

# Constructing Robert Johnson

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I don't think I'd even heard of Robert Johnson *when I first* found [King of the Delta Blues Singers (1961)]; it was probably fresh out. I was around fifteen or sixteen, and it came as something of a *shock to me that there could be anything that powerful...* It was almost as if he felt things so acutely that he found it almost unbearable.... At first it was almost too painful, but then after about six months I started listening, and then I didn't listen to anything else. Up until the time I was 25, if you didn't know who Robert Johnson was I wouldn't talk to you.

-Eric Clapton<sup>1</sup>

I was thirteen years old when Woodstock-era nostalgia swept through my small suburban world in the early 1990s. By that time, I had amassed a large collection of classic rock LPs including my personal favorites, Cream's *Greatest Hits* and Led Zeppelin *IV*. In the year or so following, on the recommendations of my local record store clerks and friends in the know, I picked up a copy of the brand new *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (1990). These most trusted of advisors let it be known that if I liked Eric Clapton, then I would love Johnson, because he was "the real deal," "where rock n' roll came from." When I brought the boxed set home – cassettes, mind you, not CDs – I poured over the liner notes before popping in the tapes. Following an 8,000-word essay about the greatness of Robert Johnson divided into sections entitled "The Man" and "The Music," came the testimonial of my idol, Clapton himself, who

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Recordings* 1990, 22

professed his love for Johnson in no uncertain terms, stating “I have never found anything more deeply soulful than Robert Johnson. His music remains the most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice.” Punctuating Clapton’s encomium was a short essay written by Keith Richards summed up by its title: “Well, This is it.”<sup>2</sup> From these multiple sources of influence and, dare I say, pressure, I was convinced that Johnson, would be, in fact, “it.” To my surprise and perhaps dismay, it didn’t speak to me as directly as I wanted it to. To my ear, it lacked the affective power of Zeppelin and Clapton. In short, I liked the music but didn’t love it.

I open this discussion of the historiography of America’s preeminent bluesman with this brief telling of my own discovery of Robert Johnson only in part because it seems to be a *sine qua non* of writing about him.<sup>3</sup> More to the point, I chose to share this anecdote because it was my own early ambivalence about Johnson – which through a few months of persistent listening was replaced by appreciation and later adoration – led me, like so many that came before, to want to understand more about him and perhaps uncover why this one man and his small collection of songs held such sway over the collective rock and blues imagination.

Robert Johnson has been called “the best-known and least understood” of all rural blues artists.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1911, Johnson recorded only twice, in 1936 and 1937, producing twenty-nine sides intended for the race

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<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Recordings* 1990, 21-22

<sup>3</sup> See Charters 1959 and 1991; Guralnick 1989; Lomax 1993; Wald 2004; to name but a few.

<sup>4</sup> Pearson and McCullough 2004, 1

market nearly a decade after the peak years of popularity for the rural, “downhome” blues.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 1938, Johnson was dead, by most accounts poisoned by either a jealous husband or a spurned lover. During his short life Johnson was a virtual unknown, at least outside of the mostly rural, black communities in which he lived and performed. Robert Johnson – at least the Robert Johnson that is knowable today, one hundred years after his birth and nearly seventy-five years after his death – is best understood as a product of the mass of literature that makes up the discourse of Robert Johnson, a construct formed by generations of critics, fans and scholars. In this regard, “Robert Johnson” can be thought of as an empty/ied signifier, at once a man, a voice, and a blank slate.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of early print mentions of Johnson focus on his records, accompanied by admissions of how little was known about the man himself. These admissions are frequently followed by some statement or supposition about his life, typically a questionably sourced anecdote or vague generalization.<sup>7</sup> Faced with this dearth of historical facts, many writers – having nothing else to go on other than the sound of his voice and his words – imagined psychological profiles of Johnson from their interpretations of his lyrics and their own preconceived notions of black culture. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the amount of writing on Robert Johnson grew exponentially, fueled generally by the folk revival and more specifically by

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<sup>5</sup> Titon 1977, 59

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the concept of the “empty signifier” here from Patricia Schroeder. See Schroeder 2004, 160.

<sup>7</sup> See Charters 1959, 207-11 and Driggs 1961.

Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues* (1959) and the Columbia Records LP *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers* (1961). Folklorists and fans conducted extensive fieldwork and investigation, uncovering historical documents and numerous firsthand accounts of Johnson.<sup>8</sup> Despite this search for the story of Johnson, the man, much of the writing published during this time – although occasionally grounded in documentation and recollection – was just as marked by imaginings, misrepresentations, and mythology. It would take Johnson's 1986 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an "early influence" to spur the publication of narratives that attempted to address Robert Johnson as an historical figure.

Around the turn of the century, undoubtedly due to the enormous success of Columbia Records' *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (1990) and Johnson's enshrinement on a U.S. postage stamp in 1994, Robert Johnson became the subject of multiple scholarly works, including two studies in the Music in American Life series.<sup>9</sup> Although many of these works feature biographical sketches of Johnson's life, they are primarily concerned with the music (Ford 1998 and Evans 2008) or with a reflexive analysis of the

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<sup>8</sup> Mack McCormick, Gayle Dean Wardlow and Steve LaVere were leaders in this movement. McCormick has yet to publish his extensive findings in a book-length treatment to date but has written shorter pieces on Johnson and contributed research and guidance to other Johnson projects including the 1992 film *The Search for Robert Johnson* and Peter Guralnick's 1989 short book *Searching for Robert Johnson*.

<sup>9</sup> Pearson and McCullough 2003 and Schroeder 2004. See Schroeder for an in depth look at the controversy that surrounded the Robert Johnson stamp.

function and misuses of the myth(s) of Johnson (Lipsitz 1998, Pearson and McCullough 2003, Schroeder 2004, Wald 2004, Rothenbuhler 2007b). Schroeder, in particular, is concerned not with how the legend of Johnson came to be, nor with a debunking agenda, but rather with deconstructing the various symbolic meanings Robert Johnson has taken on in the later part of the twentieth century. Schroeder addresses Johnson as signifier in a variety of cultural products, focusing not only on histories but on representations of Johnson in works of fiction and film and representations of the “virtual Robert Johnson” found on the Internet.<sup>10</sup>

In this study, I will focus my attention on the formation and development of the Robert Johnson discourse prior to the turn towards metacommentary and revision in the twenty-first century. Addressing representative selections from the Johnson literature over a span of roughly sixty years, I will focus my analysis on the discursive construction of Robert Johnson. Inspired in part by Schroeder’s model, and keeping in mind Spivak’s assertion (via Foucault) that “it is no longer too avant-garde to suspect or admit that ‘events’ are never not discursively constituted,”<sup>11</sup> I will attempt, by investigating literary representations of Robert Johnson, to trace the ideological assumptions, hermeneutic frameworks, and narrative strategies that facilitated these many interpretations of Johnson. This study will analyze a sample of these representations to identify how the construct of Johnson has been inscribed into various overarching narratives. These narratives will be addressed with an

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<sup>10</sup> Schroeder 2004, 136

<sup>11</sup> Spivak 1988, 242

eye toward what Jameson refers to as the “sedimented layers of previous interpretation,” through which texts are read and rewritten from previous writings and inherited cultural codes.<sup>12</sup> Throughout, we will see the term “Robert Johnson” used in a multiplicity of ways. For some authors, Robert Johnson was a once-living and breathing historical figure, for others “he” is a set of song lyrics, and in at least one case, “very little more than a name on aging index cards and a few dusty master records.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Greatest Negro Blues Singer**

Robert Johnson first enters the literary historical frame in the communist-oriented, New York-based weekly publication *The New Masses*, in three references between early 1937 and the end of 1938. In March 1937 and again in June 1937, *The New Masses* featured recommendations of Johnson’s records penned by John Hammond.<sup>14</sup> Hammond – a record producer, talent scout and outspoken advocate for African American music – is best known for his “discoveries” of black musicians, including Count Basie and Billie Holiday. Hammond’s short pieces appear aimed at record collectors, extolling Johnson as “the greatest Negro blues singer who has cropped up in recent years. . . . Johnson makes Leadbelly sound like an accomplished poseur.”<sup>15</sup> These were followed the next year by a reprint of the program for the “From Spirituals to Swing Concert” held at Carnegie Hall on

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<sup>12</sup> Jameson 1981, 3

<sup>13</sup> Driggs 1961

<sup>14</sup> Pearson and McCullough 2003, 18-21. Although the first piece about Johnson is credited to “Henry Johnson,” the authors believe that it is in fact Hammond writing under a pseudonym.

<sup>15</sup> quoted in Pearson and McCullough, 28

23 December 1938, an event sponsored by *The New Masses* and organized by Hammond. I will quote the section from the program that deals with Robert Johnson in its entirety, as this short remark – which Hammond reportedly also spoke on stage at the concert – stands as a point of origin for the Robert Johnson discourse.

Robert Johnson was going to be the big surprise of the evening. I knew him only from his blues records and the tall, exciting tales the recording engineers and supervisors used to bring about him from improvised studios in Dallas and San Antonio. I don't believe that Johnson ever worked as a professional musician anywhere and it still knocks me over how lucky it is that talent like this ever found its way to phonograph records. At the concert we will have to be content with playing two of his records; Johnson died last week at the precise moment when Vocalion scouts finally reached him and told him he was booked to appear at Carnegie Hall on December 23. He was in his middle twenties and nobody seems to know what caused his death.<sup>16</sup>

The introductory portion of the program, entitled “The Music Nobody Knows,” in which the aims of the concert are outlined, offers an insightful contextualization for Hammond's remarks. The concert is billed as “an evening of American Negro music,” which “...is rarely heard... serious audiences have neglected it... in this concert we want to show you what the real thing is by presenting some of its best Negro practitioners... what you will hear is the most sincere and valid representations that our researches could find.”<sup>17</sup> The music presented was

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<sup>16</sup> *Spirituals to Swing* 1999, 19

<sup>17</sup> *Spirituals to Swing* 1999, 3-4

intended to demonstrate the genealogy of authentic jazz, in contrast to mainstream “jitterbug” swing.<sup>18</sup> By his programming of the “From Spirituals to Swing” concert and the subsequent literature surrounding it, Hammond establishes what James Smethurst refers to as a “construction of an ‘authentic’ oppositional folk voice” to stand against the capitalist superstructure of the commercial music industry.<sup>19</sup> The overt message and who is speaking is now evident; however, the intended audience is less clear. Who is it that Hammond feels needs to be exposed to the music? We can turn again to the text for indications: “the *New Masses* ball is the big social event of literary and artistic New York; the magazine’s lectures, art exhibitions and concerts are lively spots in any cultural season.”<sup>20</sup>

With this information in mind, we can read Hammond’s *New Masses* articles in a properly contextualized frame. For Hammond and by extension the literary, artistic and cultural intelligentsia of New York, Johnson here is the “greatest Negro blues singer,” an exemplar of the type of authenticity that can only be found in the performances of someone who has never “worked as a professional musician anywhere.”<sup>21</sup> Johnson’s music is the eternal music of the folk, speaking to the reality of the African American condition in a manner uncorrupted

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<sup>18</sup> For more on Hammond’s role in forming the jazz discourse of the time, see Gennari 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Gennari 2006, 35

<sup>20</sup> *Spirituals to Swing* 1999, 6

<sup>21</sup> This anti-commercial image becomes essential to both folk and rock discourses. For a detailed discussion the ideology of folk and rock based around anti-commerciality, community and authenticity, see Frith 1981.



by the influence of commerce so prevalent in the popular swing music of the day. This reading is best framed by the populist, Depression-era communist ideology espoused by the *New Masses* and the “Popular Front Movement,” which viewed Southern rural blacks as *de facto* the most oppressed class of American.<sup>22</sup> Considered as such, Johnson serves as a representation of the voiceless proletariat to whom Hammond gives a voice, an object to be championed. Despite this sympathetic agenda, Johnson is represented as a stereotype in language rife with romanticism.<sup>23</sup> Johnson is unknown, at least to white, urban audiences. He is mysterious in all details of his life and death, and in his last moment a tragic figure that missed his one opportunity – provided by Hammond – to rise from obscurity and (assumed) poverty.

These themes of authenticity and romanticism quickly become essential elements in the ways in which Johnson is discussed, evident in two books by New York-based jazz critics: *The Jazz Record Book* (1942) by Charles Edward Smith; and *Shining Trumpets* (1946) by Rudi Blesh.<sup>24</sup> Written by members of the “moldy figs” camp of Dixieland revivalist critics, these texts are again addressed to a record collector audience. Similar in intent to the “From Spirituals to Swing Concert,”

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<sup>22</sup> For more about New Deal-era Marxism, race and music see Mullen 90-97.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ambivalence of stereotypes see Bhabha 1994, 66-84

<sup>24</sup> Note that I am intentionally using the terms “authentic” and “authenticity” loosely (often in “scare quotes”) and generally preserving the context in which they originally appear. I do not intend to unpack the concept here nor clearly define it. For an informative discussion on authenticity see Frith 1981.

*The Jazz Record Book* and *Shining Trumpets* are concerned with portraying jazz as an extension of authentic African American folk traditions. Smith emphasizes that Johnson was “trained by an oldtime New Orleans guitar player,” Johnson’s playing “as exciting as almost any in the folk blues field.”<sup>25</sup> Blesh praises Johnson’s “Hell Hound on my Trail” as “authentic blues... the expression of uncanny and weird feelings... Johnson’s voice sounds possessed like that of a man cast in a spell.”<sup>26</sup> Following Hammond’s lead, the point is made explicitly by Blesh and Smith that Johnson’s music is “authentic, folk blues.” But what does this really mean? If we accept that authenticity is socially constructed and that folk music is a reflection of the experiences of a community,<sup>27</sup> how do white writers writing for a white audience properly assign folk authenticity to a black musician? Johnson’s authenticity is constructed here by those who lack the necessary perspective to make such a designation. What we find is the “authenticity of music... judged by its effects rather than its sources,” emancipated from its site of cultural production.<sup>28</sup> As such, these literary representations of Johnson are best read in terms of what Toni Morrison refers to as Africanism:

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<sup>25</sup> Smith’s claim that Johnson studied with a New Orleans guitar player appears to be entirely unfounded and is never substantiated by later research. I can only assume that Smith is trying to further connect Johnson and rural blues to the perceived Southern/non-commercial/loosely “rural” roots of jazz. (Smith 1942, 259)

<sup>26</sup> Blesh 1946, 121

<sup>27</sup> Mullen 2008, 15; Frith 1981

<sup>28</sup> Frith 1981, 162

a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people... Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless.<sup>29</sup>

Viewed in this framework we can see how these and future constructions of Johnson represent and misrepresent his racial, cultural and historical otherness to reflect the Eurocentric assumptions and agendas of the writers.

### **A Brooding Sense of Torment and Despair**

The first turn toward a sense of cultural self-consciousness appears in Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues*.

The young Negro audience for whom the blues has been a natural emotional expression has never concerned itself with artistic pretensions. By their standards, Robert Johnson was sullen and brooding, and his records sold very poorly. It is artificial to consider him by the standards of a sophisticated audience that during his short life was not even aware of him, but by these standards he is one of the superbly creative blues singers.<sup>30</sup>

In these introductory words to his five-page section on Robert Johnson, Charters is quick to recognize that his own perspective on Johnson may not, and most likely was not, shared by Johnson's cultural or historical peers. Despite this recognition, despite his

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<sup>29</sup> Morrison 1992, 6-7. Morrison's concept bears an interesting similarity to Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. See Said 1979.

<sup>30</sup> Charters 1959, 207

very own warning, he proceeds along these “artificial” lines. In these pages, Charters establishes a narrative strategy of mixing biography with lyric analysis that serves as prototype within the Johnson discourse. Although there are a handful of historical facts presented, he is quick to point out the paucity of information available about Johnson, a notion underscored by frequent qualifiers to the statements made in the three paragraphs dealing with Johnson’s life.

Charters appears much more confident in the insights he gains by interpreting Johnson’s lyrics. Although he openly admits that a cultural distance exists between himself and Johnson, he does not seem to see this as an impediment to interpreting Johnson through his songs. For Charters, “the finest of Johnson’s blues have a brooding sense of torment and despair.”<sup>31</sup> He discusses at length the lyrics to two songs that he believes qualifies as Johnson’s finest, “Hellhound on My Trail” and “Me and the Devil Blues.” In these interpretations, Charters sees Johnson as “so disturbed it is almost impossible to understand the words... emotionally disturbed by the image of the Devil, the ‘Hellhound’... the figure seemed to be his torment.”<sup>32</sup> This reading of Johnson the man from his lyrics (in particular the lyrics to “Hellhound on My Trail”) is a trope extending from Blesh that will remain a constant facet of the literature on Johnson.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Charters 1959, 210

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> For a point of contrast see Lawrence W. Levine’s reading of “Hellhound on my Trail” in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Levine reads “Hellhound” as rather than “an expression of trouble and woe,” an expression of African American’s embrace of freedom and special mobility. (Levine 1977, 262)

Although the approach is inherited, Charters enhances the level of rhetoric and romantic imagery used in an effort to stir his readers' imaginations. Reflecting on *The Country Blues* in 1975 Charters was quite candid about this agenda.

*The Country Blues* was two things. It was romanticization of certain aspects of black life in an effort to force the white society to reconsider some of its racial attitudes, and on the other hand it was a cry for help. I wanted hundreds of people to go out and interview the surviving blues artists. I wanted people to record them and document their lives, their environment, and their music—not only so that their story would be preserved but also so they'd get a little money and a little recognition in their last years. So there was another kind of romanticism in the book. I was trying to make the journey to find the artists as glamorous as possible, by describing the roadsides, and the farms, and the shacks, and the musicians themselves.<sup>34</sup>

Through the continued and escalating presentation of Johnson as a mysterious, romantic, now tragic figure, Charters's book was effective in generating interest in Johnson, the person, while simultaneously perpetuating the discursive patterns established by Blesh and Smith. Charters's book was well received by an eager group of young, white, middle-class, future writers and researchers who were more than willing to appreciate black blues artists through Charters's romanticizations and to heed his "cry for help." Enthralled by his effusive prose, the sounds they heard on Columbia Records' *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers*, and a propensity for romanticizing the Other, they set out on the "search" for Robert Johnson.

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<sup>34</sup> quoted in Charters 1991, vii-viii.

Folklorist Patrick Mullen argues that white audiences during the folk revival were seeking in the “rediscovered” rural bluesmen a “symbolic alternative to a repressed white society”; but the representations of these artists as constructed by white revivalists rarely reflected the musicians’ realities.<sup>35</sup> Jeff Todd Titon points out that by “rejecting conformity to middle-class values, blues revivalists embraced the music of people who seemed unbound by conventions of work, family, sexual propriety, worship and so forth.... The romantic strain projected a kind of primitivism on the blues singer and located him in a culture of natural license.”<sup>36</sup> As blues revival-era researchers set out to gather the “reality” of Johnson, much of what they found, or at least what they felt should be presented, simply reinforced the romantic notions of earlier generations. Before turning to an example of this type of research-based narrative representation of Johnson, I will address what is perhaps the most overtly impressionist and one of the most influential constructions of Robert Johnson, found in Greil Marcus’s *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* (1975).

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<sup>35</sup> Mullen 2008, 124.

<sup>36</sup> quoted in Mullen 2008, 124.

## The Spirit of Rock ‘n’ Roll

In his prologue, Marcus is careful to assert that Johnson is not the literal inventor of rock, but rather an early representation of the spirit of rock n’ roll, stating that “Johnson figures as metaphor more than musical influence.”<sup>37</sup> He is less careful on this point later in the work, mixing statements of spiritual influence and musical lineage in claims that Johnson’s “presence” can be felt in many of the best guitarists and singers of the day: “a good musical case can be made for Johnson as the first rock ‘n’ roller of all... he was, I think, working out a whole new aesthetic that rock ‘n’roll eventually completed.”<sup>38</sup> In his attempt to construct Johnson as a suitable spiritual forbearer for the massively popular rock music of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marcus follows and escalates the well-worn patterns utilized in early writings on Johnson. Despite the recent emergence and publication of historical information about Johnson in the years prior to the release of his book, Marcus eschews biography for interpretation, supporting this methodology by proposing that a “mythical authority... comes when an artist confirms his work with his life.”<sup>39</sup> Besides Johnson’s date of birth, recording dates and date of death, Marcus only includes historical “facts” and firsthand accounts that serve his reading of Johnson. Only in speaking of Johnson’s “tragic” death does he present anything resembling a data-driven postulation of the historical Johnson: “if some remember that he was stabbed, others say he was poisoned; that he died on his hands

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus 1975, 6

<sup>38</sup> Marcus 1974, 23, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus 1975, 31.

and knees, barking like a dog; that his death ‘had something to do with the black arts.’”<sup>40</sup> Writing for an alienated, post-1960s American audience, Marcus asserts that “Johnson’s vision was of a world without salvation, redemption, or rest; it was a vision he resisted, laughed at, to which he gave himself over, but most of all it was a vision he pursued.”<sup>41</sup>

Marcus’s prose is filled with the type of evocative descriptors that reinforce Tilton’s notion of “projected primitivism.” Johnson is represented by his “grace and bitterness,” “slow sexual menace,” “a brooding man who did his work on the darker side of American life.” Furthermore, and in line with the notion of escalating rhetoric in the Johnson discourse, the book goes to great length to amplify Johnson’s image from disturbed and tragic to literally damned and possessed.

There were demons in his songs—blues that walked like a man, the Devil, or the two in league with each other—and Johnson was often on good terms with them; his greatest fear seems to have been that his desires were so extreme that he could satisfy them only by becoming a kind of demon himself.<sup>42</sup>

Marcus supports this vision of Johnson as in league with the Devil by latching on to a quotation from Son House – the only quotation in this chapter from someone who actually knew Robert Johnson – in which House simply states, “[Johnson] sold his soul to the Devil to get to play like that.” Despite the fact

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<sup>40</sup> Marcus 1975, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus, 1975, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



that House was interviewed countless times about Johnson, this was the only time he claimed an affiliation between Johnson and the Devil.<sup>43</sup> Although the notion that Johnson sold his soul to the Devil is here connected with African American culture via House, it is nonetheless emphasized by Marcus for its romantic narrative function, supporting Marcus's vision, rather than with an effort to reinscribe Johnson in a more appropriate cultural framework.<sup>44</sup>

To further support this construct, Marcus analyzes lyrics from ten of Johnson's twenty-nine records, finding in them the necessary imagery and allusions to support his assertions.<sup>45</sup> Although he does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview, his analysis is nevertheless marked by exclusion. That he only examines one-third of the available body of work is not on its own problematic, as a selection can represent the whole. Rather, it is the degree of selectivity by which Marcus includes and excludes in order to inscribe his own vision that is of greater concern. This process of inscription and exclusion is best seen in his interpretation of "Stones in My Passway," which Marcus refers to as a "two-minute image of doom that has the power to make doom a fact."<sup>46</sup> Marcus reads in "Stones in My Passway" "terror... too ubiquitous to have a face: it is formless, elusive, overpowering," although he states that on a primary level the song is about sexual impotence.

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<sup>43</sup> In an interview with Pete Welding, published in *Down Beat Music '66* (Pearson and McCullough 2004, 89).

<sup>44</sup> See Lipsitz 1998 for more about the romantic and cultural functions of the Robert Johnson Devil myth.

<sup>45</sup> By this time all twenty-nine of Johnson's songs were commercially available on *King of the Delta Blues Singers vol. I & II*.

<sup>46</sup> Marcus 1975, 36

While the reading is perhaps a stretch, it is not necessarily the conclusion that is of concern, but rather the fact that Marcus only considers four of the five verses of the song. It seems the second verse – “I have a bird to whistle and a bird to sing, a woman that I’m loving, but she don’t mean a thing” – does not fit his agenda.

### Searching for Robert Johnson

Coinciding with the release of the *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* boxed set, the years around 1990 mark the peak point for contributions to the Robert Johnson literature. Information gathered through exhaustive research and extensive interviews conducted throughout the Mississippi Delta region, though first published in short form and in sections of larger works on the blues, was now compiled in the form of comprehensive narratives.<sup>47</sup> In addition to an 8,000-word essay that accompanied the *Complete Recordings*, two important works concerned with portraying the “real” Robert Johnson emerged around this time: Peter Guralnick’s short book, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (1989), and the British documentary film, *In Search of Robert Johnson* (1992), starring John Hammond, Jr. It is to the former of these that we will now turn.

Guralnick’s *Searching for Robert Johnson* is one of the first comprehensive attempts to reconcile earlier interpretations of Johnson with historical documentation and quotations from informants.

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<sup>47</sup> Earlier biographical sketches and interviews regarding Johnson appear in Palmer 1981, Welding 1966, Charters 1973 as well as numerous articles in a variety of trade publications, including *Living Blues*.

Guralnick, whose interest in Johnson and the blues is a product of the blues revival, picks up the mystery theme that he inherited. In the introduction to *Searching*, he discusses how he was influenced by Charters's writing in particular:

What could seem more appropriate to our sense of romantic mystery than an “emotionally disturbed” poet scarcely able to contain his “brooding sense of torment and despair” [quoting Charters 1959]...Robert Johnson became the personification of the existential blues singer, unencumbered by corporality or history.<sup>48</sup>

The first ten pages of the book deal primarily with Guralnick's own “discovery” of Robert Johnson and a brief description of the mystery that is Robert Johnson: “How was one individual...able to create an *oeuvre* so original, of such sweeping scope and power?”<sup>49</sup> The proceeding forty-five pages tell the story of Johnson's life in a level of detail not hitherto found in the literature.<sup>50</sup> Guralnick attempts to present the historical Robert Johnson, writing about Johnson's relationship with his parents, his scant education and his frequent travels. Furthermore, for the first time in the examples I have cited, the voices of those who actually knew Robert Johnson are allowed to inform the narrative. Nevertheless, their words are filtered and selected through the editorial process, used to reinforce a construct of Robert

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<sup>48</sup> Guralnick 1989, 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Although many of the facts are presented in less detail in prior writings. For example, see sections in Guralnick 1989, 21-22 and Palmer 1981, 117-119 that discuss Johnny Shines interaction with Johnson.

Johnson that in many ways conforms to earlier representations.

While many of the established tropes – tragedy, possession, torment, etc. – recur in *Searching*, a new concept of Johnson emerges: that of a “self-conceived professional musician.”<sup>51</sup> Robert Johnson, the professional, emerges in part from the stories told by many of Johnson’s peers, notably musician Johnny Shines. Shines is quick to point out that when he and Johnson performed together their repertory was not limited to blues nor dictated by their own personal interests: “You didn’t play what *you* liked; you played what the people liked. That was what you had to do... Robert could play anything... Hillbilly, blues, all the rest.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore and contrary to the idea of Johnson and the rural blues as static folk music, “Robert’s material was way ahead of his time. He was already trying to play jazz... if he were around today you can’t even *imagine* what he’d be doing.”<sup>53</sup> Shines also stresses the connection between performance and commerce for Johnson, stating that “when he picked up his guitar it was for business.”<sup>54</sup> From these accounts, the view that Johnson was strictly a folk musician demands reconsideration and threatens much of the romantic concept of Johnson. In this light, it becomes problematic to view Johnson’s music through the lens of authenticity as it can no longer be seen strictly as “the direct expression of emotion,” but rather demands to be seen as “the product of

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<sup>51</sup> Guralnick 1989, 33.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Guralnick 1989, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Guralnick 1989, 56. The context of this quote makes it clear that Johnson was concerned with making money from his playing and saw it as a livelihood rather than an avocation.

talent and craft.”<sup>55</sup> Addressing this conflict between commercial and folk constructions of Johnson, George Lipsitz raises the point that “romantic critics might prefer to imagine blues musicians as folk artists outside the culture industry, but in order to survive, much less record, they had to display a mastery of the codes of commercial culture.”<sup>56</sup> It appears that despite the romantic proclivity in the discourse for understanding Johnson as folk, faced with so much new information, a reconsideration was unavoidable.

Nevertheless, Guralnick does not seem able to allow Johnson, the professional, commercially aware musician, to stand without some degree of romantic conjecture which he inscribes through his discussion of Robert Johnson and the Devil. In *Searching*, the Devil story is neither refuted nor proselytized, but simply stated by way of another’s words: “Many stories have been advanced to account for [Johnson’s] sudden proficiency in the blues... Son House was convinced that Robert Johnson had [soul his soul to the Devil], and undoubtedly, as Johnny Shines says, others were too.”<sup>57</sup> This quotation is followed by four pages of informant accounts of Johnson’s almost supernatural abilities to perform, learn songs on first listen, and attract a crowd while the suspected pact with the Devil is not mentioned again in the narrative at all.<sup>58</sup> Via this strategy, Guralnick does not take on

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<sup>55</sup> Schroder 2004, 100.

<sup>56</sup> Lipsitz 1998, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Guralnick 1989, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Guralnick makes no reference to the counterargument to the Devil myth raised by Robert Palmer in 1981 that Johnson gained his proficiency on the guitar through study with Alabama-born bluesman, Ike Zinneman. This exclusion is even more troubling considering Palmer and

the myth of Johnson and the Devil directly, but reinscribes it through carefully arranged allusion. While the author sets out to “find” the real Johnson he is not willing to solve the mystery and risk losing the romantic vision of Johnson, claiming in his conclusion that no matter how many facts emerge “the central mystery of Robert Johnson will remain.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Through these examples I have presented a sampling of the ways in which Robert Johnson has been constructed through discourse to represent the ideologies of those who created the literature. Referring to this discursive formation of Johnson, George Lipsitz astutely points out that “the life and legend of Robert Johnson can be made to conform perfectly to the contours of romanticism.... Yet by incorporating Robert Johnson into the romantic narrative, these appropriations of his story hide both the social circumstances and the cultural strategies that informed his life and art.”<sup>60</sup> Throughout the many writings on Johnson, the scant historical facts of his twenty-seven years of life have been modified, manipulated and at times fabricated to serve a romantic narrative in which this poor, virtually unknown/unknowable bluesman stands in as the antidote to generations of commercialization and alienation. In investigating the construction of

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Guralnick both relied heavily on the research and guidance of Mack McCormick. (Palmer 1981, 113-114).

<sup>59</sup> Guralnick 1989, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Lipsitz 1998, 43-44.

“Robert Johnson,” we consider the man, the voice, the songs, etc., but in essence, it is the very embedded layers of meaning and signification that critics and fans have poured into the construct that reflect back at us most clearly.

From the moment in 1938 when John Hammond was unable to produce the corporeal Johnson and used his records and tall tales to stand in for the man, “Robert Johnson” became the most malleable stuff of legend, romance and imagination. From that point on writers have molded Johnson to be something meaningful for them, to fulfill a need for something authentic, a romantic, mythical other to represent a sense of honesty and community that was somehow lacking in their modern lives.<sup>61</sup> As my pre-scholarly concept of Robert Johnson was formed through these very constructions and through these very impulses, I was not immune to this process. Friends, rock gods, and liner notes told me that Robert Johnson could be my personal salvation, my “antidote to the shallowness of contemporary commercial culture.”<sup>62</sup> Even at the age of thirteen, this was something I could relate to – to self-alienate from mainstream popular music was all that many a suburban American teenager craved in the face of an industrial model of mass music consumption.<sup>63</sup> In that sense, Johnson has been

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<sup>61</sup> Eric Clapton indicates an unwillingness to give up the romantic construct of Robert Johnson in the close of his remark in *The Complete Recordings* liner notes: “It would be great if people could simply appreciate his music for what it is, for its truth and beauty, without it having to be a scholarly event.” (*The Complete Recordings* 1990, 23).

<sup>62</sup> Lipsitz 1998, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Which at this time meant Debbie Gibson, Tiffany, New Kids on the Block...

constructed to fulfill just that need. He was created through the discourse to stand as the epitome of “authenticity,” the roots, the very heart and soul of the musical traditions we consider “real.”



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**Abstract**

Robert Johnson — at least the Robert Johnson that is knowable today, one hundred years after his birth and nearly seventy-five years after his death — is best understood as a discursive construction formed by generations of critics, fans and scholars. Faced with this dearth of historical facts, many writers — having nothing else to go on other than the sound of his voice and his words — imagined psychological profiles of Johnson from their interpretations of his lyrics and their own preconceived notions of black culture. In this regard, "Robert Johnson" can be thought of as an empty/ied signifier, at once a man, a voice, and a blank slate.

This study focuses on the formation and development of the Robert Johnson discourse in an attempt to trace the ideological assumptions, hermeneutic frameworks, and narrative strategies that facilitated a construction of Johnson by addressing representative selections from the Johnson literature by John Hammond, Samuel Charters, Greil Marcus and others over a span of roughly sixty years. Throughout these writings the scant historical facts of Johnson's twenty-seven years of life have been modified, manipulated and at times fabricated to serve a romantic narrative in which this poor, virtually unknown/unknowable bluesman stands in as the antidote to generations of commercialization and alienation. While these works consider the historical figure and the music, in essence, it is the embedded layers of meaning and signification that critics and fans have poured into the "Robert Johnson" that reflect back at us most clearly.