



HELL HOUND ON HIS TRAIL: ROBERT JOHNSON

RAEBURN FLERLAGE

By PETE WELDING

ONE MONDAY in late November, 1936, in a San Antonio hotel room that was serving as the American Record Corp.'s makeshift recording studio, a young, slight, light-skinned Negro perched tensely in front of a microphone, his thin, expressive fingers dancing nervously over the strings of his guitar as he awaited the engineer's cue to begin performing. The signal given, Robert Johnson hunched in his chair, his body rigid with taut energy, fused to a knot of concentration, and launched into *Kind-Hearted Woman Blues*:

*I got a kind-hearted woman, do
anything in this world for me,
I got a kind-hearted woman, any-
thing in this world for me,
But these evil-hearted women, man,
they will not let me be.*

The singer's voice was tight and constricted, the words seemingly forced through his clenched throat with an intensity that was almost demonic; his aching, pain-filled cries, the swooping falsetto shouts that only began to hint at the anguish that lay behind them, the piercing, bittersweet sting of the guitar—all combined to produce a statement of overwhelming power and conviction.

To hear Johnson was to believe him immediately, to join him in his private world of misery, to travel with him along the byroads of despair and anxiety and rejection that were the sole markers of his demon-driven journey through life, a life that was all too quickly burned out in dissipation and, finally, death by poisoning.

On that November day and the Thursday and Friday that followed, Johnson recorded 16 gripping, magnificent performances that have remained unrivaled in the history of

American Negro folk music. These—and the 13 additional selections he recorded for ARC the following June in Dallas—are all that remains of the greatest, most expressive and harrowingly poetic blues singer whose work has been documented by recordings. These 29 songs are his estate, the chronicle of his experience, the legacy of his mind, heart, and imagination.

These recordings—Johnson's songs and the manner in which they were performed—represent the ultimate flowering of the Mississippi blues style, the extension of that awesomely expressive, highly personal, powerful idiom to its fullest reaches. In his potent, wildly imagistic songs, there is revealed a vision of the world, a poetic dimension, and an expressive level that are unparalleled in the blues. No other blues are so burningly intense, so personal, so apocalyptic, so frightening in their view of life. They are shot through with dark foreboding; a sense of impending, overwhelming doom; a disenchantment with the human condition that is all but total.

Johnson has chronicled in his telling, dramatic songs the road of despair and disillusion on which his life ran with such ineluctable fatality:

*I've been dogged and I've been
driven ever since I left my
mother's home,
I've been dogged and I've been
driven ever since I left my
mother's home,
And I can't see the reason why
that I can't leave these no-
good women alone.*

*My father died and left me, my
poor mother done the best
that she could,
My father died and left me, my
poor mother done the best
she could,*

*Every man like that game you call
love, but it don't mean no
man no good.*

He evidently felt constantly driven by impulses he could not define, by feelings he could not fathom, by anxieties and fears he only dimly understood but which were nonetheless real and powerful. They drove him on restlessly in the pursuit of something—precisely *what* he did not know—and he often felt himself thwarted in his quest for it:

*I got stones in my passway, and my
road seems dark as night,
I got stones in my passway, and my
road seems dark as night,
I have pains in my heart; they have
taken my appetite.*

and

*I went to the crossroads, fell down
on my knees,
I went down to the crossroads, fell
down on my knees,
Asked the Lord above for mercy,
now, say poor Bob, if you
please.*

*Umm, standing at the crossroads,
I tried to flag a ride,
Umm, standing at the crossroads,
I tried to flag a ride,
Ain't nobody seem to know me,
everybody pass me by.*

But travel on he must:

*I woke up this morning, feeling
'round for my shoes,
(You know) I got these old walking
blues,
Woke up this morning, feeling
'round for my shoes,
But you know about that, I got
these old walking blues.*

*Lord, I feel like blowing my old
lonesome home,
Got up this morning, my little
Bernice was gone;*

Lord, I feel like blowing my
lonesome home,

Well, I got up this morning, all
I had was gone.

Well, leaving this morning, if I
have to ride the blinds,
I feel mistreated and I don't mind
dying,

Leaving this morning, I have to ride
the blinds,

Babe, I feel mistreated, baby, and
I don't mind dying.

For Johnson, the blues were more
than an oppressive feeling; they were
a physical presence:

Umm, got up this morning, the
blues walking like a man,

I got up this morning, the blues
walking like a man,

Worried blues, give me your right
hand.

or a wasting disease eating at his
life's blood:

Well, the blues is a aching old heart
disease,

The blues is a lowdown, aching
heart disease,

Like consumption, killing me by
degrees.

At times, however, the oppression
would be magnified almost beyond
endurance, and then Johnson would
feel himself the thrall of evil spirits:

Early this morning, when you
knocked upon my door,

Early this morning, ooh, when you
knocked upon my door,

And I said, "Hello, Satan, I believe
it's time to go."

Me and the devil was walking
side by side,

Me and the devil, ooh, was walk-
ing side by side;

I'm going to beat my woman,
until I get satisfied.

They pursued him relentlessly, and
and he could never escape them:

I got to keep moving, I got to keep
moving,

Blues falling down like hail, blues
falling down like hail,

Ummm, blues falling down like
hail, blues falling down like
hail.

And I can't keep no money, there's
a hell hound on my trail,

Hell hound on my trail, hell hound
on my trail.

He looks for relief from his tor-
ments and doubts in alcohol and
women, and at first he finds a measure
of satisfaction:

Now, you can squeeze my lemon
till the juice runs down my
leg (spoken: till the juice
runs down my leg, baby;
you know what I'm talkin'
about),

You can squeeze my lemon till
the juice runs down my leg
(spoken: that's what I'm
talkin' about, now),

But I'm going back to Friar's
Point, if I'll be rocking to
my head.

And for a while he boasts of his
sexual prowess:

The stuff I got will bust your brains
out,

It will make you lose your mind.

But there is a canker in his joy,
and the thrill of conquest gives way
to growing disillusionment as he ob-
serves the perfidy of women:

The woman I love, I took from my
best friend,

Some joker got lucky, stole her
back again.

and

She's got Elgin movements from
her head down to her toes,

She breaks in on a dollar 'most any-
where she goes.

or

And I went to the mountains, looked
as far as my eyes could see,

And I went to the mountains, looked
as far as my eyes would see,

Some other man got my woman and
the lonesome blues got me.

And I rolled and I tumbled and
I cried the whole night long,

And I rolled and I tumbled and
I cried the whole night long,

Boy, I woke up this morning, my
biscuit roller's gone.

Soon his disenchantment had grown
to a smoldering resentment:

And, now, baby, I will never for-
give you anymore,

Little girl, little girl, I will never
forgive you anymore;

You know you did not want me,
baby, why did you tell me so?

And I'm running down to the
station, catch the first mail
train I see (spoken: I think

I hear her coming now),

I'm running down to the station,
catch that old first mail train
I see,

I got the blues for Miss So-And-
So, and the child's got the
blues about me.

for, he observes, pithily:

I believe, I believe I'll go back
home,

You can mistreat me here, babe,
but you can't when I go
home.

And so, once again, Johnson finds
himself in flight, pursued by the
demons that torment him mercilessly.

He has learned from his experience
with women, however; now he is
seeking love between two equals. He
recognizes his responsibility in main-
taining the relationship:

When you got a good friend, have
her stay right by your side,

When you got a good friend, have
her stay right by your side,

Give her all your spare time, love
and treat her right.

But when he finds it, some inex-
plicable, perverse impulse makes him
destroy it:

I mistreated my baby, and I can't
see no reason why,

I mistreated my baby, but I can't
see no reason why,

Everytime I think about her, I just
wring my hands and cry.

He knows how he will finish his
life:

You may bury my body down by
the highway side (spoken:

babe, I don't care where you
bury my body when I'm
dead and gone),

You may bury my body, ooh, down
by the highway side,

So my old evil spirit can get a
Greyhound bus and ride.

JOHNSON'S SONGS deal repeatedly
with these recurring themes:
women and the impermanence of
human relationships; incessant
travel, most often as the result
of disappointments suffered at the
hands of women; and the besetting,
mindless terrors that haunted his days
and made his nights endless night-
mares. There's no home anywhere for
him, his songs say; there's no place
for his body even after death; all he
can imagine is fleeing, as he did all
his life; he saw conflict as a basic
ingredient of his life—stones blocked
his passway, autos passed him by,
women refused him, and hellhounds
pursued him. His songs are the diary
of a tormented, haunted wanderer
through the dark, hopeless tangle of
the Negro underworld; the sensitive,
pain-etched chronicle of a black,
demon-ridden Orpheus in his futile,
endless, frustrating journey along the
labyrinthine path of his psyche. His
songs are the lonely, impassioned, un-
answered cries of disaffected, dis-
oriented, rootless modern man, pur-
poseless, without direction or power,
adrift at the mercies of the fates,
driven by powerful, unseen forces.
And the acrid stench of evil is always
burning in his mind.

What is remarkable about the body
of his work is that, unlike many an-
other blues that is rooted in the
experiences of its writer, Johnson's

blues attain to such universality. Despite whatever relevance they might have as fragments of his autobiography, his songs—by virtue of the strength and directness of their language, the sharpness and richness of his poetic vision, and the telling statements they make about the human condition—speak to us eloquently and movingly. At their best, Johnson's blues are tremendously powerful, concise, sharply connotative utterances, pungent and often brilliant folk poetry that treats of much the same matter—and in the same manner—as does the best modern poetry. *When You Got a Good Friend*, for example, recalls portions of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, while *Hell Hound on My Trail* summons up the wild, haunting pursuit of the soul described in Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Hound of Heaven*.

The vision of life as contained in Johnson's blues evidences a basic concern with human relations. His concern is not with God or with nature, but only with human relations, and here he may have had a blindingly prophetic insight. Since the days when he sang, we have had less and less to say about nature as an influential force on us. More and more, our lives have become a function of how we relate to others—the burden of Johnson's songs. He is aware, he shows us, of the force of the subconscious on our conscious acts—"I mistreated my baby, and I can't see no reason why"—but his knowledge is dim, shadowy, unrealized.

In manner, Johnson was a Mississippi blues man, perhaps the supreme Mississippi blues man. The idiom has always placed a high premium on close correspondence between voice and accompanying guitar, but in Johnson's case that correspondence was uncannily singular. In most of his songs, voice and guitar seem a single, incandescent instrument, one of almost indescribable sensitivity, subtlety, and complexity. The guitar does not support or respond to the voice so much as it simultaneously articulates the same thought with equal intensity.

With their different capabilities and colors, Johnson's voice and guitar express the identical thought, but they also expose two complementary aspects of it—the words literal; the guitar suggestive, connotative, amplifying and coloring the thought articulated by the voice. He needs both of them to express the complexity and subtlety of his thoughts. The two are so fused in his mind, in fact, that the words of his songs come fully alive only in his performances, as the guitar fleshes out the bones of the words.

THOUGH MUCH of Johnson, his intense personality and his brilliant imagination, live on in the achievements of his recordings, remarkably little is known of Johnson the man. Of his birth and early years nothing is known, though it might safely be assumed—from impressions gathered by those who knew him later in his life, from his utter mastery of the Mississippi delta blues style, and from the frequent mentions of Mississippi place names in his songs—that he was a Mississippian.

By the time the delta blues veteran Eddie (Son) House first met him in Robinsonville, Miss., in 1930, Johnson—about 17 at the time, House recalls—had already mastered blues harmonica and was just developing an interest in the guitar. To learn the instrument, Johnson would steal away from his stepfather's home to attend the Saturday night parties and dances House and his guitarist-partner Willie Brown played.

"He would set down on the floor between Willie and me," House said, "... and when it would come time for us to take a break, me and Willie'd get up and set the guitars down, and we'd go out for a rest or to cool off or something, then he'd get one of the guitars. He couldn't play it, but he'd keep noise with it. Annoyed the people and all like that, so we'd come back in, and I'd get after him about it.

"I'd say, 'You shouldn't do that, Robert. You're worrying the people . . . you can't play, and you're just keeping a lot of noise with it. Suppose you break a string or something? This time of night, nowhere we can go and get one. You don't know what you're doing; don't do that.' But it didn't do any good for me to tell him that; he would do it near about every time."

House recalled that some time later Johnson ran away from home when his stepfather, who farmed on Pope's plantation west of Robinsonville, wanted him to work in the fields with him. When Johnson returned home six or seven months later, House stated, he had a guitar of his own, to which he had added a seventh string.

"Me and Willie was playing out near a little place they call Banks, Miss.," House said, "and he come in that Saturday night with the guitar. . . . So he wiggled on through and got where we was. I said, 'Well, boy, what are you doing with that thing?' He said, 'Aw, get up and let me have your chair and I'll show you what I can do with it.' I said, 'Oh, nothing—that's all a lot of racket.' He laughed and said, 'Well, let me try.' So I said, 'Well, okay.' We gets up, you know—

laughs at him. So he sets down and he starts playing, and when he got through, all our mouths was open . . . yeah, what happened was a big surprise—how he did it that fast.

"Why the people, they just went wild over it, was a big surprise. But he didn't stay very long; he pretty soon left out of there. And after that night of playing, if my memory serves me right, I didn't see him no more in this life."

Johnson was at this time about 21 or 22, House said. The older blues man recalled that when Johnson came to the dance near Banks, his guitar style was fully shaped, revealing the same mastery as is evident on his recordings a few years later. House suggested in all seriousness that Johnson, in his months away from home, had "sold his soul to the devil in exchange for learning to play like that."

Johnson's style, House pointed out, was basically patterned on the instrumental approaches that House and Brown employed at the time. (Johnson's recording of *Walking Blues* shows a strong House influence in the vocal and accompaniment patterns, indicating that perhaps he did use House's approach as the core of his own, usually a much more complex and subtle style.) But even at this early point in Johnson's development, House was quick to point out, he was well on the way toward extending and refining that style into the brilliantly personal adaptation he made of it.

Johnson's story takes up again in Helena, Ark., in 1935, when he met and teamed up with Johnny Shines, a Memphis-born singer-guitarist currently residing in Chicago.

Shines recalled that Johnson was working at a small tavern in the wide-open Arkansas town, as well as occasionally playing on the sidewalks there. During the next two years the two men, who became fast friends, traveled as far north as Chicago and Detroit, east to New York and New Jersey, and west as far as the Dakotas.

"He was a natural rambler," Shines said. "His home was where his hat was, and even then lots of times he didn't know where *that* was. We used to travel all over, meet the pay days in the lumber camps, the track gangs—anywhere the money was. Used to catch freights everywhere. Played for dances, in taverns, on sidewalks—didn't matter where, far as he was concerned. Robert was a natural showman; he didn't need no guitar—he could be clapping his hands and have a crowd around him in no time. And they'd give him their money too."

Despite their comradeship and
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HELL HOUND

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travel, Shines does not remember Johnson ever alluding to his past.

"I never heard him talk even once about his family," he said, "never said nothing about his mother or father. I didn't know if he had any brothers or sisters; if he did, he never mentioned them. The only thing he was ever close to was his guitar, and he never let that go, took it with him everywhere. In fact, I never remember him being close to anyone. Whenever he'd come into a place where I'd be playing, he'd always be by himself . . . never saw him with anybody else. Strictly a lone wolf, he was."

It is from Shines that one catches the only glimpses of Johnson as a person. Shines remembers him as a quixotic, erratic personality. "Close to a split personality, I'd say," he recalled. "You never knew what he was going to do or how he'd react to something. Sometimes he'd be the most mild-mannered, quiet person you'd ever meet; at other times he would get so violent so suddenly, and you couldn't do nothing with him. He was that changeable—different things to different peoples. Of course, when he drank—and he was a very heavy drinker—he was most unpredictable."

"Money didn't mean a thing to him. He'd give you every cent he had if you needed it, and it wouldn't bother him at all. Likewise, he'd sleep outdoors, anywhere, because he knew he didn't have to. And women—much as he was a woman lover—didn't mean nothing either. If you'd wake him up in the middle of the night and tell him there was a freight coming through, why he'd say, 'Well, let's catch it,' and he'd get himself ready, take hold of his guitar, and off he'd go—no matter who the woman was he was with. He just left."

Shines recalled that Johnson would make any song he heard completely his own. He was continually adding songs to his repertoire, though he had a fairly stable repertoire of his own compositions that he always performed in the same way. (This is supported by a comparison of the several takes of some of his recordings; in most cases where alternate versions exist, they are almost identical—even to the smallest subtleties of accompaniment—to the originally-issued takes. The few exceptions—*Ramblin' on My Mind* is perhaps the most notable—when considerable variation exists between two takes of a song, it is the result, one assumes, of Johnson's not having brought the song to the ultimate shape he desired. In

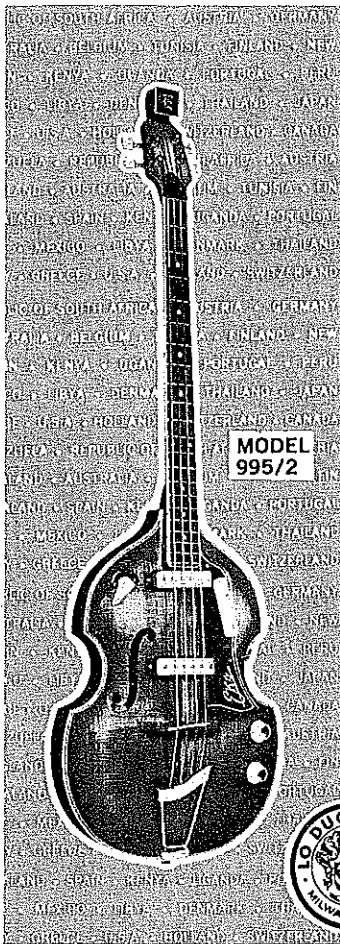
these cases, the second take is usually much stronger, more concise.)

Shines and Johnson parted company in 1937, and Shines returned to his family in Memphis and Johnson to Mississippi. Shortly afterwards Shines heard that Johnson had been killed.

"He was poisoned by one of those women who really didn't care for him at all," he said. "And Robert was almost always surrounded by that kind . . . seems like they just sought him out. That was down in Eudora, Miss., that it happened. And I heard that it was something to do with the black arts. Before he died, it was said,

Robert was crawling along the ground on all fours, barking and snapping like a mad beast. That's what the poison done to him."

However apocryphal (House, for example, heard that Johnson had been stabbed to death by a jealous husband, stabbed by a woman, and also that he had been poisoned—all three accounts were circulating at the time), the story certainly details an appropriate end for a man who all through his adult years felt the hounds of hell baying loudly and relentlessly on his trail. In the end, he just couldn't outrun them any longer. **ES**



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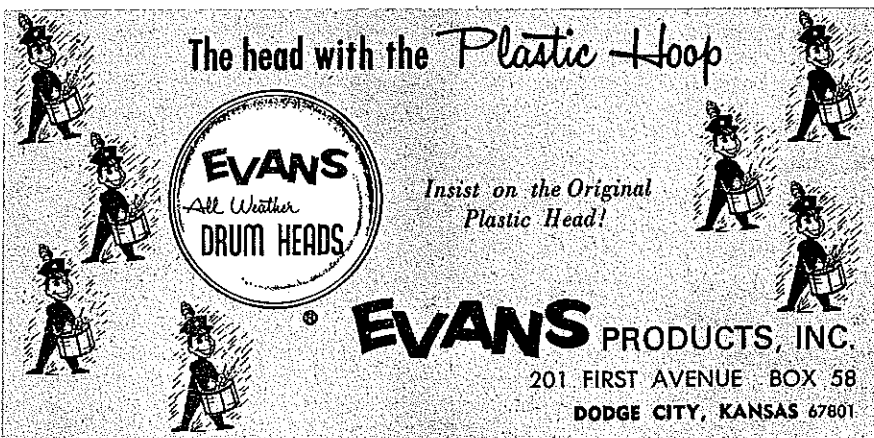
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