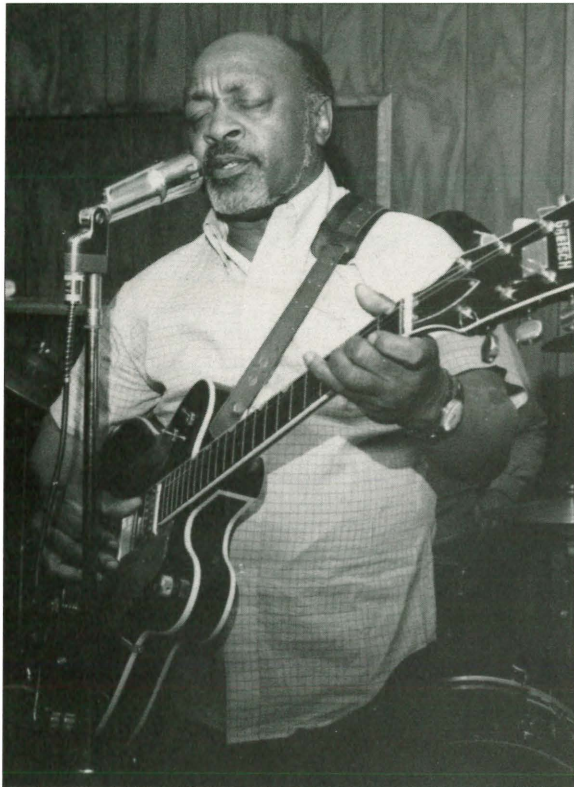


# Robert Johnson, Blues Musician

Robert Jr. Lockwood

*Compiled from an interview with Worth Long*



*Robert Jr. Lockwood*

When I turned 13, Robert Johnson followed my mother home in Helena, Arkansas, and she couldn't get rid of him. Robert looked awful young to me, and he looked young to my mother. But he was making believe that he was older than my mother. He was full of Indian, and he didn't have a beard or mustache. When he died, when he got killed, he didn't have a beard either.

When I met Robert, he was playing just like these records are today. He played by himself but sounded like somebody sitting at the piano. I never had heard the guitar played like that. I always felt like I wanted to play the piano until Robert Johnson turned me onto his guitar style.

When I was young, I couldn't play reels and popular tunes at home 'cause I was living with my grandfather. We played them on the organ when my folks would leave. But when they'd come back, we'd play church music.

There was no name for the first songs I started playing. I had two cousins who could play two or three little tunes on the piano, and I just watched them and learned how to play it. Maybe I was born to play.

Because Robert was living with my mother, he told me I could go watch him play. I didn't have a guitar. Everytime he set the guitar down, I'd pick it up. He'd set the guitar down, and he'd be with momma, and I'd pick it up. He finally asked me, "Do you really want to play?" and he decided to teach me.

He'd play a tune and then show me how he did it, and I would do it. He didn't have to do it but once for me. I had a sense of time, and I knew three musical changes, so when I started playing the guitar, it wasn't a problem. I couldn't get the real feel of it like he was doing but I could still do the notes. Within three months time, I was playing. I was only 14.

After I learned to play, I went to Clarksdale with Robert. You got the Sunflower River ferry there. So Robert put me on one side of the bridge, and he went on the other side. He was real smart. He said, "Robert Jr., we do it like this, we'll make more money." He said, "Now you sit here and play, and I'm going on the other side and play." I didn't realize what he was really doing but the people were transferring across the bridge both ways, confused about who Robert Johnson was. I said, "I'll be doggoned." We set on each end of the bridge and played about 35 minutes and made almost \$20 apiece when they passed the hat around.

Soon I was playing all over Mississippi and Arkansas and Tennessee. I started playing with Sonny Boy Williamson and also went with Robert

*Richard "Hacksaw" Harney in performance at the National Folk Festival, 1971. Photo courtesy Stephen C. LaVere, © 1971 Stephen C. LaVere*



to a lot of little places. Most of the places where we played, where I played in Mississippi, me and Sonny Boy Williamson was on street corners . . . we made a lot of money. Be a lot of people downtown, and we'd go down and get permission from the police to play, and we were making \$75 and \$80 dollars apiece. That was a lot of money then . . . it's a lot of money now.

They had house parties and things going at that time, "Saturday night suppers" they called them. The guys would be shooting dice and dancing and drinking and playing on the street corners. I done a lot of that.

Guitar players at that time couldn't hardly get a job in a band because you couldn't hear it. I always did like big bands. I liked a whole lot of pretty changes and I couldn't get all of that out of three changes. The very first band I had was with the Starkey Brothers when I left King Biscuit Time and went on Mothers Best Flour Time. I had a jazz band made up of James, Will and Camellia Starkey. One was playing piano, the others were playing horns, and we had drums and bass . . . about six pieces. That was in 1942.

In 1939, the Melrose pick-up came out and I think me and Charlie Christian were the first people to have one. You could just push it across the hole in the guitar and plug it up. Amplifiers then, you would call them practice amplifiers now. They was just loud enough to bring the guitar up to the piano.

Robert Johnson could play the harmonica and the piano, but he didn't really care too much about neither of those. Robert played the guitar by himself and sounded like two guitars. He was playing the bass and lead at the same time. He was playing background for himself on the bass strings and playing melody on the lead.

Hacksaw Harney could do that. He was a monster player. He was also a piano maker. I ran into Hacksaw back when I was coming under Robert Johnson. He could play the piano well.

He couldn't talk plain, he stuttered. And I used to catch him watching me and I would ask him, "Why you watching me?"

He could play the guitar, and with the same hand he was picking with, he'd be playing drum parts against the guitar. Me and Robert was real close to him. Hacksaw was playing old standards, and Robert was playing the blues and old standards like "Chinatown" . . . but more blues. Robert was playing ragtime, show tunes like "Sweet Sue" and all them old tunes. Hacksaw had a lot to do with Robert's playing because they played somewhat similar. [Robert] was living in Clarksdale for a while and there wasn't no demand for what he was doing because the city was too small. He was playing ballads — you could call it jazz.

Blind Blake was playing ragtime and jazz like Hacksaw did. But, at that time, the white folks called the blues "devil's music" so everybody played a little jazz or something like that and tried to stay away from the blues. Robert Johnson didn't care nothing about the blues being bad. He played the blues even when it was abandoned by the white society.

I first met Willie Dixon in Helena, Arkansas, and then in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Later, when I moved to Chicago, me and Dixon played for Chess 17 years. We did nothing but session work, backing up everybody. Roosevelt Sykes, Willie Mayburn, Little Walter. I played with almost everybody who was doing blues. I played with

Muddy. I recorded in 1940 before he recorded. Muddy Waters didn't record until 1945 or something like that.

When I first went to Chicago, I recorded by myself. "Little Boy Blue" was my first recording and "Take a Little Walk With Me." One on each side. My first recording session was "Mean Black Spider Blues," "Little Boy Blue," "Take a Little Walk with Me," and "Train My Baby." I wrote all the songs. I been writing my own songs ever since I learned how to play. That was my first four tunes recorded on RCA Victor, which was the Bluebird label. They sold but I don't know how well they sold because I didn't get nothing from them. I got the first money that the man paid me, and I ain't got no royalties. Twelve fifty a song. Everybody got caught in that.

Wasn't no segregation about that. Twelve fifty a side and 13% of one cent for royalty. I didn't even get that. [Once] I made Bluebird pay me \$500 for the recording session. I went to Chicago with Dr. Clayton, who was pretty smart. And with all these record companies bucking against each other, me and Clayton got paid \$500. I ain't ever got no royalties from nobody, and I ain't ever got no publishing money from nobody, and I have often wondered how in the hell do they expect you to keep working for them when they don't give you your money? It's very wierd.

Finally, I had to draw a line and said, "If I'm going to make a living, I'm going to have to do something better than this." I have my own label now, Lockwood Records. I think by me having that and by me and my wife working so hard, we're getting the company known all over the world, so I think things are going to tee off in a little bit.

I'm so glad I am able to do this. I don't have to listen to no one tell me, "Well, I don't like the songs." Do you know how disappointing that is? That's really bad when they say, "Well, I don't like so and so." Then you got to try to do something they like in order to sell it. Now, I just go ahead and record what I want to record, and I put it out. And if they don't like it, it don't make no difference. And if they do like it, fine.

The audiences don't know what they like no way until good creators do them. And after we do them, then they say they like it. But if they don't want to accept nothing they ain't never heard, how do unexplored people ever get recognized? How they going to keep creating? There ain't no point in creating nothing.

Fifty-two years after he died, Robert Johnson is getting on the charts. Here I am living and playing just like him and ain't getting no breaks. I

know there's some prejudice in this. There has to be.

Robert Johnson was at least 55 or 60 years ahead of his time. There wasn't nothing like him. What was there to hold him? I've seen him sit on street corners and make \$100 in a hour and a half in nickels and dimes and quarters. Except for Hacksaw, there is nobody else I know of that could do any of the things that Robert did. I hate to see them good ones go like that.

That man was something. He could play and sing. He didn't need no help. That was the real strong thing about his career. If I just want to play the blues, I don't need no help.

John Hammond is making his living off of Robert. He works hard and I like him. But there ain't nobody that I've taught that sounds like Robert. I was teaching Johnny Shines when he had that stroke. If he hadn't had that stroke, he'd be doing pretty good now.

You know, I'm responsible for B.B.'s career. I taught Luke Stuckey, Willie Johnson and I kinda helped M.T. Murphy, and taught Lonnie Pitchford, who plays in my style. If the record companies were smart, they would have me playing Robert Johnson tunes right now. But I know what the problem is. I'm free, Black and 76 years old, and they think I might fall dead tomorrow. But I got news for them. I ain't going nowhere.

There are some people who want to try to get some glory because Robert is so popular. They say they knew Robert, and they don't know a damn thing. They talked about him selling his soul to the devil. I want to know how you do that! If anybody sold their souls to the devil, it's the groups that have to have a million dollars worth of dope and have to make a million dollars in money to play. I don't like the way they are trying to label him. He was a blues musician, just like the rest of them.

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*Robert Jr. Lockwood, the adopted son of Robert Johnson, was born in Marvel, Arkansas, in 1915. Changing instruments from piano to guitar, he first became a prominent bluesman in Memphis, in the company of Sonny Boy Williamson and B.B. and Albert King, among others. After a stint in St. Louis, where he worked with the influential vocalist Dr. Clayton, Lockwood became a studio guitarist in Chicago in the 1940s. Here he worked with many great blues artists. In 1960 he moved to Cleveland and has remained — with frequent journeys to festivals and other performance stages — ever since.*