

“Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground”—Blind Willie Johnson (1927)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Blind Willie Johnson



Original label

“Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground” is a song with a powerful vocal and no lyrics. Or at least no lyrics in a traditional sense; there are no words. Instead, what one hears against the backdrop of Blind Willie Johnson’s aching, piercing slide guitar are Johnson’s grunts and moans. They are the sounds of fatigue, sorrow, pain and death, and are meant to convey the anguish of Christ the night before his Crucifixion from the point of view of both Him and his disciples.

It is believed Blind Willie Johnson was born in 1897 (some sources give 1902), probably just outside Brenham, Texas. At a startlingly young age, he announced to his father that he wanted to be a preacher and also picked up his first guitar. Johnson was blinded when he was 7 years old by his step mother; she threw lye in his face in retaliation for Johnson’s father’s infidelities. Regardless of that horrific occurrence, Johnson did not waiver in his devotion to god or falter from what he felt was his calling. By the time he was in his teens, he was making money by playing music on the street, collecting money in a hat or cup. Living in Marlin, Texas, Johnson continued busking, always with gospels and spirituals. He worshiped at the Marlin Church of God in Christ where he often performed as well.

At one time, Columbia Records maintained various field units that roamed the nation seeking out and recording local talent. In the late 1920s, it was via one of these units that Johnson came to render his first recordings.

Between 1927 and 1930, Blind Willie would record 30 titles for the Columbia label, for which Johnson was probably paid between \$25 and \$30 per song. One of these recordings was his universally acknowledged masterpiece “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.”

The song’s title, music and basic structure was taken from an 18th-century English hymn titled “Gethsemane.” (Gethsemane was the garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives where Jesus is said to have prayed on the eve of the Crucifixion.) It was composed by physician and clergyman Thomas Haweis and was first published in England 1792. It begins:

Dark was the night, and cold the ground
On which the Lord was laid;
His sweat like drops of blood ran down;
In agony he prayed.

The hymn endured, eventually finding its way to America. In time, and often with great permutations to its lyrics, the song would eventually find itself printed in hymnals published throughout the 1800's and into the next century. ("Dark Was the Night" was first published in an American hymnal in 1841.)

However, hymnal books were expensive and few churches of the era could afford them for their full congregation. Additionally, even if worshipers at that time were not illiterate (and many were), they were untrained in music. In order to lead the congregation in song, many preachers turned to what is now called, variously, "hymnody," "lining out," "long-meter singing" or "Dr. Watts' hymns" (the latter taking its name from Dr. Isaac Watts, an 18th century hymnist and composer of the holiday favorite "Joy to the World").

The practice of "lining out"—which began as a conscious break by choirs away from the edicts of the Catholic church--consists of one person, a choir leader or pastor, "pitching" the song to the congregation. He or she sings the hymn, giving the pitch and some shape of the melody before it is sung back, sung together, by the body of the congregation. While the African-American tradition of "lining out" usually attempts to copy the melody set forth by the leader, it also allows for embellishments, including moans and other vocal effects.

It was no doubt within this tradition that Willie Johnson would set down his version of "Dark Was the Night." While he skillfully played the melody of the song on his guitar, he dispensed with the lyrics entirely, instead putting in their place his collection of piercing cries, hums and moans that replicated the emotional turmoil and deliverance of Christ in his final night. Johnson's vocalizations combined to result in a performance was deeply heartfelt, sincere and powerful. Ry Cooder called it "the most transcendent piece in all American music." As stirring as Johnson's vocalizations are, so too is his musicianship via his bottle-neck, or slide guitar, playing style.

Additionally, Johnson seemed to get sounds out of his guitar that no one else before (and few since) have been able to. In the words of one writer, "Johnson made his guitar moan, slur and sing, often finishing lyrics for him and, throughout the years, Clapton, Jimmy Page, Ry Cooder, Duane Allman and many more have expressed a debt to this sightless visionary." Adopting the vocal style Johnson did on "Cold Was the Night" was only possible because his guitar was, in essence, his duet partner, able to convey the message and full meaning of the words he was leaving out. At times the guitar seems to weep words all on its own.

Some of Johnson's other recordings include: "It's Nobody's Fault but Mine," "The Soul of a Man," "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" and an early protest song that highlighted the mistreatment of black soldiers during WWII.

Though "Dark Was the Night" would become his most enduring recording, Johnson had success with many of his other releases. According to musicologist, Samuel Charters, Capitol's first pressing of Johnson's "Jesus Make Up..." was 9400 discs, a higher volume of discs than they manufactured for a Bessie Smith recording that same year. Columbia considered Johnson a major discovery and placed ads about him in such African-American newspapers as "The Chicago Defender" and even paid for him to travel to recording sessions, once as far away as New Orleans.

But whatever popularity Johnson enjoyed in the late 1920s ended abruptly with the collapse of the US stock market and the advent of the Great Depression. By the start of the 1940s, Johnson was living in Beaumont, Texas, and was back to busking. He died in 1945, at age 48, of pneumonia from sleeping in the wet remains of his burned out home.

But if Johnson was denied his full due in his lifetime, posthumously he has come to be celebrated. Peter, Paul and Mary, Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, Beck, the White Stripes, and the band Garbage, among others, have all covered his work or spoke of their admiration in interviews. Meanwhile, his slide guitar style is still being studied and emulated. Johnson received a major compliment in 1977 when NASA chose "Dark Was the Night" as one of the selections to be included on its "Murmurs of the Earth"/Voyager disc for delivery into the far reaches of the galaxy. It was included to convey to future, so-far undiscovered life forms and listeners the essence of human loneliness.

The wordless, almost pre-verbal singing that Johnson seemed to pioneer on "Dark Was the Night" would prove prophetic and, influenced by him or not, can be heard in almost all genres of music today. This is especially true in blues. For it is blues musicians who most seem to cry and wail, via their voices and instruments, in an attempt to convey the degree of angst and sadness that can't be conveyed in spoken words.

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