

"...a song that was a hit before your Mother was born."



2011 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Robert Johnson. He has been called the "King of the Delta Blues Singers". Legend has it that he sold his soul to the Devil. It has been said that he faced away from his audience when he played certain licks on his guitar so that no one could copy his style. People claim that he died as a result of being poisoned by a jealous husband. but what of his music and its legacy?

Born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, Johnson's career options were limited -- find work on a plantation or become an entertainer. As a young person he was exposed to blues performers such as Charley Patton, Son House and Willie Brown and seemed determined to make his own way as a Blues man. He taught himself to play harmonica and according to family members, he got pretty good at it. However, Robert did not display any remarkable talent as a guitar player. He would frequent the local picnics, fish-fries and juke joints to check out other musicians and when the featured guitarists would take a break, Robert would head over to the abandoned instruments, pick up a guitar and start playing-- much to the annoyance of the audience. More than once, he had to be chased away but he was determined to be a blues man. In February of 1929 he also dedicated himself to another pursuit, her name was Virginia Travis.

They were married and settled in with Johnson's half-sister Bessie and her husband not too far from Robinsonville, Mississippi. Virginia became pregnant and went into labor in April of 1930 while Robert was away. When he returned home he found that both his wife and child had died during childbirth. This event appears to have radically altered the direction of Johnson's life.

Robert left the Robinsonville area and was not heard from for almost two years. It is believed that he went to Hazelhurst, Mississippi and was tutored on guitar by a man named Ike Zimmerman, unfortunately there are no known recordings by Zimmerman with which to gauge the influence he may have had on Johnson. It is known that Robert rambled around the country and was exposed to a great many Blues musicians in cities such as Memphis, Tennessee. However he came by his prowess on guitar, by the time he got back to Robinsonville, he was no longer the young man who ran people ragged with his playing but a seasoned performer who had begun to write his own songs. Johnson continued to hobo around the country for several years playing on street corners, juke joints, house parties, anywhere there was an audience. One day in 1936, a noticeably well dressed Robert Johnson walked through the door of H. C. Speir's music store in Jackson, Mississippi and changed the map of blues music forever.

It appears to be the case that after Robert's wife and baby died, he started drifting even more that before. He would disappear in one place only to pop up in another, always playing on a street corner or juke joint collecting enough money to once again hit the road. He would show up in Clarksdale, Mississippi one day and be in Helena, Arkansas the next. People who knew

Robert claimed that he rambled as far north as Wisconsin and as far west as Texas playing wherever he could attract a crowd. But Johnson was also listening to other Blues players and songsters that he came across. In this way he would pick up new tunes and songs adapting them to his own style as well as writing his own songs.

Sometime, in 1936, Robert showed up at the H. C. Speir music and mercantile store in Jackson, Mississippi. Speir was already well known to musicians as a talent scout for various record companies and had a small, primitive studio for recording audition records in the store.

(Stay tuned for updates...)

Posted by intern on September 20, 2011

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