

Robert Johnson in the '90s: A Dream Journey

Peter Guralnick

Who would ever have thought that 52 years after his death Robert Johnson would go gold?

A friend of mine wrote recently and asked: Can you imagine him walking down a crowded city street, seeing his name and face displayed in a store window? Well, I can and I can't. It's a metaphor I've imagined many times in the past: Blind Willie McTell wandering into the TK studio in Miami in the late 1970s (don't ask me why TK; remember, this is just a dream); Robert Johnson hearing his songs on the radio on a hot summer's night. I think the movie "Crossroads" forever drove this fantasy out of my mind: my dream was rich in possibilities and associations, I felt. It was pure. Perhaps it was the mundaneness of the movie's conceit; more likely, it was just the reality of finding a secret treasure dug up and exposed to the light. The music was just as magical, but somehow the fantasy had grown old.

I don't think I'd even heard of Robert Johnson when I found the record, it was probably just fresh out. I was 15 or 16, and it was a real shock that there was something that powerful. It seemed as if he wasn't playing for an audience. It didn't obey the rules of time or harmony or anything. It all led me to believe that here was a guy who really didn't want to play for people at all, that his thing was so unbearable to have to live with that he was almost ashamed of it. This was an image that I was very, very keen to hang on to.

— Eric Clapton

We all were. It was the sustaining image of a generation, the central thesis of the liner notes to the first album, even the cover illustration for the second: the romantic loner with his face turned to the wall. And yet the real Robert Johnson played for people; he traveled the land; he played the juke joints, he was a fixture in courthouse squares, he even played on the radio. He

was a professional bluesman. And that was how he died.

What are we to make of all this implausible latter-day success, the commercialization, and canonization, of something that would have seemed, to Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, or to me, when we were all 15 or 16 years old, impervious to exploitation? There are movies in the making; there are bitter disputes over ownership of something that was once declared by Columbia to be in the "public domain." What is now being talked about is something both more — and less — than a priceless cultural legacy. We are talking about Robert Johnson as cultural commodity: we are talking about the inevitable price of success.

I don't know what to think about it all, quite honestly. It would be easy to say that America likes its heroes dead — but that would probably be true of most cultures. While an artist is still creating, he is always dangerous, there is no telling what he might do next. Robert Johnson? He recorded 29 songs — there are rumors of another one or two. There are 12 alternate takes. His work makes up a convenient canon — it can be studied and quantified.

And what of the audience that hears his music now for the first time? How can they/we relate? The world that he lived in, the language that he employs ("She's got Elgin movements from her head down to her toes": Elgin has to be explained, place names have to be explained, sexual metaphors have to be explained and excused — different time, different place). But somehow something essential comes through. What is it? I don't know. What is it that captured me, that captured Eric Clapton, that captured a generation that listened with its ear glued to a tinny speaker, that studied every crackle on that first LP when it came out in 1961? King of the Delta Blues Singers. Even the title is indicative of the misunderstanding. Howlin' Wolf might introduce himself,



Studio portrait of Robert Johnson, circa 1935.

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mythopoetically, as “The Wolf,” but Robert Johnson? Can you imagine him referring to himself as royalty?

One time in St. Louis we were playing one of the songs that Robert would like to play with someone once in a great while, “Come On In My Kitchen.” He was playing very slow and passionately, and when we had quit, I noticed no one was saying anything. Then I realized they were crying — both women and men.

—Johnny Shines

That is what Robert Johnson is about. It’s what we have to keep on reminding ourselves, not just about Robert Johnson but about art itself or anything that we value in our lives. It’s not about tag

lines, it’s not about commercial slogans, it’s not about comparing one experience or achievement to another, it’s not about ownership and it’s not about sales. It’s about a spirit, it’s about something that lingers in the air, it’s about something that can persist 52 years after a man’s death, that will keep knocking slyly, over and over again, ignoring the rebuffs of history, ignoring the deafening silence of time, until at last it is let on in.

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