but finally Br'er Rabbit got what was coming to him. A theme with obvious connections to the nefarious advantages the white man had been taking on blacks for years. Blues music may not have kept past forms, but it kept past themes, or at least a part of them.

Before exploring the themes most prominent in Blues musicians repertoire one must understand the musicians themselves in order to understand the music and culture of the South. There are hundreds of early Blues musicians, some with limitless talent,

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus. (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1985). 6.

while others simply played what they knew. In the case of Sonny Boy Williamson his identity and genius was stolen by another musician who became quite influential at Chess Records in the early fifties; the "real" Sonny Boy. Like any genre of music there is an eclectic and ranging variety of musicians and sounds. Some of the earliest were often the greatest in the case of the King of the Twelve String, Lead Belly. Lead Belly's life reads like a movie script and fittingly, a movie was made about his life in 1976. Both Lead Belly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, another grandfather of the Blues, represent the Texas Blues. Blind Lemon's life and music fit the stereotypical myths of Blues musicians, with a flair of reality. Robert Johnson on the other hand represents the Delta. He was an innovator. Johnson's guitar talents were a paragon for other musicians, but it was his life and musical trailblazing that he is most remembered for. What these Blues musicians all had in common was not just their ability, but they represent all the aspects of American Blues music, from their lyrics illuminating black life, to the their guitar and rhythm styles that would define a style of music. These musicians exude the lifestyles and culture prominent in the South after the turn of the century. It is from them that we can attempt to reconstruct and remember the time and place in which they lived and more importantly, the myths and motifs they continued to pass along.

THE BLUESMEN

"All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up." - James Baldwin.[1]

The Blues would never have existed without its musicians. The Blues also would not have existed without Southern black culture. It was the lives of novice guitar players that created the Blues and it was also this lifestyle that made their musical sounds unique and original, never seen or heard before - like the lives they lived. The Blues musician is iconic; iconic in the manner of immortalization through recording. Often the only history we have of these musicians and their culture are the enduring tracks on vinyl records. Bluesmen's lives have often been made into myth and more often than that ignored. It may have been this ignorance of Southern musical life that brought about the abundant rumors and myths. So, it is through the music and the musicians lives we can learn much of the culture. It was the idiosyncratic Southern black man that created the Blues and it is from there that we may comprehend the music itself.

One of the earliest, most influential Blues musicians, Blind Lemon Jefferson tells of a place of both happiness and heartache. A Southern world full of crossroads:

> My mind leads me to take a trip down south,
> my mind leads me to take a trip down south.
> One train's at the depot with red and blue lights behind,
> one train's at the depot with red and blue lights behind.
> Well, the blue light's the Blues,
> the red light's the worried mind.[2]

[1] Luigi Monge, "The Language of Blind Lemon." *Black Music Research Journal*. Vol. 20, No. 1. (Spring 2000). 64.

Blind Lemon Jefferson would record some of the first Blues tracks in late 1925 immortalizing him as one of the first Bluesmen, as well as the nickname "Father of the Texas Blues." Not only was Blind Lemon one of the first, but he was one of the finest. His voice matched the high-pitched, tight, strings heard in the song "Got the Blues." His voice was not so much high in range, but simply mimicked the higher octaves often heard in his guitar riffs. Blind Lemon could sing; to the point he was probably better than the Robert Johnsons and Son Houses. But it was likely that his blindness promoted his eventual immortalization. In his early life, though, his blindness held little concern to others, not just because most were unaware, but because of his ability to draw a crowd and cut a great record. The problematic issue with Blind Lemon's blindness is that it is often this physical ailment that he is most remembered for today, rather than his artistic genius.

The lives of Blues singers continuously crossed the tracks between fact and fiction and this even followed them into the afterlife. The only known photograph of Blind Lemon Jefferson shows him with squinting eyes, shielded by foggy, black spectacles. The opaque glasses were a foreshadowing of his whimsical spirit. The life of Blind Lemon is a scattered assortment of contradictory facts and local legends

Figure 1. Blind Lemon Jefferson with his National Guitar. University of Mississippi

[2] Jefferson, *The Best*.

that propelled his mythical persona. Lemon Henry Jefferson was born blind in Couchman, Texas in 1893 according to his tombstone erected in the late 1990s. American music biographer David Dicaire on the other hand marks Jefferson's birth in 1897 in the flat, eastern section of Freestone County.[3] Thanks to the lack of census and record-keeping, particularly among African-Americans, the first myth of Blind Lemon, his debated birth date, was born right along-side his tiny body.

Jefferson's mythical status would define even himself. He sang about the supernatural with songs like "Rabbit Foot Blues," along with travel in "Black Horse Blues" both recorded in 1926. Jefferson of course sang about women and the often risqué life on the road as well:

> Woman I love,
> she must be outta town.
> Woman I love, man,
> she's outta town.
> She left me this mornin',
> with her face in a terrible frown. (Easy Rider Blues)

Like his lyrics, Jefferson was a touring musician and all the ups and downs that came with life on the road. This story of his life and his musical abilities nicknamed him "The Father of the Texas Blues" and inspired the likes of Robert Johnson and Son House, not to mention a Bob Dylan cover aptly named, "See That My Grave is Kept Clean." It is the tale of his death that is much more mystical. Blind Lemon's death certificate in 1929 states the he died, "probably of acute myocarditis."[4] If Jefferson died of a heart attack, then why is there a "probably" next to the cause of death? This statement is something

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[3] David Dicaire, Blues Singers. (London: McFarland and Company, 1999). 140.
[4] Scorsese, *The Blues.*

rarely seen on a death certificate even in the early 20th century. There are other rumors to follow this equally opaque tale. The other story goes, "upon awareness of his infidelity a jealous lover poisoned his coffee."[5] This tale of a jealous lover will pop up again and again in the life of Blues singers, most notably in the case of Robert Johnson's death. Finally, Jefferson's death certificate states that he was found in a snowstorm and it is believed that he became disoriented and could never find his way out of the cold, leading to congestive heart failure. Regardless of the accuracy of the two stories the fact that Jefferson died in a snowstorm in the morning hours of downtown Chicago opens another lens. How does one get lost in the freezing cold of Chicago, or why was a blind man even roaming the cold streets in the first place? It is these conflicting stories, or possibly a missing story, that help maintain the dark, mysterious lives of Blues singers like Jefferson.

What makes one look past Jefferson's ability and ingenuity is another aspect that is often associated with Blues singers: Blindness. Like the story of soul-selling in exchange for musical talent the same is true with blindness. The lack of sight that Jefferson had to live with is often associated with his supreme musical abilities, "the blind genius, doomed and gifted by fate to trade his eye-sight in return for his artistic talent."[6]Musicians like Blind Willie McTell and Blind Boy Fuller would further this stereotype up to the present with the great Ray Charles, who is associated with his blindness as much as his genius. Jefferson likely would have frowned at the idea of his

[5] Ibid.
[6] Joseph Witek, "Blindness as Rhetorical Trope in Blues Discourse." *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2. (1988). 178.

trading music for sight considering he was born blind. But it certainly adds kindling to the flames of myth. Jefferson did seem to use his blindness to his benefit though. The image of a blind Blues player sitting in a train depot with a steel guitar on his lap singing songs about the rough life on the road brought in a few bucks. It was just as rewarding as playing in local juke joints, to the point Jefferson may have played along the street or the train tracks more than he did indoors.

Little is known about Lemon Jefferson's early years, but it was during his adolescent years that he began to become transcendent on the guitar. Jefferson grew up listening to Bluesmen like Henry "Ragtime" Thomas, who traveled eastern Texas as a performer just as Jefferson would do a few years later, with a young boy or a fellow musician to help him around. Jefferson's boyhood friend Quince Cox remembers the young Lemon playing along the Texas streets, "I pitched a quarter and nickels to him, and he'd play his guitar at any time of night...People from all over came to hear him play. Then he'd get on this road at ten and walk seven or eight miles, but he knew where he was going."[7] When Jefferson did play juke joints or chock houses he would sometimes have a fiddler to accompany him, often Lorenzo Ross. The fiddlers possibly doubled as Jefferson's eyes, although it is clear from Jefferson's friends and family he had no trouble discerning money, people, or places, furthering his mythical illusion. Bluesman Tom Shaw claimed, "You could hand him a dozen bills and he'd tell you just that fast whether it's a five- or a one-dollar bill."[8] Lightnin' Hopkins would say in an

[7] Alan Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Myth and the Man." *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1. (2000). 8.
[8] Ibid, 11.

interview with Samuel Charters, "No, don't call him blind. He never did feel like he was blind."[9] Between Jefferson's close acquaintances and family he is personified as not being blind at all, even to the point that many researchers have alluded to the fact that he may not have even have been blind. This type of myth creating certainly wasn't subdued by the conflicting statements of other musicians, but it seems clear from his sisters and cousins' reports that he was in fact born blind.

Blind Lemon played church music growing up, as did every Bluesman. But it was in the places of "ill-repute," as his mother called them, that he began to make money and consider himself a musician. It was in the early 1910s when Jefferson took to the rail and across the Texas state line playing train stops and juke joints along the way. Many of the songs he began playing were traditionals like the spiritual "Two Horses Standing in a Line" that he changed to "See That My Grave's Kept Clean." He did the same with "Corinna Blues" that was transformed from "See, See Rider."[10] Of all the different types of Black Southern life Jefferson sang about it was travel that filled much of his repertoire, like "Match Box Blues."

> I'm sitting here wonderin'
> will a matchbox hold my clothes.
> I ain't got so many matches,
> but I got so far to go.

Life on the road can be heard in his songs. Blind Lemon has a distinct voice, it's high-pitched and crooning. It almost feels transcendental, to the point that it matches the aura

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 15.

he promoted. Cox relates his singing to a howl or squeal, "He'd squeal just like a dog. Make it sound good, too."[11]

Jefferson's musical talents, as well as his voice, allowed him to travel Texas, the Delta, and up into Chicago developing his own melodies from the folk songs he grew up singing. This would eventually attract multiple recording companies. Jefferson recorded for the first time in 1926 for Paramount Records where he was paid modestly and he even received a car. Blind Lemon would move on from Paramount to Okeh Records after a dispute regarding his pay. At this point Lemon had been commuting back and forth between Texas and Chicago and the many states in between. His popularity began to peak soon after his first record cuts. By early 1929, though, he recorded for the last time which coincided with his popularity decline. In the respect to his popularity, Jefferson was a known Bluesman, but that was about it. He never translated to Jazz listeners and he made next to nothing from his recordings. Including Jefferson's apogee, his stay at the top of the Blues ladder lasted just three years. Soon after he cut his last tracks, including a gospel song "I Want to Be like Jesus in My Heart," Jefferson died on the cold streets of Chicago.

Blind Lemon Jefferson would not be forgotten in the songs and memory of another Blues pioneer: Huddie Ledbetter. Jefferson was one of the founders of the Blues. He was emulated and copied, while his songs were constantly covered, even to this day. Ledbetter was among them. This godfather of the Blues would earn the title, King of the Twelve-String, along with the nickname, Lead Belly. It is no wonder that

[11]Ibid, 9.

such a talented musician like Lead Belly would run around Texas with the Father of the Texas Blues: Blind Lemon Jefferson. It was around 1912 that Jefferson met Huddie Ledbetter in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas.[12] It was at this early period that the two unknown musicians joined forces, traversing the South; two itinerant wanderers on their way to forging Blues masterpieces.

Lead Belly's life reads like a movie; in fact it inspired a film aptly titled *Leadbelly* in 1976. Lead Belly was born in Harrison County Texas in 1888 along the border of Louisiana. Although the year of his birth would be disputed by Lead Belly himself.[13] This remote region was not too far from Jefferson's hometown and likewise not far from the Louisiana Blues city where he would eventually make his home: Shreveport, along the red-light district of Fannin Street. Lead Belly, like most early Blues musicians, played popular songs; ragtime tunes, country ballads, traditionals, vaudeville pieces, and of course spirituals coming out of the antebellum South.[14]Before Lead Belly would become the "King of the Twelve-String" it was Blind Lemon Jefferson who edified him in the way of the country Blues to

Figure 2. Lead Belly and his twelve-stringed guitar. Ray Avery's Jazz Archives

[12]Ibid, 9.
[13]John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936). 2.
[14] Lornell, "Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly." 23.

the point that it was only Jefferson he would cite as a major influence on his musical abilities.[15] Lead Belly grew up working in the cotton fields. As he grew older he toiled in the dry, sun-beat fields during the day and played the juke joints in the evening, sometimes with an accordion wrapped around his chest.[16] Lead Belly could play just about any instrument that came his way. Among his range were the mandolin, harmonica, and fiddle.[17]He combined his musical pedagogy with the ability to play music by ear. It was this rote learning that allowed him to play the most recent popular songs as well as creating his own songs from traditionals like, "Goodnight Irene" or "Midnight Special." Songs that would go on to be covered by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and later bands like Creedence Clearwater Revival.

When Lead Belly met Jefferson in 1904, as he remembers, Jefferson was already playing his way across the state. Jefferson though, would be his ticket to popularity, "I'd get Blind Lemon and we'd get our two guitars, ride anywhere, and didn't have to pay no money."[18] Jefferson and Lead Belly fed off each other; teaching one another tricks of the trade, like where the best juke joints were, or the train stops with the more wealthy black people got on and off. Dallas was the place to be for a Texas Bluesman. This is likely where he heard the Hawaiian guitar and slide technique. Riding between Dallas and Houston was where Lead Belly and his button-accordion would first be billed as "Lead Belly and his Windjammer. Lead Belly would memorialize his time in Dallas with the song "Silver City Bound."

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[15] Govenar, "Blind Lemon." 9.
[16] Lornell, "Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly." 23.
[17]Ibid, 28.
[18]ibid, 26.

Silver City bound, I'm Silver City bound.
Well, tell my baby, I'm Silver City bound.
Me and Blind Lemon going to ride on down.
Catch me by the hand, oh baby.
Blind Lemon was a blind man.

Among the vast array of songs Lead Belly sang about it was his more lascivious songs that are often remembered today. Songs like "C. C. Rider" derived from the term "easy rider," which referred to an easy woman and his more commercially popular song "Black Snake Moan," which both he and Blind Lemon sang throughout their careers.

I ain't got no momma now.
I ain't got no momma now.
She told me late last night,
"You don't need no momma no how."
Mmhmm, black snake crawlin' in my room.
Tell me what's the matter baby,
don't like no black snake no how?
Black snake momma done run my darlin' home.[19]

It would be years later that these songs would become known as they are today: music genius. And that likely would never have happened if it wasn't for Lead Belly's more sinister nature. After all, it is often the myths that make a man a legend and Lead Belly had more than his share of myths. As Sterling Brown recalls Lead Belly as "stark, rather than soft."[20] Lead Belly was a huge man, with fingers that could wrap around the neck of his guitar. In nearly all of his photos Lead Belly's smile flashes perfect white teeth. He was rarely silent and constantly jovial, when he was not completely sullen; the only two moods Lead Belly seemed to possess. He was a real life Stakolee; a mean, gun-holding, dice-roller with money and women on his mind. He would often refer to

[19] Huddie Ledbetter. *The Essential Lead Belly.* Create Space Records. 2008.
[20] Brown, "Negro Folk." 318.

himself as John Henry, a mythical, West Virginian steel-driver and outlaw. As John and Alan Lomax would remember, Lead Belly could be kind enough to teach Alan's son guitar and the next moment steal his money. This lifestyle would put Lead Belly in jail three times, if not more. It was in the southern penitentiaries that Lead Belly achieved his sobriquet. There are multiple stories that shaped his moniker. During his stay at the Parchman Farm Penitentiary for killing his cousin over a woman, fellow inmates claim he was shot in the stomach with buckshot that gave him the nickname. Friends claim it was his ability to down moonshine. While Big Bill Broonzey says it came from Lead Belly's tendency to "lay about as if his stomach was weighted down by lead," while the chain gangs were supposed to be working.[21] Broonzey would go on to describe Lead Belly as a man with a tendency to fight; a hard man. One prison story involves Lead Belly being stabbed in the neck by a shank and in turn taking the knife protruding out of the ragged wound and attacking his assailant.[22] Whether any of these stories are true or embellished they certainly shaped his mythical reign as master of the twelve-string guitar; singing about things rarely heard in the south, like prison, racism and politicians, Franklin D. Roosevelt among them.

Lead Belly's knack for getting himself locked up would cause him to change his name multiple times. Name changing was not just a way to escape the law, but it was also a way to create an alter-ego; A black hero on the one hand and in Lead Belly's case

[21] Scorsese, *The Blues*.
[22] Ibid.

musical material accessible to white, middle-class audiences.[23] It was a trick he first learned when he escaped the chain gang outside of New Orleans. While Lead Belly was working on a highway he found a chance to slip his chains off the main line and flee into the woods. Alan Lomax would recall the story told to him by Lead Belly, "Fifty yards separated him from the gang before the loose chain clinked, the guard whirled his horse, and, whipping his Winchester from its scabbard, began to fire. The bullets whizzed around Lead Belly's ears and he forgot about the chain and the plowed ground. He ran."[24] Lead Belly would make it to his father's house, where old man Wess Ledbetter hid his son in the cane patch. From that moment on he was known as Walter Boyd. Lead Belly would marry his waiting love, Lethe, soon after escaping the chain gang, under the name Walter Boyd. Name changes were not uncommon to traveling musicians. Many of them used a sobriquet to remain memorable. Names like: Blind Boy Blake, Willie Big Eyes, Barrelhouse Chuck, Big Momma, Howlin' Wolf, Jelly Roll, Lighting Hopkins, to name a few. In the pens that Lead Belly stayed there were other musicians with their own monikers like: Iron Head and Clear Rock.[25] In the southern jails Lead Belly refined his musical abilities and created his stage name. As it would serve the character's nicknames in African folklore, it would serve Lead Belly as well. His nickname appealed to an audience, while his name change kept him out of jail, for now.

It was in the penitentiaries that Lead Belly made his name and his sound. But it was his music that saved him, thus making the talented Bluesman a mythical hero. Three

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[23]Michael Paris, "Country Blues on the Screen: The Leadbelly Film." *Journal of American Studies*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (April 1996). 123

[24]Lomax, Negro Folk Songs. 10.

[25]Brown, "Negro Folk." 318.

years after he was arrested for murder Texas Governor Pat Neff was visiting the penitentiary camps. Lead Belly knew he would be asked to sing and play guitar as he had for most visitors. He was asked to play a number of songs outside of the camp for Nuff and his company, "that man sho was crazy bout' my singin' and dancin.' Ev'y time I'd sing a new song or cut a few steps he'd roll me a bran-new dollar cross the flo.' Las' song I sung was a song I had made up askin' him to turn me loose, let me go home to my Mary. He tol' me when I was through, say, 'Walter, I'm gonna give you a pardon."[26] This would not be his first pardon. A few years after his release Lead Belly, now going by the last name Boyd, was arrested for stabbing a fellow black man during what Lead Belly says was a stick-up for whiskey.[27] Lead Belly would once again be arrested. This name change had kept the authorities from discovering his past transgressions. After some time in the pen the new governor O. K. Allen heard a recording by Lead Belly and "a month from the day Governor O. K. Allen told me to go home."[28] Lead Belly would be only one of four men pardoned over this time period, and he was pardoned twice. Between multiple name changes, murder convictions, and fantastic tales of escape and mischief, it was his music that saved his life.

Alan Lomax and Lead Belly would go on to tour the United States; playing at universities and public halls under the headline "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands."[29] The Philadelphia Herald Tribune advertised him as a "powerful, knife-toting Negro here

[26]Lomax, Negro Folk Songs. 21.
[27]Ibid, 23.
[28]Ibid, 25.
[29] Paris, "Country Blues on the Screen." 121.

to do a few songs between homicides."[30] Lead Belly would continue to play and record. He gave his best shot at acting and even had a radio show. He was one of the first Bluesman to be accepted by the white community. The hero would succumb to illness. Lead Belly died in 1949 from Lou Gehrig's disease. A monument in Shreveport marks his indelible legacy on Blues music and myth.

The epitome of Blues' greats Jefferson and Lead Belly comes full circle with Robert Johnson. He was the pinnacle of all Blues musicians. Eric Clapton said "Robert Johnson to me is the most important Blues musician who ever lived."[31] That is quite a statement coming from equally one of the greatest musicians to ever play. Robert Johnson recorded very few songs. He lived a short life. He is unmemorable in almost every way imaginable, except in the world of music. Johnson is transcendent; he was sui generis. As the Rolling Stones' guitarist Keith Richards would say, "He was like a comet that came along and, BOOM, suddenly he raised the ante."[32]

Like his contemporaries Johnson's life reads like a mythos. Of the two pictures we still have of the legend he is fittingly holding his guitar in both; short cropped hair upon a tear drop face. Johnson has a slight lazy eye, possibly from cataracts and likely had trouble seeing in that eye.[33] Of the two photographs the one with Johnson, a hand rolled cigarette in his mouth with a white shirt and black suspenders, is most likely the more natural Robert Johnson, although he was known to enjoy wearing suits. A self-taken

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Eric Clapton, "Discovering Robert Johnson." *Robert Johnson the Complete Recordings*. Columbia: CBS Records Inc. 1990.
[32] Keith Richards, "Well, This Is It." *Robert Johnson the Complete Recordings*. Columbia: CBS Records Inc. 1990.
[33] Elijah Wald, Escaping the Delta. (New York: Amistad, 2004). 105.

promotional photograph of Johnson was taken in the forties showing the man in a black top hat, pinstriped suit, tie and white lapel sticking out of his chest pocket; large, thin hands wrapped around a beat up guitar and a crooked smile on his face. Like nearly everything else in Johnson's life these photographs, or lack of, continues to waft the fire of his myth.

Robert Johnson was a rural southern man, born outside of the Delta in Hazlehurst, Mississippi on May 8, 1911 or as author Tom Graves states, "thereabouts."[34]Johnson clearly gets some of his lifestyle peculiarities from his mother, Julia Major Dodds. Julia was a wanderer as well, traveling from town to town, man to man. Johnson went by the name Robert Spencer growing up until as a teenager he discovered he was an "outside child."[35] It is likely that Johnson's real father was farmhand Noah Johnson, with whom Julia had a brief affair with while her husband was away working as a sharecropper. It seems neither Noah, Julie or her husband Charles had any animosity towards one another as Robert grew up in both houses throughout his childhood. This clearly would have influenced Johnson's views on love and marriage as can be seen throughout his adult life.

Figure 3. One of only two Robert Johnson photographs. Dick Waterman.

[34] Graves, Crossroads. 13.
[35] Ibid.

While Johnson was living with his stepfather in Memphis his mother married again to a stern, field hand named Dusty Willis. "Dusty Willis was a strict, no-nonsense, hard-nosed field laborer. When he was walking somewhere, he did so with such haste that he kicked up the dust at his feet, thus the nickname Dusty."[36] Johnson came to live with his mother and Dusty by accident. According to Robert's sister Carrie they stumbled upon her in the streets of Memphis where Julia took them back to Robinsonville.[37] It was there working the hot cotton fields as field hands that young Robert developed his disdain for Dusty and plucking cotton, along with release of music.

The cotton fields were brutal in the dry Mississippi heat. Few clouds skitter across the air above rarely letting loose a drop of water or a moment of shade as it quickly moved silently through the sky. Below hundreds of black field hands picked cotton from sun up to sun down, not much different than the slavery days many of the hand's parents worked in, save for the dollar a day they would often make. Sharecropping was about the only job a southern black man like Dusty could do to put food on the table. The harder Dusty worked the more anger built in his soul. Young Robert saw it and tried to avoid it, but Robert didn't work hard enough in the fields much to his step-father's consternation. "He was lazy and good for nothing" was Dusty's opinion of Robert.[38] Or as his childhood friend Willie Mason remembers "He wasn't no farmhand. We'd be choppin' or pickn' cotton, whatever, and he be round the house in the shade pickin' at his g'tar."[39] By the

[36]Ibid, 19.
[37]Ibid, 17.
[38]Wald, Escaping the Delta.
[39] *Can't You Hear the Wind Howl?* Dir. Peter W. Meyer, (Sweet Home Pictures. 2011. Dvd).

time Robert was a young man he had wrought his soul from the confines of Dusty's tight grasp and stepped into his own.

Instead of toiling in the dry cotton fields under the burden of the relentless sun, Johnson found music as a relief, along with women, friends, and booze - all the things the slave was often denied. Saturday nights were the one night to have a good time, but during the six days before Saturday it was all work. Robert escaped as often as he could to the comfort of music. It was the only thing that could take his mind off the shackles that bound him. Johnson played the diddley bow most of the time. The diddley bow was a simple string instrument based crudely on the African instrument Umakweyana.[40] The diddley bow had a single steel string tied off to two nails on the side of a house or a board that could be laid across your lap. The bow could make a variety of sounds by sliding a bottle, knife, or a shard of glass up and down the strings while plucking the string. It seems Johnson was quite good on the diddley bow, the juice harp, as well as the harmonica. As fellow Bluesman and traveling friend, Johnny Shines, notes. "[This] undoubtedly helped Johnson formulate the many voicings he adapted for his unique guitar style. Even the droning twang of the Jew's harp can be identified in some of the walking bass notes Johnson played on the heavy top strings of his guitar."[41] Songs like "32-20 Blues" and "Walkin' Blues" are great examples of these heavy bass lines.

The sharp snap of the guitar strings was another distinct characteristic Johnson picked up along the road. He played with a thumb pick creating this hard sound on the top strings. Johnson possibly picked it up from other emerging Blues artists using thumb

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[40] Graves, Crossroads. 15.
[41] Ibid, 16.

picks at the time like Blind Willie Johnson. Johnson had the ability to pick up the different techniques of guitarists at the time and incorporate it into this new, evolving style that he would be remembered for in generations of musicians to come. His style was just as transcendent now, as it was then.

The greatest effect of playing the diddley bow led to songs like "Come on in My Kitchen." The slide guitar took off after Sylvester Weaver recorded "Guitar Rag" and "Guitar Blues" in 1923.[42] Son House, Blind Willie Johnson and others like Robert Johnson accepted this style as their own, although it had been around since the slide effect began in Africa and Hawaii. Along with this idiophone, Johnson developed the distinct polyrhythm in his guitar from his ancestral Africa. Because West African music is completely entwined with polyrhythm Johnson's guitar riffs often seem layered to the point that it sounds as if someone else is playing guitar with him. It was this "spirit guitarist" that shaped Johnson's guitar style into something the American public had never heard. Keith Richards remembers hearing Johnson for the first time, "I said to Brian (Jones), who's that?" 'Robert Johnson,' he said. "Yeah, but who's the other guy playing with him? Because I was hearing two guitars, and it took me a long time to realize he was actually doing it all himself."[43] This type of guitar playing is common in western Africa. Guitar and banjo follow what the drums do, a form of polyrhythm found in every aspect of West African music. Johnson simply took from what he knew and played a style rarely heard before, and in turn, made him into a mythical man like the apparition Richards thought he heard playing with him.

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[42] Scorsese, *The Blues.*
[43] Richards, "This Is It.".

It was these styles and Johnson's constant listening to Son House and Willie Brown that brought him to the "juke joints" with his fledgling talents and wide open aspirations. Juke joints were about the only entertainment the share croppers had. Their main attraction was live music. At the end of the week these places were packed full of worn out field hands looking for a moment away from the fields. Juke joints had everything, women, alcohol, cards, dancing and music. The presence of corn whiskey likely was to blame for its rough and rowdy atmosphere. As Son House remembers, "His mother and stepfather didn't like for him to go out to those Saturday night balls because the guys were so rough."[44] The local juke joint was a place to let it all out after a week of hard work for little pay. It was here that Robert really learned how to play guitar.

Before Johnson's true potential had emerged out of the Blues-hued fog, tragedy stuck. Robert Johnson married a young local girl named Virginia Travis in 1929. Little is known of the teen and no photographs exist. Johnson's friends never spoke of her in interviews and whether they knew her or not is a mystery. And just like that she was gone again; only remembered as Robert Johnson's wife; an apparition. Virginia died in child birth along with the baby. According to Tom Graves, Robert was blamed for Virginia's death by her family as he was gone at the time of her death.[45] It is also reported that Virginia's family felt this was punishment for Robert's decision to play secular songs instead of gospel, which they thought of as selling his soul to the devil. It would be this idea of evil and sin that would follow Robert throughout his life. These were not simple notions that passed; god and the devil were very real parts of their lives and upsetting the

[44] Graves, Crossroads. 20.
[45] Ibid, 21.

balance of good could only cause evil things to happen. In Johnson's case, this myth became him. Blues researcher Robert McCormick believes Johnson adopted this phrase as a description of his resolve to abandon the settled life of a husband and farmer and become a full-time Bluesman. Regardless, it was probably here that Johnson came to the crossroads. From this point on, Robert had many lovers, but never stayed in one place very long. His music and voice hasa sense of pain when he sings; the pitches stretch to the point of breaking and his voice is high and expressive. It's easy to picture the singer as mournful and beat down, both from his lost love and the deplorable conditions African-Americans faced in the Jim Crow south. Johnsonseems to be a strong man; nonetheless, it is unclear how he was affected by the loss of his brief love. His first stand at the crossroads speaks in "Crossroad Blues:"

> I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman,
> that love and feel my care.
> Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe.
> I believe I'm sinkin' down.

Interestingly enough Johnson would "abandon" his second wife Caletta when she fell ill just a year after their marriage. His reason was to be a traveling Bluesman of course.

At this point it is clear that Johnson grabbed his guitar and took the road to the juke joints. When Blues musicians arrived in a town they rocked the local clubs with sounds unheard of and left just as suddenly, leaving countless stories in their wake. Son House would often be one of the main attractions on the makeshift stage in the back of a tavern. Son laughingly retells the story of one of the first times Robert showed up to play at the joint with writer and musician John Fahey:

> So we'd get to a rest period or something, we'd set the guitars up and go out...Robert, he'd get the guitar and go to bamming with it, just keeping noise and the people didn't like that. They'd come out and tell us, "why don't you or Willie go in there and that stop that boy? He's drivin' everybody nuts."[46]

Six months after Johnson left town traveling to other juke joints Son House noticed the change that had taken place:

> I said, "Look who's coming in the door, got a guitar on his back."
> [Willie Brown] said, "Yeah, no kidding," he said. "Oh, that's little Robert."
> I say [to Johnson] "well we can make it our rest time. What you to do, annoy the folk?"
> He say, "No, just let me - give me a try."
> I say, "Well, OK." I winked at Willie. So me and Willie got up and I gave him my seat. He set down. And that boy got started off playing... and when he got through, all our mouths were standing open. All. He was gone.[47]

And just like that Robert Johnson was off, taking to the road up and down the Mississippi River, catching trains to the east coast, to the Midwest, Canada and New York, back down to the Delta picking up whatever styles he heard: ragtime, gospel, Dixieland jazz, bebop, country. Johnson worked it all together with his guitar pick concocting a new creation: Rock 'n' Roll. He traveled the tracks, jumping cattle cars, his guitar case bopping against his back, like a "hellhound on his trail."

> I've got to keep moving,
> got to keep moving.
> Blues falling down like hail.
> All I need is my sweet little woman,
> To keep my company.
> I've got hellhounds on my trail. (Hellhound on My Trail)

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[46] Meyer, *Can't You Hear*.
[47] Graves, Crossroads. 24 - 25.

At some point, as legend tells it, Johnson traveled back to Hazlehurst to look for his father. Whether he found him or not is unknown, but it sets up the evasive guitar teacher Robert Johnson supposedly learned his best material from: Ike Zimmerman. Johnson may have picked up guitar techniques not seen before in the Hazlehurst area. While living for a brief span with Zimmerman, (often found with the conflicting spelling Zinermon) he enjoyed a wide assortment of music of the era.[48]It was here, with a seemingly unknown man, that Johnson perfected his craft. Apparently Robert was very controlling and secretive about his mentor Zimmerman because he never spoke about him. Johnson's close friends and band mates know nothing about the man or the name. Did he exist? And if he did was he just an apparition like many of Robert's inner circle. Likewise just as mysterious as Zimmerman is Johnson's son, Claude, born in Hazlehurst while he was living and studying with Zimmerman. It was not until 2000 that the United States would affirm that Robert Johnson's only offspring was born to an unknown woman.[49] It is likely that Johnson took off for the road before the boy was even born.

Johnny Shines traveled with Johnson on many of the trips. Shines notes the difference between Son House and Robert Johnson. "Son House was more stable, played the same place on Saturday night, I wanted to go somewhere, see some things."[50] It is most likely this traveling that developed Johnson's unique style of Blues while many

[48] Patricia R. Schroeder, "Robert Johnson: Mythmaking and Contemporary American Culture." University of Illinois, 2004. 28.
[49] Robert N. Brown, "Traveling Riverside Blues: Landscapes of Robert Johnson in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta." *Focus on Geography*. Vol. 49, No. 3. 24.
[50] Scorsese, *The Blues.*

Bluesmen stayed to the South Shines and Johnson traveled, itinerant wanderers, playing what they heard. As Shines talks about in an interview:

> I tell you what his life was like. If we played somewhere tonight we'd prolly get off at four o'clock and got into our hotel room and went to sleep. And a train wakin' me up at six-thirty and sayin, "Hey Robert, you want to catch it?" He'd never say a word, just get up and start puttin' his clothes on. It didn't make no difference what way he was goin'."[51]

At this point the first stories of Robert selling his soul to the devil began to circulate, all before he had even recorded a song. But his time had come in early 1936. The recording sessions in '36 and '37 are our only proof of the genius of Robert Johnson. Upon meeting H. C. Spears, music store owner and friend of the record companies, Johnson was put in touch with the American Record Company who had recorded fellow Blues' artists Son House and Charlie Patton.[52] Johnson arrived in San Antonio to record with ARC record producer Don Law. His stay there was brief but eventful. According to Law's son, after grooving to the thriving music scene there, consisting of Mexican Blues and Hillbilly among the usuals, Johnson proceeded to get arrested for vagrancy and bailed out by Law and within hours he found a woman to share his room.[53]In Johnson's time vagrancy most likely simply meant being a lone black man wandering the streets at night.

These recording sessions are the lifeblood of Johnson lore. It is these 19 recordings that changed Western music. Songs like "Terraplane Blues" were recorded with his face to the wall because he didn't want anyone to watch his style of playing for

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Graves, Crossroads. 25.
[53] Meyer, *Can't You Hear*.

fear somebody would try to copy it.[54]Or perhaps it was the mystical, soul-selling style he'd picked up that he was fearful of showing people. Regardless, this peculiar recording method led to possibly the first use of acoustics to create reverb and chorus. Listeners of "Terraplane Blues" often claim there are two guitars playing, but it is this recording method and acoustics that produces the effect. "Terraplane Blues" was Johnson's biggest seller, even though it was a moderate regional hit, selling just 5,000 copies. A Terraplane was a popular brand of car in the 30s and a typical make-out place of the time period. The song reflects the emotions of men before it was ever acceptable to sing about, at least in white music.

> I feel some lonesome.
> You hear me when I moan.
> I'm on get deep down in this connection.
> Hoo-woo, keep on tanglin' with your wires.
> And when I mash down your little starter,
> then your spark plug will give me fire. (Terraplane Blues)

It is no wonder Robert Plant, an embodiment of sexual musicianship during the counter-culture, would write "Trampled under Foot," a tribute to Johnson and his song:

> Ohh, trouble-free transmission,
> helps your oils flow.
> Mama, let me pump your gas,
> mama, let me do it all.

With lascivious lyrics like Plant's and guitar riffs as powerful as Jimmy Paige's it all makes perfect sense, Led Zeppelin couldn't have existed without Johnson.

The second recording session in 1937 was in a sultry old factory building in downtown Dallas. The rumble of outside traffic kept the windows closed so even the

[54] Ibid.

thinnest of drafts passed by the framed apertures. Producers and recording engineers attempted early air conditioning with a small electric fan blowing on a chuck of ice.[55] It was in this oven Johnson recorded "Traveling Riverside Blues." In many people's opinions it is greatest song Robert ever recorded. The song was, in Johnson fashion, sexual as well as progressive. Johnson's ubiquitous lyrics "You can squeeze my lemon until the juice runs down my leg" found its way into Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton and Myles Kennedy.

Also on these recordings are the distinct twang of the high strings on "Preachin' Blues" This modulating pitch has a touch of country "twang" but it still has a Blues standard to it. Whether the song pertains to the famed crossroads meeting with the devil, his lost love, or none of these, the lyrics and guitar tone evoke the eerie and mysterious. Johnson's singing was equally eerie. He had no trouble reaching the higher notes, often in a rueful fit of sorrow. Johnson's wails and moans are often found in the African-American preaching traditions that inspired Johnson's and even more clearly in Blind Lemon's singing styles. This can be seen in Johnson's song "Preachin' Blues":

> The Blues is a low-down shakin' chill,
> yes, preach 'em now.
> You ain't never had 'em I hope you never will.
> Well, the Blues, is an achin' old heart disease.
> Like consumption, killing me by degrees.

The heartache, struggle, and loneliness of life on the road can all be felt through the lyrics and music.

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[55] Ibid.

Somewhere along the line, Johnson created his own style, as previously mentioned. What makes him unique is how he mastered syncopated rhythm. Music researcher Charles Ford notes that there are two features to Johnson's music that were completely original, "His inflections of pitch and timbre and his irregular and often syncopated meters."[56] The idea came from his musical experiences, like that of the preacher influence, but the technique was his alone. Johnson deviated from 4/4 time throughout much of his recordings, even beginning a song like "Come Into My Kitchen" with a series of slow beats before completely syncopating the rest of the song.[57] Johnson's beats would incorporate polyrhythm into his guitar. John Lee Hooker would recall Johnson's music enough to state, "Fancy chords don't mean nothin'. Throw the fancy chords away...get this beat...this slow beat...this big beat."[58] The use of polyrhythm and syncopated beat is a clear representation of West African musical styles where rhythm was the melody. It was this idea that created Johnson's guitar style into a combination of guitar melodies and percussive rhythms. In the Mandinka culture of Western Africa, for example, there is no distinction made between that of the drums and stringed chordophone, the Kora or Garaya lute.[59] Polyrhythm can be heard in both types of instruments.

In between these progressive recording sessions, before and after, Johnson was on the road. Like the beats after him, the road was the only place he felt himself - the only place that was real, tangible, and true. The road didn't lie, cheat, or die. The road was

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[56] Charles Ford, "Robert Johnson's Rhythms." *Popular Music*. Vol. 17/1, 1998. 71.
[57] Ibid, 80.
[58] Ibid, 74.
[59] Kubik, Africa. 11.

always the same thing - a place from here to there, or maybe a place out of there in the case of southern racial attitudes. On the road you can find yourself, without anyone telling you one thing or another. The road was freedom and Johnson wanted to escape his past and the "evil" that still resided there. Whatever it is that attracts one to the road it clearly had a hold of Robert Johnson and many of his fellow Blues myth makers. A fellow man-of-the-road Jack Kerouac would have agreed, "We all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*."[60] Johnson longed to find the crossroads that would lead him to salvation; whether it was musical or spiritual.

Johnny Shines remembers the days spent on the train tracks from city to city. "I was free. I was not under nobody's command. Nobody tell me when, where, or how. We'd just go."[61]Two things Johnson found to his liking on the road were women and whiskey. Both fueled the myths. Every woman he was with thought she was the one for him. Robert would tell his girls stories, and myths, likely different to each one, or variations of, and then be off again, leaving only these stories and his music behind. Johnson's style was, roll into town, meet a girl, one that wasn't too pretty or wanted, and stay with her until he made a little money. Willie Mae Powell was one of Johnson's lovers. "He was a nice condition person. He's loving and kind. A real handsome boy. He'd pick his box for me. The song 'Love in Vain' Robert wrote for me, sure."[62]In the few songs Johnson wrote, he did not shy away from relating personal experience through his

[60]Jack Kerouac, On the Road. (New York: Penguin, 1955). 135.
[61] Meyer, *Can't You Hear*.
[62] Ibid.

lyrics. Willie Brown shows up in "Cross Road Blues" as "friend-boy Willie Brown." And likewise Willie Mae had her enduring mark left in the song, "Love In Vain:"

> Well the blue light was my Blues,
> and the right light was my mind.
> All my love's in vain.
> Oh hoo ou. Hoo, Willie Mae.

Powell claims Robert wanted her to go on the road with him, if so, it was likely one of the few woman with whom he wanted to travel.[63] It is also likely that Miss Willie Brown really caught Robert's attention. He spent quite some time on Willie Mae's back porch playing his box. Willie Mae was clearly taken when asked in an interview if she was in love with Robert she answered, "I sure was."[64]She wasn't the only woman Robert won over. A young Robert Lockwood Jr. remembers when Robert followed his mother home after a show. "When I found out he was a musician I was glad. My mother loved him. And he taught me to play, so I'd have to say I loved him too."[65]Apparently Robert Lockwood Jr. was the only person that Johnson taught how to play. Lockwood even knows songs that Johnson never recorded.

Johnson's reasons for leaving these women over and over are unknown. Was he scared of losing another love? Scared of getting too close? Scared of living in post-Emancipation South? He was running from his buried wife, his family, maybe his innocence. Maybe he was running from life entirely. Or maybe the hell hounds were too hot on his heels.

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

In early 1938 Johnson wanted to jump the midnight train to Mississippi. Johnny Shines explains why he wouldn't make this trip. "I wouldn't go to Mississippi with him. It was open season on black people in Mississippi at that time. Kill em anyway you see em."[66]At this point Johnson was riding faster than ever. All over the South and up into the North and Northeast. He'd leave Shines behind in St. Louis and Shines would meet up with him again in Cleveland. Then leave him again in Chicago and catch Johnson again in an Arkansas juke joint. The hellhounds seemed to be catching up as his lyrics from "Hell Hound on My Trail" would proclaim:

> I've got to keep moving.
> And the day keeps on remindin' me,
> there's a hellhound on my trail.
> Hellhound on my trail.

Johnson ended up on the outskirts of Greenwood, Mississippi in early August.

When Johnson walked into Greenwood kicking up dirt he was looking for two things, a place to play music and a woman. He found both. Johnson was hired to play at the Three Forks on the outside of the Star of the West plantation with Sonny Boy Williams and Honeyboy Edwards on August 13, 1938. Before Robert went on he had found himself a woman and a bed for the night, as usual. He spent the time before playing music, drinking whiskey and eating chitlin. Sonny Boy recalls,

> This man's wife, Robert was messin' with her. She was a really nice lookin' woman. Long hair, light brown skin. She had a sister who lived out in Greenwood. And in the mornin' she'd have to go out and see her sister...when she was staying with Robert. Her husband on the plantation was a snich'n. He sold whiskey to the people out in Greenwood and he tell ever'body "you hear who's goin with your wife?[67]

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

This is the story of a jealous husband. And so just like that everybody knew the famous musician coming to the Three Forks was messing around with the operator's wife. According to the tale, Johnson was loaded before even playing, on what drug is the argument. Honeyboy remembers Johnson just sitting in his chair, slumped over while people were saying, "Wake up, wake up man. Play some Blues. Here's fifteen cents. Twenty cents. Johnson says, 'I'm kinda sick, I don't feel good.' He raised up and tried to play...in the mornin he was crawling' around like a dog. Just hounding. Something in the whiskey, no telln what it was."[68] The famous verdict: poisoning by strychnine, a pesticide put there by the angry juke joint operator. The problem is most researchers don't believe it. Johnny Shines refused to believe it. Toxicologist Steve Nichols cites that strychnine has a distinct bitter taste and is difficult to disguise even in hard liquor. To be fatal a tremendous amount would have to be consumed and the death would take days not hours.[69] Although there is a good chance Johnson's death took days, while he suffered in a rooming house in Baptist Town. Nichols also notes that this type of poisoning would have led to spasms and convulsions, none of which the few witnesses mention.

Other explanations for his death include syphilis as noted by the Leflore County Register. This seems clearly out of the question as the symptoms leading to syphilis related deaths are long, drawn out, and noticeable, including blindness and insanity. This is most likely the perversion of bigotry and an incomplete coroner's report as Graves

[68] Ibid.
[69] Graves, Crossroads. 43.

would agree.[70] Or it could have possibly been bad moonshine that Robert had ingested. In fact, given the testimony of Honeyboy and Sonny Boy, this may be more likely the truth. Whatever the cause of Johnson's death it is only fitting that it would be shrouded in controversy. Regardless the hellhounds caught up to the trail and just like his birth, life, and death; Robert Johnson was a mystery, a myth.

Most of the southern folk music at the time Johnson was playing was associated with religion; spirituals if it was gospel, and the more supernatural if it was secular. Fire and brimstone tent revivals were typical of the day and the adoption of traditional African religions with Christianity created a contrasting effect between the evil spirits of Satan and the merciful hands of God. It was likely the listeners of Johnson's tunes did not take seriously to the details of the devil, the crossroads, and spirits. As author Tom Graves notes, "Johnson's juke joint audiences would have been familiar with devil talk and its many shades of meaning. They probably didn't give a second thought to Johnson's depictive musings on the subject, certainly not enough to seriously believe he was actually in the league with the devil."[71] Johnny Shines agrees, "He never told me that lie," when asked about Johnson selling his soul. Given that Tommy Johnson is supposedly the man who sold his soul to the devil and not Robert Johnson with the lack of any other evidence associating with the myth, besides Son House's quote, it seems very unlikely the myth holds any water. And considering Son House never mentions the devil furthers this point.

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[70] Ibid, 40.
[71] Ibid, 53.

What makes the Blues' myths are the lyrics and transcendental music. While Johnson may have never sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads, it is clear through his life and music that he was haunted. Johnson does sing extensively about getting away from something. Hellhounds follow him wherever he goes, as do women, corn whiskey, and trouble. It's clear Johnson lives for life on the road. It is the only place he seemed to feel at home. He began by running from the life of a migrant laborer, kept on running after the death of his first love, Virginia, and kept on sprinting till his early demise in the back of an old plantation house outside Greenwood, Mississippi. After his feet ceased their ever-present course down a gravel highway Johnson would go down in Blues history as the accumulation of all other Bluesmen before him. Johnson was his own man, but all the other greats, like Lead Belly and Blind Lemon, were a certain part of him. He rose from the cotton fields playing a Diddley bow, stopped off at the crossroads and into perfection. Robert Johnson was an originator; at the apex of Blues musicians.

MYTHS AND MOTIFS

"The Blues are the true facts of life expressed in words and song, inspiration, feeling and understanding." - Willie Dixon.[1]

As the music of the Blues was an amalgam of African polyrhythm, slave work songs, and European musical instruments and modes, the same is true with the recurring themes found in the lyrics of Blues singers. By tracing Blues musical instruments and ideas, along with the lives of its creators, the themes presented in the lyrics convey how the Blues came to be, as well as the lifestyles of the Southern black musicians. Many of these themes follow similar roads of the music. The trickster motif is African, while the devil motif is European in nature. Both can be found in civilizations across the globe - one long road intersected by countless crossroads. The covert theme of blindness seems strictly a Southern American idea, as does the theme of slavery. Likewise, the motifs of rails and the road are American. This is not to say there are not connections to African traditions; which there are. It is from the lyrics and themes that one can begin to understand this world that had never existed before. The fusion of African and Western themes, along with that of the slave life, created a new society – a society that was ignored by historians and white culture, until the music was too impressive to deny. The Blues is a testament of a unique culture stolen from its home, transplanted across the Atlantic, and forced to create a new way of life. Blues singers were ancestors of the griot.

[1]Willie Dixon and Don Snowden. I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story. (New York: Quartet Books, 1989). 2.

While the griot is African in tradition, Blues musicians became the oral historians of their people. African-American music has played more than the role of coded slave songs of Harriet Tubman, or the entertainment of a township juke joint. These songs represent a culture - an entire way of life, found only in the American Southeast.

One way Blues musicians promoted these ideas and themes was through their lyrics and lives. The theme of blindness can be seen in a number of Blues musicians, some blind like Jefferson, others full of sight. Blind Lemon Jefferson certainly was no stranger to this. He would use his blindness as an advantageous troubadour trick, as well as a mystical trope. The question can even be raised if Blind Lemon would have gone by his birth name, Henry Jefferson, would he have been remembered in Blues lore as he was when three hundred people came to watch his coffin lowered into the ground?[2] Would he even have recorded any songs? The name makes the man as we can see previously from Lead Belly; the moniker is part of the whole musical package. Without it the lure of the artist does not shine so brightly. So, as Lead Belly changed his name from Huddie Ledbetter, Jefferson did similarly. Music researcher Joseph Witek would say that Blind Lemon's use of his blindness as rhetoric would "emphasize that the singer is different from other people, perhaps more attuned to the Muses of his art, but certainly strange and erotic."[3] Witek would go on to argue that "Blind" Lemon Jefferson was not a replacement for his name, but it signified blindness to be the most important aspect. Jefferson was not even the first to use this trope. It likely existed since there has been a blind musician. Around the same time as Jefferson used the idea Blind Blake, Blind Willie Johnson, and

[2] Govenar, "The Myth." 14.
[3] Witek, "Blindness." 179.

Blind Boy Fuller were using blindness to their own gains. In 1916 the first popular image of a blind, Blues street performer appeared in W. C. Handy's "Beale Street Blues," where he refers to "the blind man on the corner who sings the "Beale Street Blues."[4] This is a likely reference to the many Blues performers performing on the train depots in Memphis where Handy supposedly "discovered" the Blues. Strangely enough, Handy only included one of those singers along the depot: Blind Lemon Jefferson.

It is interesting to note that while Jefferson was open about being blind he did not seem to promote the issue in his lyrics. Instead his lyrics were replete with visual references like in "Long Lonesome Blues:"

> Women, see you coming.
> When she gets the letter Lemon
> have wrote a few days out.
> Tell me what's the matter that,
> I can't get no mail.
> Mama dreamt last night,
> saw a black cat cross your trail.

One can see a number of visual peculiarities of a blind singer in Jefferson's lyrics, such as the obvious use of visual clues like writing a letter and the phrase "saw a black cat cross our trail" or "women, see you coming." Jefferson's lyrics are wrought with visual representations. It is almost as if Jefferson consciously shied away from discussing his blindness in song. While Jefferson's lyrics are full of imagery, especially when it comes to women and places, it is likely he simply had to use such visual clues to keep the song working. The only visual clues in music either come from the words, or the music

[4]Monge, "The Language of Blind Lemon." 38.

mimicking something, such as a train going down the tracks, which is hard enough to visualize without seeing it.

There is more to Jefferson's lyrics though; he also inserts more subtle visual references that many listeners can overlook. Lemon Jefferson researcher Luigi Monge claims that "blindness never forms an explicit thematic unity or attains the status of becoming the main subject of a song."[5] While Monge may be correct in stating that the explicit theme of blindness is never approached, Jefferson's songs often have subtle nuances to his blindness and the theme of overcoming such adversity. Both examples of strict visual cues and these nuances can be seen in the lyrics of "Eagle Eyed Woman:"

> My woman got eyes like an eagle,
> and she watches me all the time.
> Watches me all through the day,
> watches me all through the night.
> Keeps them eagle eyes on me,
> till the good Lord brings daylight.

There may not be explicit use of blindness in "Eagle Eyed Woman," but there is the undeniable use of vision in the song. Not only that, but the idea of someone watching Jefferson's moves, all day and night, is reminiscent of the slave driver, or the idea of "the good Lord" watching over him with his idea of a breaking dawn. Similarly, in the previous song, "Long Lonesome Blues" the idea of a letter, or perhaps an idea, being lost can be reflected as Jefferson's inability to see the complications arising from such a handicap.

Likewise, the dream sequence in the song can be viewed as Jefferson's only way to see: through dreams. Blind dream researcher H. Robert Blank said, "The glib use by

[5]Ibid, 47.

the blind child or adult of a vocabulary referring to vision and the visual qualities of objects is a relatively superficial veneer."[6]Dreams were Jefferson's outlet for his lack of sight. Dreams were a way to communicate what he was feeling to his audience. There are a number of examples of these themes in Jefferson's lyrics. In "Deceitful Brown-skin Blues," Jefferson again has a reference to a note of ill-will being lost. Perhaps "lost" is a reference to his inability to read the note in the first place. Other references in his songs like "we'll be seldom seen" and "don't look for me" have a deeper meaning as well. The black man's lack of power or influence can be seen in these lines, as well as the idea of absconding. "Out of sight and out of mind" was often flowing through the thoughts of a black man walking the streets - the same reason many African-Americans lived in the rural outskirts of towns. As much as Jefferson wanted to be seen while playing his guitar he also had moments he likely would have rather been invisible.

Monge would describe Jefferson's life and lyrics as "the subtle device of exorcizing blindness through a series of hidden visual references."[7] This would account for the use of the number of visual contexts. Many of which can be seen in Jefferson's blind contemporaries. From Monge, one can see the abundant use of visual clues in blind Blues musicians. He goes on to state these visual references may be an attempt to "camouflage his alienating condition of being black and blind in the harshly racist South of the 1920s."[8] Jefferson's visual references were a double-sided blade; on the one side acknowledging the dangerous and racist world he lived in and the other side a

[6]Ibid, 55.
[7]Ibid, 65.
[8]Ibid, 65.

representation of seeing without sight. It is here one can also see the differences in Jefferson and Johnson, as Luigi Monge points out, "Despite the similarities, the anti-mythical quality of Jefferson's lyrics - compared with the visionary features of Johnson's lyrics - is exactly what had marked the difference between the two, thus creating the legendary aura surrounding Johnson, who nowadays personifies the Blues myth."[9]It is from this idea the Johnson's devil myth is now associated with the Blues, while Jefferson's blindness motif is overlooked. Blind Lemon's lyrics were a window into his soul; the soul of a blind musician and it is only natural he would incorporate such themes of blindness into his music without making a mockery of his own disability.

Joseph Witek said that the blindness myth came in two forms: The blind genius gifted by fate and the suffering Blues singer marking a cruel fate.[10] This rings true with blind singers like Jefferson, Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles and likewise with the association of the pained, blind singer begging with a tin cup along the departure ramp of a Memphis train platform. While the genius of Wonder and Charles cannot be argued, the idea of the blind, suffering Blues singer has conflicting perspectives. To whites it is an image of black powerlessness, but the use of "blindness" as musical rhetoric goes even further. It can be seen as a cultural metaphor concerning the plight of the American black man or woman. It both explains the handicap of being black in the Reconstruction era, and also the advantage of being a performer. The idea of blindness explores the lack of power African-Americans had in their new country - the idea that nobody sees, nor hears, their songs. Whites did not want to hear it and blacks could not fight against it. The idea

[9] Monge, "The Language." 37
[10] Witek, "Blindness." 178.

of a successful and legitimate blind musician gives one power. It gives their listeners power as well. It is like a power to overcome anything. Ben Sidran describes it as a metaphor for the "black man's burden."[11] He would go on to also explain the advantages of being a blind musician, "Blind Blues singers, from Blind Lemon Jefferson through Ray Charles, have wielded a certain amount of authority within the Blues idiom; an advantage when dealing in so heavily an oral/aural occupation."[12] Blues Musician Josh White remembers Jefferson in Dallas playing along the streets shouting, in between verses, "Help the blind, help the blind."[13] Witek also would agree, "Blindness...an image of the ways human beings struggle against and overcome exclusion by turning what others regard as a handicap and a mark of otherness into a form of personal power."[14] The idea of blindness as a black man's burden signifies the hardships of the southern black man. While the idea of overcoming the obstacle gives hope to the constant disillusionment they had been witnessing before and after emancipation. Both are distinct themes that can only be found in the South; the endless lands of plantations.

The idea of blindness as a myth was a subject approached previously. Both Samuel Charters and Tom Shaw note the peculiarities in Jefferson's handicap, while settling on the fact that he was likely born blind. Monge even suggests that being blind may have been "a cipher message that, after being decoded, might unveil a portion of truth about his much-speculated partial ability to see."[15] Jefferson's sister would

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[11] Sidran, Black Talk. 83.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Govenar, "The Myth." 11.
[14] Monge, "The Language." 39.
[15] Ibid, 65.

remember Lemon running about the fields, following his cousins across the creek, running right alongside the others - quite a feat for a blind child. Another question arises: Why did Jefferson wear clear glasses if he was completely blind? These are questions we likely will never answer, but as Jefferson got older he clearly got wiser, using his blindness to his advantage. This troupe did not go unnoticed. In the 1920s, Jazz guitarist Eddie Lang played with Lonnie Johnson under the name "Blind Willie Dunn." Lang was never blind and did little to even suggest that to listeners. It was simply a performance technique; a troupe. The idea of putting "Blind" before the performing act was common in the South. Most did not even bother to act blind, but simply used the myth to bring in an audience. It is perhaps here that the cultural metaphors were lost. The idea of a blind musician is still as potent as it is today, just look at Ray Charles' career. Not at his indubitable musical talent, but the aura and familiarity people have with Charles and the fact that he is blind. The average person can likely tell you that he is blind, but are not able to name a single of his songs. It is this mystical allure of blindness that draws them to the musician. To these singers, and to the people that listen to them, blindness is the image of human struggle and the will to overcome; the idea of a handicap transformed into a mark of personal power. Blindness as a cultural motif promotes the ability to break free from the shackles of life, stand up for the rights of man, and bring sight to the disillusioned.

The themes of blindness in early black southern life can also be compared to slavery and chain-gang life. Blindness can often be associated with social status. The slave or Reconstruction era African-American had little or no health care. Many treatable

cases of blindness went ignore because of this social standing. What is unique is that blindness in the motifs associated with slavery and prison are a rarity in African traditions given the fact there was rarely such issues in Africa. Nevertheless, Blues musicians did find a way to incorporate new themes into old ideas. The story of the Eboe, or Igbo, people provide a bridge between African-American culture and that of their homeland. As one can see in Br'er Rabbit like stories of animals transforming into birds to escape a predator or assailant are common in Africa. This motif is an almost exact replica of the Eboes, defying slavery, and marching into the tidal river and drowned. It was in this sense that the traditional African myths became an entirely new myth representing the new world they had been forced to live in. The folklore of escape may have been nothing new to Africans, but the need for escape changed entirely.

Even more widespread were the trickster tales of Jack and John. Jack and John were black slaves who spent their time outwitting the slave masters. While in Africa Jack or John, who went by different names then, were not just escape artists, but satirical motifs of a more sinister truth. In American slave days, he would outsmart not only the slave drivers, but "Ole Marster, Ole Miss and the patterollers" as well.[16] In post-Emancipation days, the story of Jack and John changed to outwit the inexorable landlord, or the Draconian policeman. In one story, Jack schemes to get out of a whipping. Before he is chastised, Jack's master tells him a mean story of a heaven set aside for Negroes. This heaven, he says, is run-down and generally messed-up. Jack retorts that he also had a dream, of a white man's heaven. Jack, a trickster, explains he saw it all gleaming and

[16]Brown, "Negro Folk." 324.

glittering, with streets of gold, but without a single, solitary, person in the entire place. While the supposedly dim-witted slave master contemplates this he forgets about Jack's whipping.[17] Literary theorist Jeanne Rosier Smith furthers this idea in *Writing Tricksters*:

> Because the American slave system involved living with white in daily power-based relationships, African-American trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster's subversive, masking, signifying skills. Maintaining any sort of cultural identity under slavery demanded an overt acceptance of, and covert resistance to, the dehumanizing racial myths of slavery...trickster skills - became a key to survival for Africans in America.[18]

This was the only way to escape, if just for a moment, from the hell inflicted upon them. It is in these stories of Jack and John that the idea of freedom blooms like a Giant Blue Iris in the swamps of the Delta.

While Zora Neale Hurston was working with Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus stories she found exaggeration was one way to find relief in the Jim Crow South, for "exaggeration in the hearty tradition of American tall-talk is pervasive."[19] Songs like Blind Lemon's "Black Snake Dream Blues" continue this theme of exaggeration, "Black snake is killed my baby dead. Black snake is wearing my clothes. You cain't see that black snake at all."[20] These were not new themes, but certainly can be seen in American tall-tales like Paul Bunyan, John Henry, or Casey Jones. Hurston remembers the satirical African-American tall-tales about how God made the world and the white folks made work. While another said that:

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ayana Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster." *Popular Music*. Vol. 24/2. (2005). 180.
[19] Ibid, 325.
[20] Jefferson, *The Best*.

> The Negro outraced the white man and took the larger of two bundles that God had let down in the road. But the smaller bundle had a writing-pen and ink in it, while the large bundle had a pick and shovel in it. So ever since then de nigger been out in de hot sun, usin' his tools and de white man been sittin' up figerin' ought's a ought, figger's a figger; all for de white man, none for de nigger.[21]

Stories like these put the people's experience into perspective.

Once the African-American had been freed, these motifs had no reason to change thanks to illegitimate chain-gangs and their deputies whose only purpose was to round up black folks to work the lines. This was one of the reasons for Lead Belly's arrest. Blind Lemon would write about such issues in "Blind Lemon's Penitentiary Blues" and in his song "Prison Cell Blues" not only does he sing about his friend Lead Belly's ordeals with the white law, but also with the idea of racism in politics:

> I asked the government to knock some days off my time,
> Well, the way I'm treated, I'm about to lose my mind.
> I wrote to the governor, Please turn me a-loose.
> Since I don't get no answer, I know I ain't no use.
> I'm getting tired of sleeping in this lowdown lonesome cell.
> Lord, I wouldn't have been here if not for Nell.[22]

These songs represented the grim, yet realistic, details of southern black prison life. Freedom from slavery had come and gone, but freedom from racism was still a serious problem. This is what the stories of John and Jack represented time after time; from slavery to Reconstruction. Charles Ford even hints at the idea that because of the restriction of African rhythmic bans and the idea that "black slaves played with white speech patterns" provided "contraflective musical practices that have been highly valued

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[21] Ibid, 326.
[22] Jefferson, *The Best*.

with in the US-American defined global media market-place."[23]Thus it is from this that the syncopated guitar patterns seen in Johnson's music represent racism and the division between white and black America. Ford and Sidran would go on to state that "Without oppression and without racism you have no Blues."[24]So, without slavery and racism; without Robert Johnson specifically, there would be no Blues, thus never paving the road for Rock 'n' Roll. While Blues was creeping into the lexicon of American music, regardless of race, Lead Belly's "We're in the Same Boat, Brother" recorded in the twenties brought a whole new meaning:

> We're in the same boat, brother.
> And if you shake one end,
> You're gonna rock the other.
> So that's how come that you and I,
> Got just one world with just one sky.
> (Get it?)
> Were in the same boat brother.

The racial differences were already being expressed in the open thanks to Blues' music; thirty years before the Civil Rights Movement.

One theme that is synonymous with the Blues musician is that of the itinerant wanderer; the idea of riding the rail, or hiking the gravel roads. And along those roads and depots one finds the crossroads. The crossroads are a place of decision making. It's the itinerant wanderer that most often comes to these crossroads with little direction, a few cents, and fingers full of musical talent, hoping to find a new path to follow. The motif of the crossroads is the symbolization of life decisions. This motif can be found in nearly every society from the beginnings of oral storytelling. So it is only fitting that the

[23] Ford, "Robert Johnson's Rhythms." 89.
[24] Ibid.

traveling Blues musician would adopt the theme while spending much of his life on the road. Blues Musician Mance Lipscomb explains just this, "[Blind Lemon] hung out round on the track, comin' and goin, down on Deep Ellum...from nine-thirty until six o'clock that evening. Then it gittin dawk an he git somebody to carry him home."[25] Life on the road meant living on the road. It became home to the Blues musician. The road was the pipeline to success for many Blues musicians it was also a fast-track to death and destruction for just as many of them. For it was along those lonely, dusty roads the devil walked as well. The devil can come in many forms, but in order for him to influence another he must be believed in. It was both the culture these musicians grew up in as well as their traditions that could bring both a beautiful moment and a harbinger of despair all in the same moment. Robert Johnson's other worldly musical talents brought him to the crossroads of Greenwood where he hung a right and walked into the Three Forks where he found both love and death. Blind Lemon's crossroad pointed to Chicago where he died in the snow far from the blistering, plantation fields of Texas. Lead Belly's decisions upon arrival at the crossroads took him across the country and into the arms of random women and black penitentiaries. There is no question that these southern musicians believed in every bit of life on the road, as the majority of Bluesmen did. It drove Lead Belly and Blind Lemon out of Texas and into the unknown Delta. It would be what drove Johnson away from his sick, yet beloved Caletta. It would also be what drove them into realm of myth.

[25] Govenar, "Blind Lemon." 10.

Perhaps the supernatural is not so farfetched. It is clear that the road held a certain power over traveling musicians for it still exists today. The Grateful Dead claimed life was only worth living on the road while Bob Dylan has been touring every year since 1988 on his Never Ending Tour. Johnny Shines remembers "I hung around Robert for quite a while, and then he'd disappear. All at once...Robert'd be standing up playing some place, you know, just playing like nobody's business. And the 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."[26] The road and its intersections held a power to Blues musicians, often a sinister power, one that can be found in both America and Africa. It paints both a picture of escape, love and happiness in Jefferson's "Shuckin' Sugar Blues:"

> I've got your picture,
> and I'm going to put it in a frame, shuckin' sugar.
> Then if you leave town,
> I can spy you just the same.

In "Sunshine Special" his attitude seems much less optimistic:

> Gonna leave on the Sunshine Special,
> Gonna leave on the Santé Fe.
> Don't say nothin' about that Katy,
> Because it's taken my brown from me.

The road has both its positive vibes as well as its downsides. The road is free, but with freedom comes choice and many choices lead down paths unforeseen, with obstacles great and small. It is only once the crossroads has been reached that the decision is put to

[26]Peter Guralnick, Feel Like Going Home. (New York: Back Bay, 1971). 91.

the test. What Jefferson's lyrics did paint was a picture of African-Americans moving north along with the emotions and decisions facing this migration.

The crossroads are a reoccurring theme in African-American tradition. It represents the past, from the frightful days of the Middle Passage, to the Underground Railroad days of American slavery, all the way to post-Civil War northern migration. The road for the African man was a long and dangerous one, filled with atrocities. The goal was to limit some of these atrocities which brought one to the crossroads of choices. The traveling musician represents these hard choices. Traveling the rail and the road, often crossing borders was like the migration of the freed slave. The Blues musicians were crossing borders not unlike the slaves traveling north by starlight. In the early 19th century these musicians may not have been running from slave drivers, but they were running from something. They were running from their past of slavery and later migrant work. They were running from the plantations; from the racism of the South. Just like Robert Johnson running away from the fields and his step-father Dusty, who Robert viewed as the new slave driver. But the motif of the crossroads has a duality. As the itinerant Bluesman was running from the past, he was moving towards a better future. The idea of making a living playing music rather than toil in the cotton fields must have held quite an allure. For the first time in their lives these musicians were free to make their own decisions. The road was not simply a ticket out of the past, but also, possibly for the first time, a chance to make their own judgments and decisions. Just as other Southern African-Americans were moving north to the cities looking for work during Reconstruction the traveling Blues musician was doing the same.

One can see the connection of the train motif from the days of the Underground Railroad to the time of freedom and the spiritual: "Gospel Train." Ayana Smith points out that "Gospel Train" once referred to slave times, but during Reconstruction became the symbol of freedom in both a secular and sacred America.[27] This traditional was published in 1872 by the Fisk Jubilee Singers consisting of students from the African-American Fisk University. While the song existed long before Emancipation and had been covered and altered by a number of musicians, the theme of "Gospel Train" promotes the same ideas Bluesmen were promoting through their own songs:

> The gospel train is coming,
> I hear it just at hand.
> I hear the car wheels moving,
> And rumblin' thro' the land.
> Get on board, children,
> Get on board, children.
> For there's room for many a more.

"Gospel Train" represents a more spiritual side of the rail and the road the motif springs up in African-American folklore from characters like Big Joe Turner, John Henry and Railroad Bill. "Gospel Train" portrays life on the road or rail as a path to salvation. But this will eventually lead to a crossroads, which represent choice. It is here that Blues musicians found, created, and shaped the folk heroes of John Henry and Railroad Bill, while Joe Turner was the villain. It is these types of mythical characters that many Blues singers fancied. They became folk heroes. Blues singers like Jefferson, Johnson and Lead Belly linked these folk heroes into their own lives as a sort of alter ego. These songs often still invoke the positive theme of the rail as a tool for escape and starting over and at the

[27] Smith, "Blues Criticism." 188.

same time a more sinister idea of retaliation and retribution. Sometimes these ideas are represented in an altogether nefarious form, allowing the singer to become a person they could never otherwise be. The story of Joe Turner has been told in an array of literary forms. Old Joe Turner was a mean white man; the folk villain, who rounded up African-American men to provide prison laborers like Lead Belly would have witnessed in penitentiaries like the one he spent years in at Parchman Farm. W. C. Handy wrote is his autobiography:

> Joe had the responsibility of taking Negro prisoners from Memphis to the penitentiary at Nashville. Sometimes he took them to the 'farms' along the Mississippi. Their crimes, when indeed there were any crimes, were usually very minor, the object of the arrests being to provide needed labor for spots along the river...That night, perhaps, there would be weeping and wailing among the dusky belles. If one of them chanced to ask a neighbor what had become of the sweet good man, she was likely to receive the pat reply, 'They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone.[28]

It was in this way that Blues singers could demonize a particular type of person, or job, as seen in Handy's tale. It also brings to light the inhumane treatment of the black man, or in the case of Joe Turner's brother: Pete Turner, tyrannical white-supremacist governor of Tennessee who told ole Joe what to do. Lead Belly and Robert Johnson certainly knew of such atrocities, as well as the folk songs dealing with such themes. Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" can again be used to describe the type of villain Joe Turner was to the African-Americans.

The atypical hero like Railroad Bill provides the singer with an outlet of immoral desires and human weaknesses. Railroad Bill was an outlaw. He was a man ole Joe Turner had no power over and that is what makes him a hero. Railroad Bill exemplifies

[28]Handy, Father of the Blues. 151 - 152.

the link between the trickster and the hero, which will be discussed shortly. Bill brings a strange brew of anti-hero, hero, and trickster, which is a combination of both, while fusing together the idea of the rail and the road. One example of this can be seen in Lead Belly's "John Hardy:"

> John Hardy, he was a desperate little man,
> He carried two guns ev'ry day.
> He shot a man on the West Virginia line,
> An' you ought seen John Hardy getting away.
> John Hardy, he got to the Keystone Bridge,
> He thought that he would be free.
> And up stepped a man and took him by his arm,
> Says, 'Johnny, walk along with me.
> John Hardy, he had a pretty little girl,
> That dress that she wore was blue.
> As she came skipping through the old jail hall,
> Saying, 'Poppy, I've been true to you.
> John Hardy walked out on his scaffold high,
> With his loving little wife by his side.
> And the last words she heard poor John-O say,
> 'I'll meet you in that sweet by-and-bye.'

It goes without saying that the man John Hardy shot was white; the reason unknown. Lead Belly would have taken to this song given his claim that a group of white men attempted to rob him and he stabbed the one, resulting in one of his prison sentences. John Hardy represents the man that fought back and died with his woman on his side.

On the other side of the myth was John Henry; the African-American folk hero. Henry was a steel-driver, one of the best ever. He worked hard and treated everyone fairly. His heroic moment came when he won the steel-driving race with a steam powered hammer only to die of a heart attack just after driving in the winning stake. While the mythical tale of John Henry offers great lyrical material, he also brings together the three personas: anti-hero, trickster, and hero. The commonality of all three stories is that they

all end in tragedy, either for the prisoners in Joe Turner's case; injustice and racism in Railroad Bill; and finally triumph met with death in John Henry's case. They all promote the idea of African-American disparity to that of the place in which they live. It was a feeling most, if not all disenfranchised blacks felt in America at the time. The myth of John Henry at least describes triumph over adversary, but it is through these myths we can connect the feeling of helplessness that they must have felt. It is also the reason so many men and women took to the road to come face-to-face with their own crossroad, hoping to make the best decision they could.

As was mentioned earlier, the point of the crossroads is that it serves as a choice. Ayana Smith explains, "The crossroads at once symbolizes freedom of movement, travel, and self-determination; the dilemma of the crossroads is that one must choose which path to follow."[29]

At this point an obvious question seems to arise: What happens at the crossroads that makes one choice the right or wrong path? According to human history the creature who frequents crossroads is the trickster, seen in accounts before its association with heaven and hell. The trickster would transform into the devil with the influence of Christian America. The rail, the road, and the African-American folk hero can all be related to the trickster. He ignores traditional rules and behaviors. He acts in his own best interest, which often is not the wisest of choices. The trickster is neither good nor bad, but simply represents human choice, one often decided without the necessary wisdom. Or it was in many cases simply what the trickster desired at the very moment he came to the

[29] Smith, "Blues Criticism." 184.

crossroads. In African-American society the trickster "provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes."[30] This explains why the stories of John Henry and Railroad Bill are not seen as evil; going against the tide of white America may have been socially unacceptable, but a necessity for southern blacks. It was the idea of breaking social norms that appealed to the singers who covered such songs. It was the idea of coming to the crossroads and turning away from the road that led to black suppression. But one must remember that the trickster is only looking out for their own good. So when coming to the crossroads and meeting the dark figure in the night, asking oneself whether he has your own best interests in mind is fruitless. It makes perfect sense for the trickster, and later the devil, to compensate musical talent for a soul given their nature.

Enter Blues musician Tommy Johnson and the devil. Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for musical talent, so the tale goes. This is a classic folk tale. These duplicate stories have the same basic elements over the years: a budding guitarist, a large black man, the crossroads, a finely tuned guitar, and one soul. The only problem with Johnson selling his soul to the devil is that it is not the right man. The story retold all these years concerns a Tommy Johnson, not Robert. As Tommy's brother LeDell told Blues researcher David Evans in 1966. "Now if [Tommy Johnson] was living

Figure 1. Tommy Johnson. The man behind Robert Johnson and the devil myth. Sheldon Harris Collection

[30]Ibid, 180.

he'd tell you... He said the reason he knowed so much, said he sold hisself to the devil. I asked him."[31] This is a classic tale of mistaken identity. LeDell goes on to tell the story of Tommy waiting at the crossroads near midnight and the tale goes from there. Whether or not Tommy sold his soul to the devil is irrelevant at this point.

This devil story was a common way to explain the unexplainable. The South in the time of the two Johnsons was a world without modern means of communication. Meaning, nobody knew anything about anyone else outside of their own rural town or close knit family. Tall tales were an effective way of explaining a talented musician no one knew much about - a transient musician like Robert Johnson for example, or a Tommy Johnson for that matter. Tommy was in fact a bigger hit in his day than Robert with Victor label hits like "Canned Heat Blues" and "Big Road Blues." Besides the recapitulation of the devil story the two Johnsons have much in common. They were both from Mississippi, loved women, whiskey and Blues, and took to the highways and train tracks like they were running from something.

The only mention of Robert Johnson and the devil comes from Son House, who was not even speaking about the infamous story when he said, "[Johnson] sold his soul to the devil in exchange for playing like that."[32] Other than that one mention in 1966, Robert Johnson and the devil has never shown up in any other setting. Seventy years after his death there has only been one mention of such a tale involving Johnson. None of his musical contemporaries, his family, or Blues biographers has had even a whiff of the myth. The one, quick and subtle remark comes from Son House, not only Johnson's

[31]Ibid, 51.
[32]Ibid, 54.

friend but mentor. That right there may be enough to legitimize the myth of Robert Johnson and the devil. What House meant by that lone quote may likely never be known. Maybe Johnson did not sell his soul at the crossroads, or maybe he sold it somewhere else. Son House was one of the closest people to Johnson in those troubadour days. It is also likely, given Johnson's silent acceptance to the myth, that the devil played the signifying role. It played the role of the singer's alter ego because they identify with the mythical character and use it to signify to the listeners. This would have been typical of Western African oral traditions of the singing griot. As Ethnomusicologist and Blues researcher Ayana Smith would state, "American Blues musicians are keepers, interpreters and transmitters of cultural identity."[33] Robert Johnson was signing not just about himself, but about his culture, and his culture has its foundations in African folklore. The devil may be seen as the trickster figure signifying the person and the person's actions and feelings. Not only is the trickster fitting to a singer or griot, but it is also an effective lyrical tool. Possibly Johnson's greatest move was to embrace the myths around him and inject the notions into his own music.

Musician Henry Townsend would agree, "That word 'devil,' you'd be surprised how effective it is."[34] Blues music was often associated with the devil in those early days because it went against the traditional, if not exclusive, form of music: Gospel. The Blues was secular in a deeply rooted Christian atmosphere. Singing about women, drinking, and sex were completely new in the early 20th century. Long before white conservatives preached black "soul" music was anti-religious, traditional African-Americans wanted

[33] Smith, "Blues Criticism." 188.
[34] Meyers, *Can't You Hear*.

little to do with it as well. Tommy's brother LeDell felt the Blues was devil's music.[35] This has little connection with Robert Johnson and the devil though. The association of the two was likely adapted to explain the union of Blues and African folk-lore as Blues author Elijah Wald notes. "There is no suggestion that the hellish or demon-harried aspects of his work were of particular importance to him, or that they were even noticed by the people."[36] Likewise, the Christian "devil" and the African "trickster" are not related. It was simply the only way whites could understand the trickster's role in the tale of Robert Johnson and the crossroads.

While the devil was associated with turpitude in the African-American community, he was less the infernal, Christian devil who was associated with pure evil. The African-American devil was simply a cause for egregious desires such as alcohol, easy women, and of course, Juke joints. As Ben Sidran points out that "The Devil came to represent to the black culture not the perpetrator of original sin but a hero in evil, a good/bad figure, in keeping with the oral ability to transcend categorical polarizations. Worship was more pleasure than exorcism of guilt, more release of emotional energy that lesson-learning."[37] The devil was not what one may assume today as whites, but as the symbol of a trickster, one who often does as much good as evil.

The link between the hellish southern life Robert Johnson came from and his escape from such things are his lyrics. He would often perform covers of traditional songs like "Joe Turner." These lyrics certainly continued his association with Satan:

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[35] Graves, Crossroads. 52.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Sidran, Black Talk. 21.

Oh, they tell me Joe Turner done come.
When he came he brought,
Three-hundred and nineteen chains.
Oh, baby, you go I bring my gun.
They tell me Joe Turner done come.[38]

The only problem is that the song is clearly not about selling one's soul to the devil. "Me and the Devil Blues" is a song about spousal abuse, possibly the "devil" being alcohol:

Me and the Devil was walkin' side by side.
And I'm gonna beat my woman,
till I get satisfied.
It must-a be that old evil spirit.
So deep down in the ground.

The song goes on to say that when he dies he hopes his woman buries his body by the highway side, so his evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride.

Another Johnson tune linked with the devil in the form of sin, is "Hell Hound on my Trail," but like "Me and the Devil Blues" this song has no real relationship with the devil either. It has more of a connection with woman, traveling, and possibly voodoo:

And the day keeps on remindin' me,
there's a hellhound on my trail.
All I need is my sweet little rider,
just to pass the time away.
You sprinkled hot foot powder,
mmhmm, 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.

While the memorable song "Crossroad Blues" is simply about hitchhiking:

Standin' at the crossroad,
tried to flag a ride.
Ohh eee, tried to flag a ride.

[38] Ed Young and Hobart Smith, "Joe Turner." The Alan Lomax Archive. 1959.

Didn't nobody see me, babe,
everybody passed me by.

In order to better understand the African-American trickster in relation to the devil, one must go back to where the foundations of the trickster were born: Africa. The trickster is not a hero in the sense of Odysseus, or even John Henry. He is not the perfect model of a sentient being. Nor is he pure evil, as is the case with the devil. He is not the fastest, strongest, or most omnipotent being. It is his superiority in wit that is his greatest characteristic. He uses cunning over strength and that makes all the difference. While he may not have the best interests of others in mind that is not to say he will not benefit others, but only if he has something to gain from it. Because the trickster figure is portrayed as a figure on the fringes of society it is easy to recognize the similarities between the trickster and the slave. The trickster represents the slaves' subversive, masking, and signifying skills.[39] The trickster also reevaluates common cultural standards and taboos. Consider the trait of cunning over strength in connection with slave life. Ayana Smith describes the African trickster in a similar way, "[the trickster] is one who flouts the norms of society, using cunning, humor, and deceit to obtain personal gain. Often his character embodies a limitation of some sort, one who is likely to be trod upon by others with more power or physical strength."[40] A common African example well known in America is that of Br'er Rabbit, like the story of the Tar-Baby presented earlier. The stories of mischievous Br'er Rabbit outsmarting the locals are well known. It is also important to point out that in the South Br'er Rabbit and his fellow tricksters often

[39] Ibid.
[40] Smith, "Blues Criticism." 179.

embarrassed the local Caucasians and men in charge; the Joe Turners of that time can be seen is the Br'er Rabbit stories:

> A bullfrog dressed in soldier's clothes,
> Went in de field to shoot some crows.
> De crows smell powder and fly away,
> De bullfrog mighty mad dat day.[41]

There are a couple of ideas floating around in the story. The first is a roundabout way of explaining how a black man can detect a malevolent intent under any disguise, be it white or black. The other idea is post-Emancipation way of saying "we will never be caught again." Likewise Br'er Rabbit myths can incite an uprising or just simple defiance:

> De ole sow say to de boar,
> I'll tell you what let's do.
> Let's go and git dat broad-axe,
> And die in de pig-pen too.
> Die in de pig-pen fighting,
> Die wid a bitin' jaw![42]

The trickster's skills of exposing twisted cultural values were also crucial in pointing out the rampant racism in the South. The trickster uses all sorts of media to move around in. The printed Br'er Rabbit stories provided an outlet for African-Americans to express then socially unacceptable themes such as racism. The Br'er Rabbit stories that Americans and the West are familiar with are those of the Uncle Remus stories, written by Joel Chandler Harris, a white journalist. He also mixed in the Br'er Rabbit, or Brother Rabbit, stories with that of the Creek trickster stories of Hare and the European satirical stories of Fox. Thus the original stories of Br'er Rabbit, which originated in the Yoruba culture of

[41]Brown, "Negro Folk Expression." 51.
[42] Ibid.

Nigeria have been watered down and altered, perhaps exactly what the trickster had planned. These stories are just a glimpse of the more traditional trickster, one who has striking parallels to the devil; like that of Esu, the West African trickster who followed his people to America and came to the crossroads in the Delta swamps.

Esu is the guardian of the crossroads. He is the monstrous black spire who tunes Robert Johnson's guitar. He is the epitome of all tricksters. When he came to America he was simply called the devil. And just as the myth tells, Esu was the watchman of the crossroads. The crossroads were often referred to as Esu's Crossing. This West African ancestor also exists throughout Africa, Asian, and the West Indies with names like Legba, Exu, and Papa Legba.[43]The connection of the Christian devil and Esu can be explained by Blues author J. M. Spencer, "The confusion of [Esu or Legba in this instance] is easily explainable. Just as early Christian missionaries...taught their African converts that Legba was Satan, so did the semi-dualism of Christianity, imposed upon the holistic cosmology of the African brought to America as captives, force Legba...into a satanic role."[44] It is here that we can understand the connection between Esu and the devil seen in the Blues myths. We can see an example of this in Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" when he describes walking with the devil:

> I said, Hello Satan.
> I believe it's time to go.
> Me and the devil,
> was walking side by side.

[43] Henry Louis Gates Jr. The Signifying Monkey. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 5.
[44] Smith, "Blues Criticism." 185.

From this perspective the devil was just like another man; one who engages in conversation and expresses his opinions. The devil in this respect carries himself just like any other man. One who can be persuaded and bargained with, just like guardian of the crossroads, Esu. Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research Henry Louis Gates describes Esu as:

> The guardian of the crossroads, master of style and stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. Frequently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understand, the sacred with the profane.[45]

It is now clear how Esu came to represent the devil. He is the intermediary between the Christian heaven and hell. He is more like Charon in Dante's *Inferno* than the devil himself, but the similarities may often lose their context when traveling across the ocean and being suppressed for most of his existence in America. Esu represents the choices the Bluesmen had to make when coming to their crossroads. He is the connection between the hard, bigoted world the Blues musicians knew and absolute freedom in the form of a guitar. More than that, though, he was a gatekeeper; a holder of the truth.

While Esu was the gatekeeper he was also the man's man. He was sexual, wise, and powerful and had a massive penis. This figure represented what man could become. No person would tell Esu to keep his head down and continue striking steel into the ground. He held the power of breaking free of any sort of restraint, while making a mockery of his tormentors. This concept is certainly not lost on the men of Reconstruction South. In fact, this attitude still exists today in likely every culture. So it is

[45]Ibid, 6.

no wonder that even Jimi Hendrix would prostrate his guitar outward from his body as a phallic symbol. Pete Townsend would say, what every guitarist felt with the power of music in their hands, "The guitar was an extension of what he [Hendrix] was."[46] The guitar, like the singer's voice, became a powerful social communicator. It was like Esu's enormous penis, a symbol of power and control.

Finally, Gates' assessment of Esu as "the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding"[47] is the less glamorous side of the traveling musician. They are the griots after all and it is their responsibility, their calling, to convey the truth of the world around them, as seen in the tragic John Henry story or the acerbic Joe Turner, and then to connect those messages to the people. It was both their duty to pleasure and enlighten through song. The Blues musicians were oral historians; telling the story of their people. It may have begun in the deep swamps of the Mississippi River Valley and heard only by their own people, but by the time Jefferson, Lead Belly, and Johnson recorded their songs, the rest of the world began to open up to them. It was beginning to open up to their wants, desires and hardships; to their culture. The trickster was the itinerant Bluesman's alter ego. This trickster also symbolizes Black frustration. There are two distinct characteristics that connect the trickster with Blues musicians like Jefferson, Lead Belly and Johnson:

1. The singer identifies with the tricksters traits.
2. The trickster is the singer's alter ego.

[46] Solt, *History of Rock 'n' Roll.*
[47] Ibid.

It is this idea that allowed Robert Johnson to perform the songs associated with the devil and hellhounds, while maintaining a separate life apart from such myths; as it was with his life that remained free of such themes. Johnson, after all, never associated himself with the devil and the crossroads myths outside of his music. This also allowed the singer to present such themes on stage and morph into the trickster, if just for the performance.

It was also in this theme that this new guitar style also became the connection that Gates was referring to. The distinct and inventive style Johnson and others created was a different way to tell their history. Learning how to play the Blues in this unique manner connects with the idea of selling one's soul. This was the idea of obtaining something powerful, like sublime musical talent from the other side, to express the feelings of man. You can even connect the two with the "burst of percussive phrases, repeated the beat of West African drum music, and transferred to the guitar."[48] The guitar became the medium to transmit the voice of the southern Black man in a new way. "Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms...Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black signifying difference."[49]As Robert Johnson stepped across the fold and into the grip of Esu, he became a part of him, neither good nor bad, but simply the torchbearer. Musicians explain the past and are harbingers of the future. It is through myth that Johnson became the new African-American folk hero. He was like Moses, his message was that of music and it made all the difference.

Back in the early 19th century American south the devil or trickster was a prominent feature in the south, not just at particular crossroads. It was not uncommon to

[48]Rutcoff, "Preaching the Blues." 145.
[49] Ford, "Robert Johnson's Rhythms." 75.

find, among the shotgun homes in the Delta, doors lined with newspaper to keep the devil distracted.[50] This idea can also be found in Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail:"

> I've got to keep moving,
> There's a hellhound on my trail.
> You sprinkled hot foot powder,
> All around you daddy's door.

Now, Johnson's "If I Had Possession over Judgment Day" can be understood with fresh insight, not one of fear and paranoia, but a thoughtful look back at the decisions made upon making to a crossroads:

> If I had possession over judgment day,
> Fold my arms and I slowly walk away.
> I said in my mind, 'Yo' trouble goin' come some day.'

It is not so much of a sinful choice, but of a bad choice, one that looked positive upon acceptance, but in turn may go on to cause trouble down the road. While you can often hear the misery and howling in Johnson's voice it was more about his ill-advised choices that he vocally laments rather than a decision he had made regarding right and wrong; heaven and hell; or good and evil. The trickster has no use for those labels; he only concerns himself with his own best interests at the moment of his choice.

That is not to say that the fear of a Christian god played no part in African-American's lives. While playing "devil's tunes" throughout Texas and Louisiana Lead Belly had a change of heart. It seems Lead Belly had a distant relationship with his parents and elders, but the fear of God had been driven so deep into his soul he gave up playing dances and joined the church. He remembers when people asked why he wasn't playing anymore, "They asked me, 'Say Huddie, where's your guitar?' I say, 'I done

[50]Rutcoff, "Preaching the Blues." 136.

joined the church now.'"[51] It is here when one can see the difference between the trickster and the devil - an understanding of selling one's soul for a talent, rather than salvation. This is something Robert Johnson understood. So why would one risk such travesty to work within the devil's plans? Musician Blind Jim Brewer explained:

> Well lots of people say, 'What profit you in the world if you gain the world and lose your soul?' Well I realize that's true too. But you got to live down here just like you got to make preparations to go up there. You can't go there until you do get there; that is you can't cross the bridge until you get to it...I know it's right to serve God; I know it's right to go to church. But goin' to church ain't gonna save no one, I realize that. You got to live this life, and you got to obey God. And God give me this talent and he knew before I came into this world what I was goin' to make out of this talent.[52]

This sense of religious good and evil can even be seen in Jefferson's "Hangman's Blues." One can sense the dramatic, pulsating guitar accompaniment representing the rapid heartbeat of a condemned man.[53] The connection with Christianity and African-American folk must be viewed from the emic. They tend to associate the devil less with good and evil, and more with personal choice. It goes even further than personal choice; it is an emotional connection. So it is only fitting to compare the lyrics of Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson's "Devil Sent the Rain:"

> My brain is cloudy,
> My soul is upside down.
> When I get that lowdown felling,
> I know the Blues must be somewhere close around.
> The Blues is like the devil,
> It comes on you like a spell.
> Blues will leave you heart full of trouble,
> And your poor mind full of hell. (Devil Sent the Rain)

[51] Lornell, "Blind Lemon." 24.
[52] Witek, "Blindness." 192.
[53] Govenar, "The Myth." 18.

Now shown with Robert Johnson's "Preachin Blues:"

> The Blues is a low-down shaking chill.
> You ain't never had them,
> I hope you never will.

Living with the burden of being a spokesperson is a tremendous weight. This connection was the choice that Bluesmen like Johnson came upon when reaching the crossroads. What is right and wrong matters only to the person and the one's he associates with. The trickster cares not for such things as good and evil, as does the itinerant musician coming upon the crossroads, they are only looking for an alternative route. They were only looking for a way out.

EPILOGUE

It is clear that the early Bluesmen: Jefferson, Johnson, and Lead Belly, along with succeeding Blues players, like Jimi Hendrix and B.B. King, played from inside, from a place that knew nothing of music terminology; a place deeply rooted in the soul; a place called the Blues. The Blues is not as much a style as it is a way of life. It is about approaching the crossroads of life and making the best decisions possible. The lyrics explain this everyday pain and happiness; about love, life, friends, family and of course heaven and hell. It is from the lyrics and lifestyles that a new generation of African folk heroes were made. It is as if Blues musicians took the personas of Esu, Br'er Rabbit, among others, and reworked their tales into African-American folk tales. The moral tales of old, full of aphorisms, can still be found in the life and lyrics of the Blues. In Africa the telling of myths by the griot is a time honored custom of teaching respectful social relationships among people, animals, and the earth. The symbiosis between Blues musician and African griots can be summed up by Ayana Smith, "Both the American Blues musician and [African griots] are keepers, interpreters and transmitters of cultural identity - human versions of the mediating Esu."[1] The importance of studying, as well as preserving, both heeds introspective into a culture largely ignored and provides a glimpse into a

[1] Smith, *Blues Criticism*. 188.

culture that almost no longer exists. Johnson and his fellow Bluesmen were the keepers, interpreters, and transmitters of cultural identity. Blues today, and certainly Rock 'n' Roll, owe their existence to the cultures of Africa and the lifestyles of Southern America. Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon, and Lead Belly were the interpreters of the past who translated their culture into the present.

When we look at the music of today and forget the role Blues played in it we can still hear similar stories of life and myth. All music is a cultural artifact just waiting to be excavated. It is about a clear representation of the life and times as a primary source can be. Like the Blues symbolizes Southern Black culture after Reconstruction other genres today can represent the same idea. Music is the voice of the people. And it is through the myths, like the trickster and the devil, that history is explained; as it is with the cyclical nature of the enduring crossroads. Life is full of choices, but it's not the choice but the outcome that makes all the difference. The Blues is like poetry. The real substance is what you cannot directly see. The Blues are circumlocutions. The truth is under the surface and it is through the myths, motifs, and Blues musicians that a culture can not only be heard but seen.

Robert Johnson and his fellow musicians may have not been the creators of the Blues, but as band-mate Johnny Shines explains, "I thought Robert was about the greatest guitar player I'd ever heard. The things he was doing was things that I'd never heard nobody else do. Robert changed everything"[2] The Blues changed everything. It is clear the Blues shaped the future of music unlike any other.

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[2] Graves, Crossroads. 29.

Johnson, Jefferson, and Lead Belly continue to be covered by nearly every genre of music from such artists as Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, Elvis, Bob Dylan, Allman Brothers Band, The Doors, Red Hot Chili Peppers, B.B. King and right on through to today with The Black Keys. Robert Johnson and his contemporaries may not have sold their souls to the devil for his musical talents, but they lived like they did and that made all the difference. As Son House felicitously said, "Jesus, it was good."[3] Not only is the Blues pleasing to the ears, but it is a historical account of black Southern life. The most powerful aspects of the human race are their cultures, music, and history. With it one can understand all things.

[3]Ibid, 37.

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