



Robert Johnson, left, with Johnny Shines, c.1935

Preaching the blues

Stories being told and re-told about musical pioneers

RUSSELL DAVIES

Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow

UP JUMPED THE DEVIL
The real life of Robert Johnson
336pp. Chicago Review Press. \$40.
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Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff

THE ORIGINAL BLUES
The emergence of the blues in African American
vaudeville
480pp. University Press of Mississippi. \$85.
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It was in the 1960s, under the influence of the folk music movement, that the prewar acoustic blues recordings of the deep South suddenly re-emerged. New heroes shot to fame, some of them ancient but still performing, others long dead, though ever youthful in the grooves of shellac and vinyl. Foremost among the casualties, a founder member of the "Twenty-Seven Club" of musical stars who died at that age, was Robert Johnson, previously known to few listeners outside the feverish clan of 78 rpm record collectors. Johnson's name looked unexciting, certainly compared with Blind Lemon Jefferson, Peetie Wheatstraw and their like. But he died young, under sinister circumstances, and sounded genuinely anguished on many of the tracks he made, so Johnson matched the zeitgeist perfectly. You could listen to his entire output, including alternative takes, in a couple of hours—and then start wondering what exactly you had been hearing.

Johnson's LP compilations, drawn from two quick bursts of recording in 1936 and 37, were launched without much optimism, yet they sold in colossal numbers. Hasty but earnest attempts were naturally made to fill the holes in the man's short lifestory. I contributed myself, on radio in 1991, making the required pilgrimages to sites all over the state of Mississippi, snake-infested graveyards and all. Johnson's life had ended in 1938, but it was surprising how close to him one could still feel. I got to know his friend David "Honeyboy" Edwards quite well, and recorded (through a window, in the deepening Delta dusk) a session with one of Johnson's girlfriends, Willie Mae Powell, whom he menaced and promised her he would, in the "rain". But I dare say biographine tended to perpetuate perhaps invent new ones.

The wait for a proper corrective biography has been a long one. More than one prominent Johnson researcher has promised such a volume, only to die before producing the goods; so we must all be thankful for the survival of Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow, who between them have put in well over a hundred years' study of the Delta blues. Their one mistake, to my mind, was to choose the title *Up Jumped the Devil*. Surely the first duty of a modern Johnson biography must be to dispose of the tiresome tale that a sudden blossoming of Robert Johnson's instrumental technique (a transformation which certainly took place) resulted from his having sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads at midnight, and so on—the old Faustian bargain. The story was a blues-world cliché before Johnson's career began, already used as a self-dramatizing ploy by the (unrelated) Delta singer Tommy Johnson. *Up Jumped the Devil* (though it is, it must be said, the subtitle of Johnson's version of "Preachin' Blues"), suggests a reluctance to abandon the creaky old myth once and for all.

Of course Conforth and Wardlow don't subscribe to the crossroads superstition. They replace it convincingly with an account of Johnson's search for his natural father, Noah Johnson—a quest that failed, but brought Robert instead under the aegis of a guitar mentor by the name of Ike Zimmerman. Able to afford that Delta rarity, a Gibson guitar, Ike was an accomplished player, and it seems that Robert did learn a lot in a short time. While Ike was no devil, he was inclined, according to his daughter, to use his music as a prelude to seduction ("My daddy was a womanizer"). Robert needed no tutoring along those lines—in fact, at the point of their meeting, he was already a teenage widower. His underage bride Virginia (Robert, too, had misrepresented his age) had died in childbirth, along with their undelivered baby. Johnson was away at his trade at the time, playing distant juke joints and joy-houses, and his guilt over that absence seems to have driven him into a frenzy of blasphemous rage. "He'd go to cursin' God out and he could empty a house quick", the piano player Memphis Slim recalled. Of course, this chimed perfectly with the beliefs of those many God-fearing Delta citizens who had regarded the blues all along as the devil's music. It was they, rather than Robert, who introduced Satan into the narrative.

Births, marriages and deaths in this book, incidentally, are scrupulously backed up with the relevant certificates and licences and census records. It was Gayle Dean Wardlow who found Robert Johnson's death certificate, more than fifty years ago, and he evidently acquired a taste for documentation. Among the many readjustments he and Conforth make to our expectations of the real-life Johnson, the chiefest surprise is how close he might have come to living an "orderly" existence.

An important part of his childhood was spent not out among the cotton fields where his mother and brutal stepfather lived and worked (Robert particularly loathed the work), but in the city of Memphis, Tennessee, with a previous stepfather, Charles Dodds Spencer, and his welcoming family. The musical hubbub of Beale Street was nearby; professional entertainers visited the city, and Robert may have witnessed some. He certainly received a solid Memphis education: he could read and write, and friends remembered him consuming reading matter of all kinds when there was no music to play. But of course there was always music to play, women to charm, and drink to drown in, and together they lured him back to the agricultural Delta and the "rambling" life of which he sang.

The circumstances of his recordings, particularly the first batch—made in Room Fourteen of the Gunter Hotel, San Antonio, Texas—were more fraught than some of us realized. Picked up on an erroneous vagrancy charge the night before his first visit to the microphone, Johnson had been seriously roughed up and his guitar smashed beyond retrieval; so some of the sounds that have been so minutely ana-

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lysed, in this book and elsewhere, came from an injured man playing somebody else's instrument. Somebody else's blues, in some cases, too: Conforth and Wardlow are ruthless in enumerating the memorable turns of phrase Johnson had adopted from others' recordings – while insisting that his vocal and instrumental intensity still made everything his own. And rightfully so, on occasion: it's true that the boogie bass pattern he bequeathed to the Chicago blues tradition had been heard before on a disc by Johnnie Temple, but Temple himself happily admitted that he'd learnt it from Johnson in the first place.

The tale we have always been told of Johnson's death was not, it seems, seriously misleading. His drink was indeed doctored by a jealous husband, on a gig at Three Forks, close to Greenwood, Miss, though the additive (in the form of mothballs) was apparently intended to cause pain and humiliation rather than death. Robert's innards, however, long trashed by alcohols of unspeakably variable grades, gave way under the strain, and he haemorrhaged to death over a couple of days. Up north, the impresario John Hammond, disappointed in his hopes of bringing Johnson to Carnegie Hall as part of a black music history spectacular, played a couple of Robert's tracks from the stage instead. He didn't choose the best ones available. The Johnson story died away for a good while. Now we have the fullest version we may ever get.

But blues historians can't toil up and down the old Highway 61 for ever. Other stories need

to be told, and one of them gets a fine first airing from *The Original Blues: The emergence of the blues in African American vaudeville*, where pioneers you've never heard of flourish, and die too soon. We are dealing here with the chains of black vaudeville houses which sprang up as the blackface habits of the minstrel era mercifully ebbed away. There was a long overlap: Jelly Roll Morton, who claimed to have invented jazz, was himself photographed in the old burnt-cork and zinc-white lips. To judge by his "comedy" introductions to certain Red Hot Peppers recordings of the mid-20s – magnificent in their instrumental verve – Jelly never had a future as a funny man, or indeed a past, but he knew a star when he saw one. And so he joined a general chorus of acclaim for Butler "String Beans" May.

Take comfort – not to have heard of String Beans until now is no crime. He never recorded, never strayed into mainstream circuits, and even among his own people was a difficult and controversial figure. What local critics and reporters couldn't do to bring him alive (Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff have been fantastically diligent in seeking out contemporary newspaper accounts of his appearances and exploits), the caricaturists and illustrators strove to make good. It wasn't a tough assignment: Beans was a long-legged, capering presence, possessed of a rhythmic logorrhoea which certainly deserves to count among the origins of rap. At his most biddable, he would play and sing the blues from his piano stool. What blues they were, in the absence of

recorded evidence, can only come to us in fragments, which Abbott and Seroff pursue into the far corners of discography. For example, an introductory figure from May's own "String Beans Blues", announcing itself in declamatory octaves, they find replicated all over the place – even in a 1930 Jelly Roll Morton accompaniment which we're lucky to be able to hear, since the Victor company should probably have rejected it. The vocalist, Miss Billie Young ("an actress friend who was down on her luck", Morton said) could count neither beats nor bars, so she wrongfoots Morton disastrously throughout.

String Beans can also be credited with the spread of some early blues imagery, notably the "Elgin movements" he lasciviously claimed for his hips. Elgin was a celebrated American watchmaking firm of the period, and that image endured for decades, springing up virtually unchanged in "Walkin' Blues" by none other than Robert Johnson. Butler May didn't live to observe any of that: he died grotesquely in 1917, the victim of a rowdy induction ceremony at some minor fraternal guild, in the course of which his neck was broken. Many of the blues-inclined vaudevillians brought to light by Abbott and Seroff met early deaths, showing repeatedly how hard and reckless the professional life was, and how little skilled medical attention was available even to prominent black Southerners.

The authors generally waste very little time on obsequies, but then their sources, chiefly newspapers, didn't dwell on the departed

either. As Walter C. Allen remarked in his bi-discography *Hendersonia* (1973), the staffs of black American papers were "small, poorly paid and overworked, even though zealous and conscientious in their duties. This of course limited their ability to cover everything adequately". It limits Abbott and Seroff too, but from a tattered heap of regional ephemera, they have drawn a remarkably lifelike picture of a struggling industry in the throes of self-creation. Post-Beans, one might say, the way was clear for an army of talented women – the "Blues Queens" – to take over the top billings, and eventually populate the record catalogues of the 20s. Where had they been before the phonograph "discovered" them? What apprenticeship was served by Sara Martin and Viola McCoy, Edith Wilson and Edmonia Henderson, Butterbeans and Susie and Ada Brown? Where had Bessie Smith and Clara Smith and Ma Rainey been forming their more famous styles? The answers are here in profusion.

This account closes in 1926, when Blind Lemon began recording. In the opening moments of his first issued piece, he deploys the "String Beans Blues" phrase, and it remains a mainstay of his self-accompaniments until the end. Lemon belonged to a different performing world, yet as the book concludes, "even if there was practically no guitar blues in African American vaudeville, the songs and styles of vaudeville stage stars left a deep impress on blues guitarists. Country blues came of age in the shadow of popular vaudeville blues".

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