

# “The Complete Recordings”--Robert Johnson (1936-1937)

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Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)\*



*Robert Johnson*

Twenty-nine songs in 41 takes is a compact legacy of a bluesman’s complete career, two hours of music fitting in the palm of one hand. That was the power of the 1990 Sony/Columbia 2-CD set, Robert Johnson, “The Complete Recordings.”

The genesis of that legacy began in the late 1920s, when Johnson (1911-1938) embarked on his career as a performing bluesman in the Mississippi Delta. For his models, he took the best musicians that he was hearing in the region, especially Charley Patton, Son House, and Willie Brown, along with the records being made by St. Louis musician Lonnie Johnson. But according to some accounts, Johnson wasn’t very good, and sometime around 1930-31, he spent a year or longer learning and woodshedding in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, with another guitarist, Ike Zimmerman. His musical growth was remarkable enough, upon his return to the Delta to cause wonder if he had not sold his soul to the devil during the meantime.

What people speculated would have been of no concern to Johnson but what they were willing to pay to hear was. During the early to mid-1930s, he rapidly expanded his songbag, adding the artful if little-known blues of Nehemiah “Skip” James, the big-city piano blues of Leroy Carr, Peetie Wheatstraw and Jabo Williams, and additional songs by St. Louis-based Roosevelt Sykes, and even a hit by Memphis Minnie.

Johnson’s first opportunity to make records came in 1936, at a time when the record industry was holding fewer sessions with southern blues musicians than it did seven or eight years before. Johnson passed his audition with the Jackson, Mississippi, talent broker Henry C. Speir, who referred him to his American Recording Company (ARC) contact Ernie Oertle, who in turn set him up with a recording session in San Antonio, Texas, led by Don Law. Johnson recorded enough songs to fill eight 78s, of which “Terraplane Blues” backed with “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” was the standout hit upon its release in March 1937. To follow up on that success, he was invited to make additional records that summer in Dallas. The next year, Johnson died on a plantation near Greenwood, Mississippi under circumstances that remain mysterious.

Yet, Johnson’s music lived on. Initially it was through cover versions by his protégés Robert Lockwood, Johnny Shines, Muddy Waters, and Howlin’ Wolf, among others. Among the few white listeners who noticed him were John Hammond and Alan Lomax, each of them mentioning Johnson’s name whenever appropriate in print or in conversation. Meanwhile, ARC was sold in 1938 to Columbia Records, which in 1949 introduced the LP record. The stage was then set for Johnson’s rebirth.

In 1961, Frank Driggs of Columbia compiled 16 Johnson takes (some of them not previously released on the 78s) for the LP "King of the Delta Blues Singers." Although seemingly for collectors of early jazz and folk music, the album was noticed especially by British blues/rock musicians such as Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones members Brian Jones and Keith Richards. Songs like "Cross Road Blues," "Ramblin' on My Mind," and "Love in Vain" as recorded by white musicians during the 1960s sold in higher numbers than the original Johnson releases did in the late 1930s. The second volume of "King of the Delta Blues Singers" in 1969 issued the remaining Johnson songs and an alternate take of "Kind Hearted Woman Blues." These two LPs sold well enough to encourage Columbia to begin preparing in 1973 a 3-LP set of the complete recordings, but its release was delayed through the 1980s.

By then, compact disc technology was developed and introduced to consumers, and Sony Records acquired Columbia. The entire legacy of who was by then the most influential blues musician was repackaged to fit in one hand, with notes and lyric transcriptions by Johnson copyrights administrator Stephen C. LaVere tucked in the box, making for an irresistible package. When "The Complete Recordings" was finally released in 1990, buyers could choose between the 3-LP set or the 2-CD version. Most of the 600,000 purchasers during the first year chose the CDs, more than ten times the initial sales expectation of the collection. This success enabled Sony/Columbia producer Lawrence Cohn to prepare more blues reissues from the Columbia and ARC catalogs (including Bessie Smith, Blind Willie Johnson, and Bukka White). The Johnson collection was also a clear antecedent to the ambitious blues series executed by Johnny Parth for the Austrian label Document, which reissued on CD nearly all of the vast remainder of the recordings made before 1942 by all blues musicians and African American sacred and gospel singers.

What is it about the recordings made by Robert Johnson that made it more appealing to today's rock listeners than those that other bluesmen made before 1941, including those that Johnson imitated? One answer is that Johnson happened to record for a company that saved its metal stampers and those have survived to the present day. From those stampers, low-surface-noise discs been pressed for smooth-playing transfers and vivid playbacks. By comparison, the label that recorded Charlie Patton and Son House, Paramount Records, went out of business in 1932, then sold its metal stampers for scrap. The music by Patton and House, among the other musicians for Paramount, survive only in battered, poorly-pressed records which demand concentration and a little faith to be listened to.

But another reason is that Johnson played a guitar and, since the 1940s, the guitar has replaced the piano as the instrument of choice for American vernacular music. Furthermore, in many of his blues, Johnson was playing to the pulsing "big beat" meter in 4/4 time to which rhythm sections in the big bands and, since the 1950s, rock bands were anchoring their sounds. When rock musicians and their fans have looked to blues history for their musical ancestors, Robert Johnson was and still is the Delta blues figure whose music is the most readily available, most accessible and most easy to tap one's foot to.

For the centennial in 2011 of Johnson's birth, Sony/Columbia released "The Centennial Collection" of the complete Johnson recordings, adding an outtake recovered in 1995, and improving the playback sound.

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