

STORIES OF THE CROSSROADS

Did Robert Johnson Sell His Soul to the Devil?

“You go to . . . where a crossroads is. . . . Be sure to get there just a little ‘fore midnight that night so you’ll know he’ll be there. You have your guitar and be playing a piece there by yourself A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he’ll tune it. And then he’ll play a piece and hand it back to you. That’s the way I learned to play anything I want.” -Tommy Johnson

Robert Leroy Johnson was born dirt-poor in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, in 1911. He grew up in and around Memphis and for a few years attended the Carnes Avenue Colored School where he got his love of the blues. But loving the blues was not enough to make him a good blues musician. As a boy, he hung out in local juke joints in Memphis, begging to play other musicians’ guitars. He could play the harmonica, but in spite of his unusually long fingers, he couldn’t get a decent sound out of a 6-string guitar.

But one night, in 1930 after a failed attempt at playing the blues in a Mississippi juke joint, Robert disappeared. No one knew where he went, and after a while, folks made up stories about his disappearance. When he came back, though, a few weeks later, he was a master at playing the guitar and singing. He could play anything he heard. Johnson was silent about where he had been, but his song [Me and the Devil Blues](#) suggests he had a little help at the Crossroads of Highways 61 and 49. He sang of meeting the devil there. He sang about getting down on his knees at the crossroads where an ‘old evil spirit from deep down in the ground’ came to him, and after the devil tuned his guitar, they played together there, and they made a deal. The Devil Man said, “my left hand will be forever wrapped around your soul and your music will possess all who hear it. . . Your soul will belong to me.”

He soon became known as the King of the Delta Blues. Walking from town to town and catching rides on freight trains, he made his way through the Mississippi Delta, drinking lots of whiskey and playing his guitar. Robert recorded exactly 29 songs before he died a mysterious, painful death when he was just 27 years old.

The devil’s hell hounds Robert sang about finally caught up with him.

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