

The Road to Fame

Early Life and Influences

Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Copiah County, Mississippi, on May 8, 1911, to Julia Dodds and Noah Johnson. Around 1918 they landed in the cotton-growing community of Robinsonville, Mississippi, about thirty miles south of Memphis.

As a teenager, Johnson became interested in music and began playing the harmonica. Later, he sought out older musicians who could teach him the rudiments of guitar. Against his family's wishes, he followed local musicians Willie Brown, Son House and Charley Patton to parties, fish fries, and juke joints around Robinsonville.

Brown, House, and Patton would often belittle Johnson's inferior musical skills. More importantly, the raw intensity of House's music greatly influenced Johnson's style and repertoire.

Increased Popularity

In the early 1930s, Johnson left Robinsonville to return to Hazlehurst, where he met Ike Zinermon, who became his musical coach and mentor.

Johnson's musical abilities blossomed under Zinermon's tutelage, and he incorporated much of Ike's music and style into his own. When Johnson returned to Robinsonville, Son House and Willie Brown were astounded at the artistic development of his music.

Over the next several years, as he performed at juke joints throughout the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, Johnson's popularity spread to western Tennessee and southern Mississippi.

Recording Sessions

In November 1936, the American Record Company took Johnson to San Antonio, Texas, to record some of his songs. This session produced his most famous song, "Terraplane Blues." The next June he was called back to Texas where he recorded the masterpiece "Hell Hound On My Trail." A total of twenty-nine compositions were recorded in five sessions. The Vocalion label released twelve of Johnson's songs.

Below are those compositions in the order they were recorded:



- Kind Hearted Woman Blues • I Believe I'll Dust My Broom
- Sweet Home Chicago • Ramblin' On My Mind
- When You Got A Good Friend • Come On In My Kitchen
- Terraplane Blues • Phonograph Blues • 32-20 Blues
- They're Red Hot • Dead Shrimp Blues • Cross Road Blues
- Walkin' Blues • Last Fair Deal Gone Down • Preachin' Blues (Up Jumped The Devil) • If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day • Stones In My Passway • I'm a Steady Rollin' Man • From Four Until Late • Hell Hound On My Trail • Little Queen Of Spades • Malted Milk • Drunken Hearted Man • Me And The Devil Blues • Stop Breakin' Down Blues • Traveling Riverside Blues • Honeymoon Blues
- Love In Vain Blues • Milkcow's Calf Blues

Page 1 - Image derived by Megan Slaughter of the Robert Johnson photo booth self-portrait, early 1930s, © 1986 Delta Haze Corporation, All Rights Reserved. Used By Permission.ARC label and sleeves, courtesy Delta Haze Corporation record archive; Grave marker photos 1 and 2 by Britt Hammons; marker number 3 by Tom Joynt; photo of Robert Plant by Kelly Rayeski

A Date with Destiny

In July 1938, Johnson arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi, to perform at a juke joint at the intersection of Highways 82 and 49E. The juke joint was referred to by locals as "Three Forks." Johnson's ongoing affair with the wife of the man who ran the juke joint proved to be his undoing. It is alleged that Johnson accepted a drink that was sent to him, and he soon became ill and was no longer able to perform.

Early the next morning he was transported to his room in the Baptist Town section of Greenwood. There Johnson lingered for a number of weeks before being moved to a tenant's home on the Star of the West Plantation. Johnson succumbed on Tuesday, August 16, 1938. He was twenty-seven years old.

Three Gravesites

Over the years, three gravesites have been identified for the bluesman. The most likely one, supported by an eye-witness account, is the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery about two miles north of Greenwood. According to witness Rose Eskridge, Johnson was buried in a simple pine box provided by Leflore County. Historian Stephen LaVere erected a marker there in 2002.



Originally located in 1973, Mount Zion M.B. Church Cemetery near Morgan City is the site of the second effort to honor Robert Johnson. A one-ton obelisk was placed here in 1991 by Columbia Records.



Payne Chapel M.B. Church at Quito is home to Johnson's first grave marker, placed in 1990 by an Atlanta rock band.



After years of uncertainty, Robert Johnson's final resting place at Little Zion M.B. Church in Leflore County was determined by interviews with burial eyewitness Rose Eskridge.

He recorded 29 songs that changed music forever.

Life & Legacy Tour



Robert Johnson

Didn't nobody see him
everybody pass him

Star of the West
Greenwood
MISSISSIPPI
CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

225 Howard Street • Greenwood, MS 38930
662-453-9197 • visitgreenwoodms.com

All information is current as of 8.1.17
and subject to change without notice.

In the Fall of 2009, Robert Plant visited Johnson's grave to pay his respect for the music that inspired him as a youth in England.

Did you know?



Bluesman Robert Johnson lived twenty-seven years and wrote twenty-nine songs that changed the course of music forever. Eric Clapton, Led Zeppepin, The Rolling Stones, and countless others are among his devotees and have dubbed him the "Grandfather of Rock and Roll."

According to legend, Robert Johnson walked to a crossroads at the stroke of midnight, and called upon Satan to lay claim to his mortal soul. In exchange, the devil tuned his guitar, giving him an unearthly ability on the instrument.

—Cross Road Blues by Robert Johnson
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please"

Legend at the Crossroads

1 Baptist Town

Greenwood
33.518835, -90.174960

Robert Johnson rented a small room or "crib" off Young Street in Baptist Town in the summers of 1937 and 1938. Baptist Town was a safe haven for bluesmen and was named after the large wooden McKinney M.B. Church that still stands today.

2 Tommy McClennan's Home

207 East McLaurin Street, Greenwood
33.5133758, -90.1729058

Bluesman Tommy McClennan's home was the hub of activity for local musicians during the summers of 1937 and 1938. The circle of friends included Robert Johnson, Honeyboy Edwards, Hound Dog Taylor and Robert Petway. The original house is gone, having been replaced by a newer structure.

3 Dixie Theater

312 East Johnson Street, Greenwood
33.53820, -90.22807

Now Kornfeld's Department Store warehouse, this building still has the sloped floor and bolts from the original cinema seating. Johnson and his lady friend attended movies at this segregated theater in 1938. (It should be noted that Blues Empress Bessie Smith performed for a mixed-race audience here in 1932.)

4 Juke Joint behind Fort Pemberton Store

Intersection of Highway 49 and Highway 82, Greenwood
33.53272, -90.23965

Colloquially known as "Three Forks," it was here in July 1938 that Robert Johnson played his last engagement on a double bill with Honeyboy Edwards. Purportedly poisoned by the jealous husband of his lady friend, Johnson was taken in the early morning hours to his room in Baptist Town.

5 Death location

Star of the West Plantation
33.53825, -90.22811

Sought and found by female fans in his room in Baptist Town, Johnson was transported to their father's home on this large plantation just north of Greenwood. Despite their care, it was here on Tuesday, August 16, 1938, that Johnson died of complications resulting from the poisoning.

6 Final resting place

Little Zion M.B. Church Cemetery
33.56261, -90.21538

Early on the morning of Wednesday, August 17, 1938, Tom Eskridge was summoned by plantation owner Luther Wade to prepare a grave. According to eyewitness Rose Eskridge, it was here around noon that words were said over bluesman Robert Johnson, and he was laid to rest.

Jesus of Nazareth, King of Jerusalem. I know that my redeemer liveth and that he will call me from the grave

"Jesus of Nazareth, King of Jerusalem. I know that my redeemer liveth and that he will call me from the grave"

Written in Johnson's own hand, this deathbed conversion was saved among family papers and served as their consolation that his life had not been lived in vain.

Sites Once Considered Relevant

7 Three Forks Store / Quito

33.26548, -90.17999

Located in 1973 based on an earlier published interview with Honeyboy Edwards, this was long thought to be the location where Robert Johnson played his last engagement and was poisoned. The building, which bore a sign "Three Forks Store," no longer exists. It was in the early 1990s that Edwards clarified the actual location.

8 Robert Johnson memorial obelisk

Mt. Zion M.B. Church Cemetery, near Morgan City
33.23531, -90.18586

Also located in 1973, this cemetery was long thought to be the burial place of Robert Johnson and was so marked with a memorial obelisk in 1991 by Columbia Records.

9 Robert Johnson memorial grave marker

Payne Chapel M.B. Church Cemetery, Quito
33.26446, -90.18218

In 1990, Atlanta rock band *The Tombstones* received inaccurate information that led them to install the first Robert Johnson memorial marker here.



Detail from a 1930s map of the Star of the West Plantation shows the residence of Tom and Rose Eskridge (blue circle) and the tenant house (red circle) in which Robert Johnson died. Rose Eskridge, witness to the burial and longtime cook for the plantation owner, died in 2006 and is also buried in the Little Zion Cemetery.



This 1930s view shows the Dixie Theater (arrow) at 312 East Johnson Street. At that time the Columbus and Greenville Railway separated Johnson Street from parallel Carrollton Avenue. While the view remains much the same today, the 711 service station was removed in the 1960s and the two-story building on the left was destroyed by fire in the early 2000s.



The only known photograph of the Fort Pemberton Store was made during the flood of 1932. This view looks west from the intersection of U.S. 49E and 82. The store is the white building. The juke joint is believed to be the darker building behind the store. The man is standing on the concrete slab of Highway 82 inspecting erosion as floodwaters from the Tallahatchie River run across the highways to the Yazoo River.

"A little past noontime, a 'jake-leg' preacher said some words over his body and we committed his soul to the earth."

— Rose Eskridge on the burial of Robert Johnson

Mississippi Blues Trail Marker Sites

For driving directions and history, visit msbluestrail.org

A

WGRM

222 Howard Street, 33.519635, -90.18254

B

Robert Johnson Gravesite

Little Zion MB Church, 33.563108, -90.215355

C

Elks Lodge

106 East Scott Street, 33.511773, -90.17429

D

B.B. King's Birthplace

CR 513 & CR 305, 33.438985, -90.373363

E

Hubert Sumlin

12th Street at River Road Extended
33.518302, -90.204813

F

Baptist Town

200 Short Street, 33.438985, -90.17496

G

Guitar Slim

Salem M.B. Church, CR 101
33.558991, -90.236925

H

Furry Lewis

Lamar & Carrollton Avenue,
33.517345, -90.177026

I

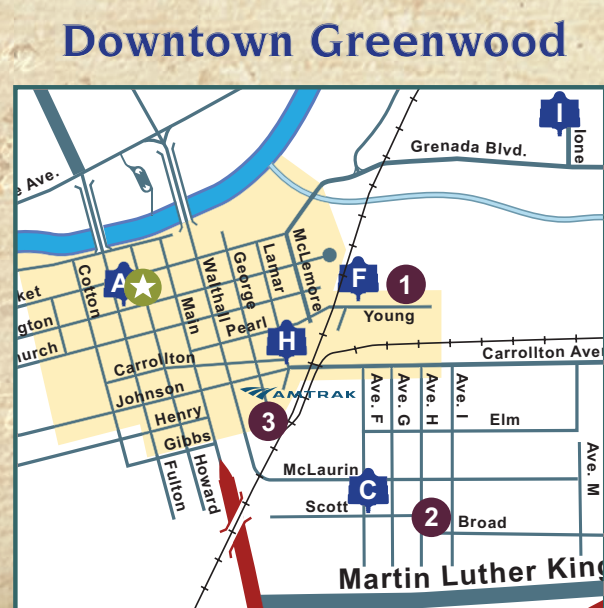
Blues DeeJays

503 Lone Street /
Reuben Hughes Street
33.525494, -90.163998

J

Mississippi John Hurt

CR 41, near Teoc, Mississippi
33.629678, -90.037723



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