

The Devil in Robert Johnson: The Progression of the Delta Blues to Rock and Roll

by Adam Compagna

“I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees,
I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees,
Saw the Devil and begged for mercy, help me if you please
--- Cream, “Crossroads”

With the emergence of rock and roll in the late nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties, many different sounds and styles of music were being heard by the popular audience. These early rock musicians blended the current pop style with the non-mainstream rhythm and blues sound that was prevalent mainly in the African-American culture. Later on in the late sixties, especially during the British “invasion,” such bands as the Beatles, Cream, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, and the Yardbirds used this blues style and sound in their music and marketed it to a different generation. This blues music was very important to the evolution of rock and roll, but more importantly, where did this blues influence come from and why was it so important? The answer lies in the Mississippi Delta at the beginning of the twentieth century, down at the crossroads. From this southern section of America many important blues men, including Robert Johnson, got their start in the late nineteen twenties. A man who supposedly sold his soul to the Devil for the ability to play the guitar, Robert Johnson was a main influence on early rock musicians not only for his stylistic guitar playing but also for his poetic lyrics.¹ An important factor in the creation of the genre of the Delta blues is the era that these blues men came from. Although life for the black man in the southern region of the United States was never easy, the Great Depression made life even worse. Because of the Great Depression, many out-of-work black men picked up their guitars and started traveling, playing their music wherever they could and for any kind of payment. The Great Depression shaped these men’s lives and was the instigator for many of their problems, which were expressed through their music. The music of Delta blues men such as Robert Johnson was important to the evolution of rock and roll because it shaped the style that the musicians used and because it served as the basis for material, especially tonally and lyrically, that was used for decades by rock and roll artists.

The Great Depression is considered the worst economic slump in United States history. Through the combination of the greatly unequal distribution of wealth throughout the nineteen twenties, and the extensive stock market speculation that took place during the latter part of that same decade, the Great Depression started in the United States in 1929 and lasted for about a decade. The speculation and the resulting stock market crashes acted as a trigger to the already unstable United States economy. The economy of the nineteen twenties was very dependent on confidence; the market crashes undermined this confidence. The rich stopped buying luxury items, and the middle-class and poor stopped buying things with installment credit for fear of losing their jobs. As a result industrial production fell by more than nine percent between the market crashes in October and December of 1929.² As a result of this, jobs were lost and soon people started defaulting on their interest payments. This occurred all over the country, making poor

areas even poorer. The land where the original blues men came from, the Mississippi Delta, was no stranger to this. The area called “the Delta” is close to the state of Mississippi’s northwestern tip, though it is nowhere near the mouth of a river. This Delta is approximately two hundred miles of flat plain running from Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi, bounded by the Mississippi River to the west and the Yazoo River to the east, and also including parts of Arkansas and rural Tennessee. Despite a small number of rich landowners, the Delta was a poverty-stricken area even during its fifty-year reign as the United State’s Cotton Kingdom. Poor whites experienced hardships, but black life was considerably harsher. As Big Bill Broonzy, a blues player from the 1930’s observed, “a Negro didn’t mean no more to a white man than a mule.³ Most black marriages were common-law and considered to be temporary. Because of a large debt to a landowner, entire families would steal away at night to another plantation where, usually, they would eventually end up in the same situation.⁴ Often only the man of the family would flee, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves while he started a new life miles away on another plantation. These men often rode the rails, traveling all over the South, carrying multitudes of stories with them to tell, usually through song.⁵ The Depression caused many of the small farms and plantations to close; they could not pay workers or compete with the larger plantation organizations. This caused much of the Southern black population to be jobless, which influenced blues music in two ways. Out-of-work men tend to seek jobs, and this causes them to travel frequently. The traveling of the unemployed caused them to experience different forms of blues and to gain playing experience. Unemployed men also more easily decided to try music as a career. This caused the music to spread and for institutions like the juke houses to come into existence. A harsh fact of life these men were surrounded by in these establishments was murder. The unwritten law in the backwoods juke houses in which the blues was performed was that you could kill anybody you pleased and the authorities would look the other way so long as your victim was a fellow black and not a good worker.⁶

Robert Johnson was a man who exemplified the blues and was known to lead the lifestyle of the poor, traveling, and raunchy blues man. Although often mentioned as one of the fathers of Delta blues, Johnson was actually one of the last great performers to sing and play the blues in the style of the real founders of the Delta blues, such as Tommy Johnson or Son House. Born on May 8, 1911 to Julia Major Dodds and Noah Johnson in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, Johnson seemed to always be interested in music, with his first instruments being the Jews harp and the harmonica.⁷ Johnson married Virginia Travis in February 1929, but tragedy struck when Virginia, only sixteen years old, died during childbirth in 1930. During this period he first experienced blues guitar from the musicians Son House and Willie Brown. He asked them to teach him to play, but Johnson just did not seem able to play the guitar. As Son House asserts, “Such another racket you never heard! It’d make people mad, you know. They’d come out and say ‘Why don’t y’all go in there and get that guitar from that boy!’⁸ Johnson did not want to get caught up in the life of a sharecropper so he left his regular scene of Robinsville, Mississippi and moved to Hazelhurst, Mississippi where he played in juke houses and to men from lumber camps. While there he met and married a lady named Calletta “Callie” Craft in 1931. When Johnson returned to Robinsville Son House and Willie Brown were astounded by his amazing ability to play the guitar. Johnson’s sudden ability was credited to a deal with

the Devil.⁹ Legend states that Johnson went down to a crossroads of two highways in North Mississippi and at midnight gave over his soul to the Devil in exchange for the ability to play the guitar because he had already lost his soul to the Devil when his first wife died. For the next six years Johnson traveled all over the south, occasionally reaching the Midwestern city of St. Louis, performing his songs as well as those by other blues men and the occasional popular song of the day. In San Antonio in November 1936, he recorded sixteen songs with Ernie Oertle, an ARC scout.¹⁰ Johnson recorded ten more songs in Dallas in June 1937. On August 13, 1938, Robert Johnson played his last gig at a juke joint called Three Forks back home in the Delta and died the next day. Many rumors have circulated concerning the reason for his death, including being poisoned by a jealous girlfriend, being poisoned by a jealous husband, or finally succumbing to the Devil. The rumors of Johnson succumbing to the Devil were intensified when many people who saw him on the day he died claimed they witnessed Johnson crawling on his hands and knees and barking like a dog before he died. The singer David “Honeyboy” Edwards is noted as saying that Johnson was “in terrific pain” the day before he died.¹¹ Edwards suggests that Johnson may have been slipped “passagreen,” which is basically a tasteless, odorless backwoods poison extracted from mothballs. According to witness accounts victims of “passagreen” were known to crawl on their hands and knees and bark like a dog for whatever reason. Johnson was supposedly lazy, a womanizer, and not liked by everyone. It took another ten years for him to be recognized as a blues man and another thirty years to be honored as a legend at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Robert Johnson’s appeal to early rock and roll musicians falls generally into three categories: his musical talent and qualities, his lyrical qualities, and his amazing legend. On a musical level Johnson’s appeal lies in the tension between his vocals and his almost voice mocking guitar technique. Johnny Shines, a contemporary of Johnson’s, said, “His guitar seemed to talk-repeat and say words with him like no one else in the world could.”¹² His style included running lines on the low strings of the guitar which sounded like a piano’s boogie-woogie bass line, and also persistent strumming techniques which were picked up by early rock legend Chuck Berry and are still used in present day rock groups.¹³ His walking bass lines show up in most present day boogie guitar shuffles. Johnson’s lyrics though are the real source and power that caused his revival years later. Although much of Johnson’s lyrics were borrowed or copied from former blues men, his own lyrics had a definite new quality to them. Every one of his blues is a carefully worked out composition, and the lyrics are the highest flowering of the blues language.¹⁴ His lyrics, instead of just talking about desires and wishes as previous blues men had, placed emphasis on actual needs, showing the dark side of what life really was about to these people.

In Johnson’s recording of “From Four Till Late,” he shows the angst he feels in the first verse and then his bawdy remarks about women in the second:

From Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six hours ride
(repeat)
A man is like a prisoner, he’s never satisfied

A woman is just like a dresser, some man always
ramblin' its drawers (repeat)
It cause so many men wear an apron overall

He tells us in "Ramblin' on My Mind" that he's got "mean things on my mind," and in "When You Got a Good Friend," he tells us about a mean thing:

I mistreated my baby
and I can't see no reason why
(repeat)
Everytime I think about it,
I just wring my hands and cry

As in this example and most of Johnson's lyrics, there seems to be a damned if you do, damned if you don't attitude, one many black men of that day must have felt. Many artists have been influenced by his lyrics and subject matter, with many covering entire songs or just borrowing his lyrics as he did so many years before. In Led Zeppelin's "The Lemon Song" Robert Plant screams, "squeeze my lemon ... till the juice runs down my leg."¹⁵ This extremely suggestive line is taken directly from Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues." Elmore James took Johnson's song "Dust my Broom" and made a career out of it. Johnson's song "Cross Road Blues" has been covered by Cream and the Allman Brothers Band as "Crossroads," and the Rolling Stones, a group heavily influenced by the blues, recorded a famous version of Johnson's "Love in Vain." Another aspect of Johnson's appeal lies in his legend and his supposed relationship with the Devil. According to black folk culture, Johnson had a number of traits that might have been seen as demonic: he had a cataract in one eye; he often played with his back turned to other musicians, causing people to believe he had something to hide; and he favored unusual guitar tunings.¹⁶ Devil imagery abounded in many of his songs such as "Hell Hound on My Trail Me and the Devil Blues," and "Crossroads Blues," which is supposedly his story of what went on with the Devil at the crossroads. Just as supposedly "evil" musicians in present day gain audiences for being so bad, the notion that a performer was evil incarnate caused many juke joint revelers in the thirties to get very excited. Johnson's supposed association with the Devil has only helped to seal his fate as one of the most remembered of the early blues men.

Although Robert Johnson is the name many people associate with the blues, other such artists such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Son House also had a very important influence on early rock. Son House was born around 1902 just outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi.¹⁷ He spent a good deal of his boyhood in Louisiana, and it was not until he came back to Mississippi around 1926 that he really took an interest in the blues or even took up the guitar. When he came back home a twenty-seven year old who had only played the guitar for three years, he met Charley Patton, who would become his mentor and companion for the rest of his life. Together with Patton and Willie Brown he played all around the Delta and perfected his art. He gradually became the best known blues man

around. As Muddy Waters recalled, “Seem like everybody could play some kind of instrument and there were so many fellers playin’ in the juke joints around Clarksdale I can’t remember them all. But the best we had to my ideas was Sonny House.”¹⁸ House first recorded through H.C. Speir in Grafton, Wisconsin where he recorded ten tracks that met with little commercial success.¹⁹ He recorded again for the Library of Congress in 1941 when he recorded eighteen tracks. In 1952 his good friend Willie Brown died and he decided to stop playing the guitar forever. In 1964 House was rediscovered by white blues enthusiasts and was coaxed into performing again. What he is most remembered for now is that he was the teacher of Robert Johnson.²⁰ Johnson did hang around House and may have picked up a few things, but House was definitely not Johnson’s only influence. House gave Johnson and future generations powerful guitar accompaniment and exceptional vocal control, exemplified in his a capella pieces, that have been copied and used for decades.

Another blues man that follows this tradition and stands as a direct link to rock and roll is Muddy Waters. His music has been copied by many musicians, importantly the bands that came over from England in the British “invasion” of the 1960’s, and most importantly by the Rolling Stones, who took not only their name but most of their early material from Water’s collection. Waters was born on April 4, 1915 in Rolling Fork, Mississippi.²¹ He was born in the Delta, but grew up in Clarksdale about a hundred miles away, where his grandmother raised him after his mother’s death in 1918. Like most everyone else, Waters started out on the harmonica and started playing the guitar when he was seventeen. While playing in juke joints around the area, he came into contact with Son House and Robert Johnson, both of whom influenced his style, adding imaginative slide techniques and unique rhythm patterns. In 1943, at the age of twenty eight, Waters left Mississippi for good and headed to Chicago, a mecca for the black population in the North. He got a day job working on a loading dock and would play seven nights a week at local clubs. In 1948 he recorded for the Chess label, and his first hit was “Rolling Stone.” His reputation built while he played bigger and better venues and by 1952 he was a nationally established recording star who had already had three records place on the R&B charts in Billboard’s Top Ten.²² All of the Chicago blues artists of later generations and of today emulate him in order to generate a following that compares to Waters’. With his use of the electric guitar and his wide range of songs, early rock and roll artists emulated him as well.

As important as the blues men were to the blues becoming rock and roll, the blues songs themselves also had aspects that became integral parts of rock and roll. The lyrical qualities of blues songs were very important. Many lyrics of blues songs were used as the lyrics of early rock and roll songs. The earliest influences for the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf songs, and this shows in their almost predominately blues song driven live sets. ²³ Led Zeppelin took Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson songs, amplified them and turned that into a career. As well as directly copying lyrics, many early rock musicians used the same lyrical style as the blues men. Instead of talking about the normal pop themes such as puppy love, happiness, and Caucasian middle-class life, they wrote and sang about the realities of life; the heartbreak, the cheating, the pain, and the carnal pleasures. Another important similarity between the blues and early rock is the structure of their songs. Almost all blues songs lyrics follow the AAB form of rhyme. The first line would be sung, then repeated, and

then another line would be sung that rhymed with the first line. This is evident in almost every blues song, and is very prominent in early rock, such as Elvis Presley's Hound Dog:

| | |
|--|---|
| You ain't nothin' but a hound dog | A |
| cryin' all the time | |
| You ain't nothin' but a hound dog | A |
| cryin' all the time | |
| You ain't ever caught a rabbit and you | B |
| ain't no friend of mine | |

Elvis' roots were steeped heavily in blues, country, and gospel music. Another aspect of blues structure that is found in early rock and today in music is I-IV-V chord progression sequence. In a blues song the I-chord, or the tonic chord as it is called in musical terms, is played for four measures.²⁴ Then the IV-chord, or the dominant chord, is played for four measures. The I-chord is then played for four more measures, with the V-chord following this with four measures. This is exemplified in Cream's song "Politician," one that is nothing but a blues song set with electric guitars.²⁵ Another aspect of blues songs that comes through in rock and roll is the off-beat, back-beat style that much of rock has, actually more than the blues ever did. The off-beat, back-beat style is when the bass drum plays on the first and third beat of the measure, and the snare plays on the second and fourth beat of the measure. The emphasis on the second and fourth beats of the measure, played primarily on the snare drum, created a body movement that excited the listener.²⁶ Although blues musicians tended to convey this beat style with their rhythm patterns on the guitar, it wasn't until rock and roll added the drums that this beat style could be fully appreciated. Another aspect of blues songs and playing, especially of Robert Johnson's, were major scale boogie patterns.²⁷ These patterns were played on single strings of a guitar, played chromatically, sounding today like a walking bass line. The origin of the bass line itself comes from these early boogie patterns. Early rock and roll musicians played these major scale patterns on the bass, guitar, and piano to drive songs and make them feel more "upbeat." These structural qualities along with the lyrical aspects of blues songs show how important the blues was to the development of rock and roll and how rock and roll is basically just an updated version of the blues.

Many early rock musicians used the blues in their music, but two of the most important early rockers were Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. Chuck Berry, born Charles Edward Anderson Berry in St. Louis, Missouri on October 18, 1926, is considered the poet-laureate of the first generation of classic rockers.²⁸ As rock historian Loyd Grossman says in *A Social History of Rock Music*, "Berry was the first performer to demonstrate that rock and roll could be philosophically and artistically worthwhile as well as good to dance to ... he put a measure of quality into rock and roll."²⁹ Berry taught himself saxophone and piano, but is best known as the self-taught father of rock and roll guitar. He fused certain elements of the blues, such as repetitions, chokes, and bends, techniques that he learned from listening to Robert Johnson and his contemporaries, with country music sounding speed licks and slides. An important innovation in the development of

rock guitar that Berry seems to have come up with is his rhythm guitar style.³⁰ Using bar chords he would strum an eighth-note beat on the bass strings of the guitar while alternating with his pinkie every two beats four frets above the bar. This created a driving sound to his material that continues to be used by modern rock guitarists.³¹ In the early 1950's Berry, who had a wife and two children, supplemented his income as a hairdresser by leading a small blues combo. His combo became widely known and he decided to visit Chess records in Chicago to secure a record deal. Chess records did not like Berry as a standard blues musician, but instead asked him to rework a few of his songs at a faster tempo. One of these re-workings became "Maybellene," and Leonard Chess, the founder of Chess records, rushed it to New York and disc jockey Alan Freed, the premier rock disc jockey of that day.³² "Maybellene" reached number one on the R& B charts and number five on the pop charts that summer; within the next four years he recorded eight more top-forty hits. Berry wrote tales of teenage existence with a freshness and humor that was not coming from the pop sensations of that day, and the population soon fell in love with his music. His songs dealt with important adolescent concerns such as romance, sex, school, cars, and parents that could be accepted by almost anyone. In 1964 Berry had three top-forty tunes that went up against the British invasion, but it was eventually a losing battle. Many sixties groups recorded Berry's songs and often cited him as a major influence in their development, but he never again achieved his previous popular status.

Considered by many to personify the pinnacle of classic rock and roll, Elvis Presley, a second-generation classic rocker, fused elements of the blues, rockabilly, rhythm and blues, country, and gospel. Although there he had many contemporaries, such as Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis, he was separated from the rest because he became the vehicle for the mass popularization of the rock and roll genre. He was in the right position at the right time, and he fused the right elements of music so that everyone could embrace him. Elvis was born in a two-room shotgun shack in Tupelo, Mississippi on January 8, 1935.³³ In 1948 his family moved to Memphis, where Elvis' interest in music began to grow. He would listen to many famous black artists of the day, such as B.B. King, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Howlin' Wolf, on the radio as well as country artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and Bob Wills. He later claimed all of these as influences.³⁴ Elvis's recordings, especially his early ones, clearly show the influence of the blues, with the twelve-bar blues pattern being prominent.³⁵ After high school Elvis secured a truck-driving job for Crown Electric. One evening in 1953 he stopped in at Sun Records and recorded two sides of a 45-rpm disc for \$3.98. The owner of the store, Sam Phillips, was not impressed. The next year Elvis recorded "That's All Right (Mania)" at Sun Records and this time his record was noticed. The song created a stir in Memphis, went to number one on the local country charts, and enabled him to start touring. During this tour he perfected his live performances with hip shaking and dancing. Elvis described that he got the moves from his experiences with black gospel revival meetings. Elvis signed with RCA and recorded "Heartbreak Hotel" and "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" on January 10, 1956 at RCA's Nashville studios. Both songs went to number one and Elvis scored ten more number ones and twenty more top forty hits during the next four years.³⁶ By the 1960s classic rock was slowly dying out. Elvis no longer dominated the charts but became simply a major recording artist. By 1970 Elvis's professional life consisted of concentrated touring, but his edge was definitely gone and it was obvious that he had abdicated his throne as the King of Rock and Roll. On August 16, 1977,

Elvis died at his Graceland mansion from a supposed drug overdose. Elvis Presley's contribution to the story of rock and roll will always be important because he carried rock to everyone in the United States, thus helping solidify rock and roll's permanence as a popular music form. After Elvis, rock and roll was there to stay.

Since the end of the 1950s rock had gradually moved away from its R&B roots.

Mainstream rock was on the verge of extinction in the early 1960s. There were all kinds of pop music, but very little real, raw, basic rock and roll. With the British invasion of the 1960's, this music that had its origins in the blues came back to the mainstream and was now accepted everywhere. The Beatles, Cream, Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling Stones brought with them their knowledge of the blues from their early days. The influence of the blues in these bands can be seen and heard all over their songs. The Beatles frequently used the standard I-IV-V blues progression in their songs, but often expanded on this formula in their later songs, taking rock to an all-new level.³⁷ Their musical direction in their songs, along with the blues musicians, influenced many later bands. The blues in Led Zeppelin's music is very apparent. Six of the nine songs on their second album Led Zeppelin II are classic blues standards, words exactly the same, set to louder music and different melodies. The chord patterns of many of their songs are in the classic blues form, and they sing about all of the things a blues man would have: hatred, hard work, romance, sex, and death. Their song "The Lemon Song," a basic twelve-bar blues, illustrates the continuing thread from the blues through the blues based British bands to early heavy metal and modern rock.³⁸ A contemporary of Led Zeppelin was Cream, another band that shows the heavy blues influence. In their brief two-year career they recorded two albums that were met with critical acclaim. They were one of the first rock trios (guitar, bass, drums) and successfully mixed their knowledge of the blues with their improvisational skills, creating classic rock songs. The blues structure and form is prevalent in most of their songs, especially in "Politician" and "Crossroads." One of the members of Cream, Eric Clapton, is considered the father of many blues revivals in popular culture, the most recent being around 1992. With his early bands he always played blues standards, was considered one of the best soloists ever, and always cited his influences as early blues musicians such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters.³⁹ Rock and roll has a long and tumultuous history. It started in the little shacks on Southern plantations as the blues, with blues men picking and singing to drive their troubles away. When the Depression hit, these blues men no longer had real jobs and were forced to move around, trying to make music into a career. Some blues men succeeded, some did not. The ones that did though helped shape and influence music forever. The blues became rock and roll through a series of steps and through many different ways. The blues was most influential in giving rock lyrical and structural form. The lyrics of blues songs and the lyrical quality of blues songs are apparent in early and modern rock. As with the lyrics, certain blues structures (AAB form, I-IV-V chord structure) are prevalent in early and modern rock. The blues give musical creativity to rock and roll, and will continue to influence rock and roll for as long as it lasts.

Notes

1 Frances Davis, *The History of the Blues*, (New York: Hyperion, 1995) p. 132.

2 Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, (New York Times Books, 1984) p. 48.

- 3 Davis, p. 132.
- 4 Davis, p. 47.
- 5 Davis, p. 48.
- 6 Davis, p. 47.
- 7 Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock and Roll*, (New York: Random House, 1972) p.53.
- 8 Guralnick, p.53.
- 9 Davis, p. 129
- 10 Davis, p. 126
- 11 Davis, p. 127
- 12 Davis, p. 129
- 13 Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll A Social History*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) p. 18
- 14 Guralnick, p.55
- 15 Davis, p. 132.
- 16 Davis, p. 129
- 17 Guralnick, p. 50.
- 18 Guralnick, p. 50.
- 19 Guralnick, p. 52.
- 20 Guralnick, p. 53.
- 21 Guralnick, p. 65.
- 22 Guralnick, p. 70.
- 23 Friedlander, p.83.
- 24 Joe Stuessy, *Rock and Roll. Its History and Stylistic Development*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990) p. 30.
- 25 Friedlander, p. 217.
- 26 Friedlander, p. 18.
- 27 Friedlander, P. 19.
- 28 Friedlander, p. 33.
- 29 Friedlander, p. 33.
- 30 Friedlander, p. 34.
- 31 Friedlander, p. 34.
- 32 Friedlander, p. 34.
- 33 Friedlander, p. 43.
- 34 Friedlander, p. 43.
- 35 Stuessy, p. 29
- 36 Friedlander, p.45.
- 37 Friedlander, p.88.
- 38 Stuessy, p. 307.
- 39 Davis, p. 223.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)