

“Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground” –Blind Willie Johnson (1927)

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Essay by Shane Ford (guest post)*



Blind Willie Johnson

In 1977, NASA launched two Voyager spacecraft. Included on each was a gold-plated copper disk containing sounds and images meant to portray the diversity of life on Earth. Specifically, Carl Sagan and his team included 90 minutes of music to communicate to any potential intelligent life form in the solar system that we are human, feeling creatures. Of those 27 song selections only four were from the United States, and one, “Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground,” was a three minutes and 20 seconds masterpiece by a blind, African American from Texas recorded almost 50 years earlier.

Willie Johnson was born to Dock Johnson and Mary King on January 25, 1897 in Pendleton, Texas, a small farming community just north of Temple. He was not born blind. Within the first ten years of his life, his mother would die and his stepmother would tragically blind him with lye. With this blinding, Johnson’s path began--away from the grueling labor jobs that would have most certainly been his fate, and onto one of the few roads available to him at the time. He became a Homer like figure, a blind bard traveling through various Texas cities--Temple, Marlin, Navasota, Hempstead, Hearne, and Houston’s Fourth Ward--sometimes with a partner but mostly solo, carrying his beat-up guitar with a tin-cup looped around the neck with wire singing songs, warnings, and ballads crafted from the African American spirituals or woven from events from the newspapers.

Johnson played what were known in those days as “knife songs,” a technique of running the back of the knife against the strings. It was a style of playing that especially appealed to the itinerant religious singer performing alone on the streets, where the effect of the slide was ideal for mimicking the sound of church bells, a train whistle, or could function as another voice for a call-and-response song, a stand-in for a singing partner when one could not be found.

In addition to his revolutionary approach with the guitar, Johnson also brought a unique vocal technique to his songs, discarding the AAB pattern typical of blues and instead evoking, through the use of his false bass and change in pitches, the image of the best of the black preachers or song leaders of his day. In a tradition where the experienced voice mattered more than the eloquence, Johnson embodied what the folklorist Howard Courlander, in "Negro Folk Music USA," described as the preferred "...hoarse, rough, or sandy" vocal elements.

Johnson's first recording session came in December of 1927 when Columbia Records set-up a makeshift studio in Dallas. It was in those first six sides, through the use of his voice and slide guitar, where Johnson united the musical vocabulary of the solo blues performer with the antiphonal group singing of the African American spirituals and work songs.

While on the streets in the Jim Crow South Johnson may have been seen as a beggar, but in front of the microphone he was able to conjure the griot, the healer, the mystic, the Old Testament survivors, and black folk heroes all in one. He was the first to bring the church members into the studio and, through him, became both the impassioned preacher and the jubilant congregants, responding to his own call with the responses of "oh," or "well," heavy moans, or his evocative slide. And when he sang the slavery era song, "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed," or about motherless children having a hard time, or of Samson tearing the building down, it was not the origin of the songs that mattered but the feeling.

"'Moaning' does not imply grief or anguish; on the contrary, it is a blissful or ecstatic rendition of a song..."

Harold Courlander, "Negro Folk Music U.S.A."

The title for "Dark was the Night" originated in the form of an 18th century hymn written by the English physician and clergyman Thomas Haweis, under the title "Gethsemane." It recalled the night before the Crucifixion when Jesus prayed at the foot of the Mount of Olives and where His agony was so deep that "his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground." But like many of the spirituals during the time of slavery, the hymn during this period took on an even greater, personal significance and was transformed by a people who saw in His suffering their own, and through the Resurrection their own salvation, the cross proof that the spirit could be killed but not the soul.

In this new incarnation, "Dark Was the Night" was sung as "Am I Born to Die" on slave plantations. It was sung by black preachers in the early 1900s at the execution of a black man as he was hung in Natchez, Mississippi. It was requested by a dying 25 year old woman in Dallas to be sung at her funeral in 1919. It was sung when Frankie laid Albert down, and it was sung at Good Friday services and by the song leaders in Amen Corner in black churches as a lined-hymn funeral song all over the South.

The antiphonal lining-out hymns, already established in the white Protestant tradition in the United States were, for African Americans, just an extension of the call and response pattern carried over from Africa. The practice, usually at the beginning of the church service, involved the song leader or preacher singing or stating the first line of a hymn while the congregation, in unison, would then sing the line back in response in long, a capella utterances producing the

effect of an almost communal moan. This practice was only reinforced out of necessity due to the laws against education that kept those in bondage virtually illiterate. This method of delivery was often practiced in the spiritual “Amazing Grace” and can be heard in the singing renditions of “Dark was the Night” performed by Mary Price in Louisiana for Folkways in 1954, and by Johnson’s widow, Angeline, in her 1955 interview with musicologist Samuel Charters.

What Johnson accomplished on his recording of “Dark Was the Night” was as moving as Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, but right in line with what he had been hearing in and out of the black churches his whole life. What was unique was what he decided to do with these elements: stripping the original song of its lyrics, and performing this call and response line-hymn with the short bursts of standard guitar picking functioning as the song leader while his voice and celestial slide delivered the prolonged moans of the congregation, the combination so profound it transcends language, straddling the abyss that lies between feeling and expression. In here, one can trace the words of the original hymn as Johnson hums and moans in the voice of his ancestors, while also constructing a new language, distilling the song to strictly emotional measures, and by not singing he is able to free it from categorization.¹ In the hands of Johnson, this is not only about the particular death and eventual redemption of one man but of a people, a universal moan. And it was on this afternoon in 1927 where he was able to, in a little over three minutes, express an entire history in his *own* voice: the death of Jesus, slavery, the lynchings, the heat, the blindness, the pain, and the singing patterns of the black musical language, and produce a masterpiece. It was about His suffering, but it was more. It was love, it was resistance, and it was an expression of freedom, a voice who had been through the fire and was determined to be an individual self in the face of terror. As the theologian James H. Cone, who compared the cross to the lynching tree, says in his memoir, “Suffering is sorrow and joy, tragedy and triumph.”

Following the success of this first recording session, Johnson would go on to record for Columbia in each of the next three years. In his unique style he transformed spirituals like “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” sang disaster songs concerning the democracy of death in the Titanic ballad, “God Moves on the Water,” and asked “What is the Soul of a Man” when he sat in the temple with the lawyers and scholars. But after 1930, he would never record again. The Depression temporarily destroyed the market for record companies, and severely impacted the financial viability for playing on the streets. In the next ten years, we see Johnson getting closer to the church than ever before, and not just the Pentecostal church, but the Colored Methodist Episcopal and the Baptist church as well. He resides for a time in Marlin, San Antonio, and finally, Beaumont, where he was still playing on the streets. Shopkeepers remembered him as a “...dignified man and a magnificent singer.”

The hope, though, for most of the street evangelists was that one day they may have their own place of worship and a name, like many black professionals during Jim Crow, that prioritized their social status. This was accomplished by disguising their first names with their initials, a minor yet significant step to retain their dignity from those who wished to usurp it, forcing those who would otherwise attempt to strip them of their humanity to refer to them by their credentials and last name like in the case of Johnson’s mentor, Rev. M.B. (Madkin) Butler. Johnson died at the age of 48 on September 18, 1945. His last address in Beaumont, Texas, doubled as a place of worship Johnson called The House of Prayer. The name he last used was Rev. W.J. Johnson.

Carl Sagan wrote about the purpose of the 1977 NASA Golden Records in his book, "Murmurs of Earth":

Our previous messages had contained information about what we perceive and how we think. But there is much more to human beings than perceiving and thinking. We are feeling creatures. However, our emotional life is more difficult to communicate...

To assist in what selections would be included, the Texas folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax was enlisted to add his expertise to the Voyager team. Lomax, beginning with his father John in the early 1930s, had spent his life traveling to the prisons, churches, and the sharecropper's shacks seeking the most beautiful music America--and later the world--had to offer. It was Lomax who equated the African American prisoner's work songs and the sounds of Louis Armstrong's trumpet to the best works of Bach and Stravinsky in his book, "The Land Where the Blues Began," and who, while in the fields, carried a copy of Johnson's record "I Just Can't Keep From Cryin'" as one of his constant companions. And it was Lomax who chose "Dark was the Night" to be included on the Golden Record.

Sagan also saw "Dark was the Night" as one of the more important songs included, pairing it with Beethoven's Cavatina from his String Quartet No. 13 in B flat, Opus 130 as the final two selections on the record. Beethoven composed the piece a year prior to his death through "sorrow and tears," according to his friend Karl Holz, communicating its composer's anxiousness, fears, and fragility through the violin in the same way Johnson's slide trembles alongside its composer's affecting moans. For Sagan, these were the two songs--one from a man who knew what it was like to see and had his sight taken from him, and one from a man who had hearing and lost it--that were the deepest expression of our human vulnerabilities, of our love, of our trials, and our shifting inner states for which, most often, there are no words. Sagan wrote, "For us they express a longing for contact with other beings in the depths of space, a musical expression of the principal message of the Voyager itself." He believed they were the truest expression of "cosmic loneliness," but the term seems insufficient for the beauty and depth of these works. A better term may be a "cosmic resilience," what we may hear if we could present our profound vulnerability through sound, allowing others to witness, emotionally, what it feels like to wrestle with the trials of human existence.

Johnson's influence on American music was immediate and continues to reverberate. He had the soul and voice of what would become rock 'n' roll, and with him a new era was born. He was an original, a first among equals--the modern bard who walked the shadows of America's streets, and stood face to face with God. "Dark was the Night," his meditation on the inadequacy of language to express emotion represents our message of what it means to be human--still drifting through the heavens--which may just outlive us all.

Shane Ford is a multimedia artist who is passionate about the history of blues and gospel music. In 2010, he spearheaded a campaign to honor Texas musician "Blind" Willie Johnson by unearthing new research and helping to honor him with a cenotaph and historical marker in Beaumont, Texas. His research was published in "Texas Monthly" and "Shine a Light: My

Year with 'Blind' Willie Johnson.” He has also hosted a roots blues radio program in Austin, Texas.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.