Blues to World War II: Roots and Branches
By Elijah Wald

When rock ‘n’ roll burst onto the American popular music scene in the mid-1950s, it caught a lot of people by surprise. Suddenly the airwaves were full of rambunctious young musicians with wild styles that sounded nothing like the mainstream studio pop that had dominated radio and television since the end of the big band era. Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and hundreds of raw Southern rockabillies, earthy African-American shouters and ebullient streetcorner doo-wop groups changed the music scene forever.

To a lot of listeners, especially in the Northern states, this music seemed to come out of nowhere, but like any popular form it had grown out of older styles and was nourished by deep roots. Haley and Presley came out of a long tradition of country musicians who mixed hillbilly vocal inflections and instrumentation with boogie-woogie rhythms and energy. Berry blended those same styles with the smoothness of Nat King Cole and the hipster jive of Louis Jordan. Little Richard and the doo-wop groups brought the singing techniques of the black gospel church. But of all the musical styles that came together in the new fusion dubbed rock ‘n’ roll, the one that has tended to be most celebrated is blues.

From the beginning, the links between blues and rock ‘n’ roll were clear and direct: Elvis’s first hits were covers of blues records (“That’s All Right, Mama” by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup and “Hound Dog” by Big Mama Thornton). Ike Turner, who preceded Elvis at Sun Records, and whose Kings of Rhythm produced what many critics have hailed as the first rock ‘n’ roll record, “Rocket 88,” learned his music from older Delta bluesmen around his hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi. And when a new wave of rockers arrived from England in the 1960s, many of them were deep acolytes of Mississippi and Chicago blues styles, with Eric Clapton and Keith Richards naming the Delta artist Robert Johnson as a prime inspiration.

In many ways, Johnson was a perfect icon for blues-loving rock ‘n’ rollers. He was a handsome young man who played expert, propulsive guitar lines, sang with soul and passion, and had lived a life of romance and mystery. Born in 1911, he grew up during the peak of the first blues boom and by his early teens was playing harmonica for some of the greatest guitarists and singers in the rural Mississippi Delta. By his twenties, he was the archetypal rambling musician, traveling by thumb and freight train up to Canada, east to New York, and West to Texas. In 1936 and 1937, he had two recording sessions that surveyed the breadth of contemporary blues, from eerie Delta slide guitar pieces to smooth urban ballads, and proved him to be one of the most moving and poetic songwriters in the genre. And by the summer of 1938 he was dead, apparently murdered by a jealous husband.

In the rock world, Johnson has been celebrated as more than just a great musician. Building on his haunting recordings of “Hellhound on My Trail” and “Me and the Devil,” fans have created an enthralling mythology in which he gained his skills by meeting the Devil at a lonely Delta crossroads. Admirers unfamiliar with the history of Mississippi music took him as an example of the deepest, oldest blues styles, a brilliant, primitive artist whose style was wrenched from his soul rather than learned from guitar teachers or phonograph records. And blues as a whole has been celebrated in much the same way, as an earthy roots style, created by wandering hobos and prison inmates rather than by expert professional musicians.

As with most myths, the rock world's myths about blues contain elements of truth, but on the whole they tell us more about the tastes of later rock fans than about how blues evolved and was perceived in the communities where it first gained fame. In his own world, Robert Johnson was a hip young player who had mastered all the latest styles from the big cities. Rather than an ancient figure from the dawn of blues, he was one of the last acoustic guitarists to make an impact on the Delta scene and young enough to overlap the rock 'n' roll generation—when Johnson made his recordings Chuck Berry was already turning ten years old, and Big Joe Turner, a Kansas City barroom shouter who was almost his exact contemporary, would cut one of the defining rock 'n' roll hits, "Shake, Rattle and Roll." Within a few years of his death many of his Delta peers—including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Elmore James—were playing electric guitars and fronting bands, and there are even stories that in his last months he had electrified his own instrument and added a drummer to his shows. All of that helps to explain why Johnson's music has been so attractive to rock 'n' rollers: along with being a superb musician, he is a link between the electric blues that evolved into rock 'n' roll and the older, less familiar styles that preceded that sound.

So if we want to understand what blues was before the electric transformation, we need to go back before Johnson and try to understand the world that shaped him and that first generation of electric pioneers.

Before the Blues

We will never know who sang the first blues, or when or where they did it. In fact, it is hard to say what blues was in the beginning. Some historians and musicologists would say that the songs African-American slaves sang in the Southern cottonfields were already blues, and others trace the style all the way back to Africa. There are good arguments for these positions: some styles of music played in Mali and Senegal clearly resemble blues, and the "field hollers" that African Americans sang while working on Southern plantations were often very similar to songs that farmers and herders sang in Africa. The song that Robert Johnson recorded as "Last Fair Deal Gone Down" was also recorded from a group of convicts on a Mississippi prison farm as a very African-sounding work song, and all he had to do to change it into a blues number was to speed it up and add a guitar part.

On the other hand, another version of the same song, "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down," had been recorded back in 1927 by the first white country music star, Fiddlin' John Carson, and Johnson's friends recalled that along with blues he also sang pop tunes, yodeled and even played polkas. The rural South was full of all kinds of music, and white and black styles had been overlapping and intermingling for several hundred years before anyone started calling any of them blues. So although it makes perfect sense to trace some of the sounds we hear in blues to what black workers were singing in the fields, we also have to consider the thousands of black fiddlers and banjo players who had been the main performers at rural dances across the South and invented much of what we now think of as hillbilly or country music, as well as all sorts of other musicians, from professional entertainers to ordinary folks who sang or played for their own amusement, comfort and relaxation.

One clear survival of the African tradition in later blues performances was the practice of "call and response" between singers, or between a singer and an instrument. In a great deal of West African music, a song leader will sing a line, then his or her partner or a group of singers will answer, echoing the line or responding with a repeated refrain. This style came to America with the African slaves and became the basis of both Christian "spirituals" and the secular songs with which laborers accompanied jobs that required a group of people moving together—for example, the "sea chanties" sailors sang while hoisting a ship's sails, or the songs railroad workers used to keep their hammers swinging in unison. The basic twelve-bar blues form adapted this to suit a singer with instruments: in

a typical twelve-bar blues, there are two bars of sung lyrics, which are answered by two bars of music; then the singer repeats the same line over a different chord, again answered by an instrument; and finally the singer finishes with a line that completes and rhymes with the first two, and is answered yet again.

For example, on her record of "St. Louis Blues," Bessie Smith starts out singing:

I hate to see the evening sun go down.

Louis Armstrong replies with a series of high trumpet notes, then she repeats:

I hate to see the evening sun go down.

Armstrong answers in a lonesome, sliding phrase, and she completes the thought:

It makes me think I'm on my last go-round.

And Armstrong plays a final, descending passage.

The partnership between Smith and Armstrong is a reminder of yet another strain that influenced the development of blues—along with the work and field songs and the country dance groups, there were also trained, urban musicians in cities like New Orleans who could play anything from folk tunes to classical trumpet solos. African-American musicians and styles had been influencing the mainstream of American pop music for many decades before the blues boom. The first great breakthrough came in the 1840s, when a group of white musicians calling themselves the Virginia Minstrels began wearing blackface make-up and advertising their music as a reproduction of what slaves were playing and singing on Southern plantations. They were so successful that they attracted a flood of imitators, both black and white, and by the end of the 19th century such "minstrel shows" were the main kind of touring entertainment in much of the United States. Minstrel music and comedy—as well as the blackface make-up—was also a staple of less organized rural shows, especially the "medicine shows" that traveled all over the South using small groups of entertainers to attract customers for "doctors" selling dubious homemade (and often alcoholic) remedies.

Many artists who went on to fame as blues or country singers got their start in the minstrel and medicine shows, and two of the most influential of these touring performers were William Christopher (W.C.) Handy and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, who would come to be known as the Father and Mother of the Blues. Handy was a trumpet player, born in 1873 and schooled in the European classical and brass band tradition. By the late 1890s he was musical director for Mahara's Minstrels, and in 1903 he took a job teaching music and directing a band in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the largest town in the Delta. He later explained that it was during this period that he first came across the style that became known as blues, when he heard a black man at a train station in the hamlet of Tutwiler playing slide guitar and singing about the local railroad lines. He was also impressed by the response that black country players received from white audiences—Handy had assumed that a brass band like the one he led would be more popular than a bunch of guitar and fiddle players, and was astonished to see the crowd at one of his dances get more enthusiastic about a raw rural string trio than about his polished orchestra. As a result, he began writing compositions that adapted the melodies of singers and musicians he heard in the Mississippi countryside and in the streets of Memphis, where he moved in 1909.

As for Rainey, she was born in 1886 and by her teens was touring with the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels as well as working in circuses and "tent shows" around the South. Like Handy, she recalled coming upon the blues style by chance, when a girl came to her show in a small town in Missouri and sang her a "strange and poignant" song. She started using the song in her act, and later claimed that when a newspaper interviewer asked her what kind of music it was, she spontaneously named it "blues."

Over the next few years, Rainey and other singers performed these slow, sad songs in their shows, and in 1912 Handy published the first national hit in the style, a three-part, ragtime-flavored composition titled “The Memphis Blues.” Oddly enough, this composition owed much of its success to the fact that a white New York dance team, Vernon and Irene Castle, who were the most popular ballroom dance instructors of the teens, chose it as the music for a new step called the fox-trot. Their backing band, led by the black conductor James Reese Europe, played it in a fast ragtime dance style, and that was the way blues first reached most Northern listeners. Handy responded to this success by composing an even bigger hit, “St. Louis Blues,” which included a section in tango rhythm to fit another of the Castles’ favorite dances. Other bands, though, were playing blues in slower styles: in New Orleans, there was already an established tradition of brass bands performing blues as slow, moaning pieces that sounded more like what Rainey sang, and in the long run it was this slower music that would most directly influence the first great wave of blues recordings in the 1920s.

The Blues Queens

By the late teens, blues music of one kind or another was familiar to pretty much everyone in America—indeed, it was so familiar that one of the big hits of 1918 made a joke out of the craze: “Everybody’s Crazy ’Bout the Doggone Blues, But I’m Happy.”

That song, like all the blues recorded in the teens, was performed on record by a white singer—in this case, Marion Harris, who was sometimes billed as “The Queen of the Blues.” At that time it was assumed that record buyers and theater-goers would prefer to hear the style sung by well-known stars, and it does not seem to have occurred to anyone in the music business that some listeners might prefer to hear an African-American blues singer. That is, not until August, 1920, when a composer named Perry Bradford persuaded the OKeh record company to let him make a disc featuring a black singer named Mamie Smith, backed by a black band, singing a song of his called “Crazy Blues.” The record company men were dubious about this idea, but “Crazy Blues” became a huge hit, reportedly selling a million copies within a few months, and its success changed the course of American music. Record companies had already been aware that non-English-speaking immigrants would buy records in their native languages and musical styles, and had been making special lines of recordings for Italian, Jewish and Polish listeners. Now, they discovered that there was also a huge African-American audience that would buy records by African-American artists, and soon a dozen labels were rushing out what became known as “Race Records”—“Race” being the respectful term for black Americans in this period. Though these records included vocal quartets, instrumental groups and a few male singers, Mamie Smith had set the most successful pattern and the vast majority were by female “blues queens,” backed by pianos or small jazz bands. Indeed, the blues scene in this period was dominated by female singers to a greater extent than any American pop style before or since.

Though Southern singers like Ma Rainey had been the pioneers of professional blues singing, they were not included in the first rush of recorded blues queens. Before cutting “Crazy Blues,” Mamie Smith had been a Harlem musical comedy star, singing the complete range of pop material that other New York singers performed, and most of the blues singers who caught on in the next couple of years were also from the Northern theater and vaudeville circuits—Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter were Smith’s prime competitors, and though in this period they recorded nothing but blues, in later years both would be known for their performances of mainstream pop songs. They were elegant, polished stage entertainers, with clear diction and beautiful costumes—an early review describes Smith wearing “spangled material…and a flock of diamonds”—and though they specialized in blues in the recording studio, they sang a much broader range of material at their live shows. On

records, white singers were doing the big pop hits and black singers were limited to blues, but since most theaters were still racially segregated, black audiences could not go out to hear the white stars and black singers were expected to present versions of the same hits in their live acts.

It was not until 1923 that a black pianist and songwriter named Clarence Williams persuaded the Columbia company to let him record the most popular of the Southern blues queens, a woman named Bessie Smith. Smith had worked in tent shows with Ma Rainey and adopted the older woman's moaning style, and her deep, rich voice had a soulful power that still carried hints of the field hollers and work songs of an earlier era. She could sing pop material as well, but she was known all over the South as a blues stylist and from her first record—a cover of Hunter's "Down Hearted Blues"—she was hailed as the greatest blues singer alive. As with "Crazy Blues," this disc was a big enough hit that all the record companies began looking for similar-sounding singers, and soon there were dozens of Southern blues queens on the market, including Clara Smith, Trixie Smith (neither of whom were related to either Bessie or Mamie), Sippie Wallace, Ida Cox and, by 1924, Rainey herself, whose first record advertisement announced triumphantly, "Discovered at Last—'Ma' Rainey, Mother of the Blues!"

The blues queens did not quite have the field to themselves. There were a few male blues singers—though none of them attracted much attention—and a host of instrumental groups that featured blues material, such as Clarence Williams's Blue Five and King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Both of these bands were from New Orleans and at times featured Louis Armstrong, who also recorded numerous accompaniments for Bessie Smith and other female singers. At this point, blues and jazz were not two different styles: jazz was a way of playing, and blues was a kind of song that jazz bands sometimes played. On records, though, female singers dominated the market, and the market was booming. In later years, blues historians were often surprised to find that legendary rural players like Son House recalled the style not as part of their Mississippi Delta heritage but as something that had arrived in their region on records by Smith, Rainey and Cox. In hindsight, the two strains of blues—the rural folk tradition and the urban pop craze—can be seen as overlapping and reinforcing each other, but for most people in the early 1920s "blues" meant the music that was being performed by the blues queens. And for both black and white audiences in many parts of the United States, women backed by jazz bands would remain the most important blues artists into the 1950s and beyond.

Down Home Blues

While the blues queens were creating the first major wave of African-American popular recordings, male pianists, guitarists, fiddlers, mandolinists and harmonica players all across the South were also coming up with their own variations of blues. The first male blues singer to make serious inroads on the recording scene was actually an old-time minstrel-style banjo player from New Orleans, Papa Charlie Jackson, who had a comical hit in 1924 with a semi-naughty lyric titled "Shake that Thing." The second was another New Orleansian, Lonnie Johnson, who had some of the theatrical polish and jazz influences of the female stars and is remembered not only as a supple vocalist but as the father of jazz guitar. But it was the third male recording star who set off the next great wave of blues stylists, the rurally-rooted guitarists who are usually hailed as forefathers of rock 'n' roll. He was a blind Texan named Lemon Jefferson, and came to the attention of the record companies because of the crowds he was drawing on the streets of Dallas.

The story of how Jefferson came to be recorded is a revealing example of how the record business worked in those days: One of the most successful blues labels of the 1920s was Paramount

Records, which like many early record companies was the subsidiary of a furniture manufacturer, the Wisconsin Chair Company—phonographs were sold as pieces of furniture, and records were made as a way to persuade people to buy phonographs. Unlike most labels, which saw no need to hire black agents or producers in order to target the African-American market, Paramount had placed a black man, Mayo Williams, in charge of its Race line, and by 1924 Williams was looking for something that would set his records apart from the field of sound-alike blues queens. To that end he published an advertisement in African-American newspapers urging customers to write to him at the Paramount office with “suggestions and recommendations,” promising, “if your preferences are not listed in our catalog, we will make them for you…. There is always room for more good material and more talented artists.”

The manager of a music store in Dallas, Texas, responded to Williams’s appeal by recommending that the company record Blind Lemon Jefferson and Paramount arranged for Jefferson to come to Chicago and record early in 1926. The company presumably expected just to sell a few thousand records around Texas, but Jefferson’s records were so successful that they caused a shift in the pattern of Race recording and had a profound and permanent effect on American music.

Blues had arrived on the national scene as a music played by dance bands like W.C. Handy’s and James Reese Europe’s, and sung in touring minstrel shows, circuses and vaudeville theaters by stars like Ma Rainey and Mamie Smith, but it had also become part of the repertoire of rural bands and itinerant buskers (musicians who played for donations on street corners or in marketplaces, saloons and barbershops). Some buskers had other jobs and just played to make some extra cash, but others had music as their only occupation, especially if they had physical handicaps that prevented them from doing other work—which accounts for the unprecedented role of blind performers in the next wave of the blues boom. Many of these performers played an astonishingly broad range of music, since their income depended on their ability to suit the tastes of anyone willing to toss them a coin. Indeed, in the days before phonographs and radios were common in public places, pretty much all professional musicians were expected to play the full range of music that customers might want to hear, and to learn the latest styles and hits. As blues caught on across the country, rural musicians had added the new hits alongside the older fiddle tunes, ballads and minstrel numbers that had been staples of their repertoires in the 19th century. The songs of the blues queens were particularly suited to singer/guitarists like Jefferson, because street singing demanded the same sort of powerful voices that Rainey and Smith had, and their slow tempos and simple chords fitted the skills of guitarists who had grown up in older rural folk traditions.

Among poor and rural Southerners, the guitar would become particularly linked to blues, in part because both the instrument and the style were recent arrivals. Guitars only became widely available toward the end of the 19th century, when Sears-Roebuck’s mail-order house made cheap instruments available for the first time. Before that, the main rural instruments had been the fiddle, which was not ideal for accompanying singers, and the banjo, an African instrument that was fine for playing fast dance numbers but did not fit as well with slower songs. Though the banjo’s leather drum-head gave it a loud, insistent tone that could cut through the noise of a crowded dance hall in those days before microphones, it did not sustain vibrations, which meant that the strings went “plunk” rather than ringing for a few seconds, so it was best for fast dance music. By contrast, guitars had warmer, more sustained tones, suited to the slower blues tempos, and in the hands of a good player using a slide or bending the strings, they could even mimic the slurs and moans of a human voice. Jefferson was one of the first great blues guitar stylists, and he alternately used his instrument to take the place of the pianos that had backed the blues queens and to function as a sort of second voice, echoing and

replying to his vocal lines in a way that recalled both the call-and-response of the old work songs and the vocal-instrumental interchanges of record stars like Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong.

We will never know how much of the music played by people like Jefferson was already around before the blues boom and how much of their style was developed in imitation of what they heard from dance bands, pianists and the early blues queens. In either case, there was a lot of interchange—rural musicians learned songs from records and touring stars, and theater and record artists picked up tunes they heard on street corners and at informal dances—and by the 1920s musicians like Jefferson had adapted the blues to guitar, and were providing their own instrumental accompaniments. This gave their work a new kind of freedom: unlike the singers who worked with accompanying pianists and bands, Jefferson didn't have to adapt his singing to anyone's music but his own, so he sang and played in a loose, unarranged and deeply personal style, sometimes stretching a line for more than the regular number of bars to make it more soulful or speeding up his guitar licks to convey excitement. As a result, his music sounded less like professional entertainment and more like the field hollers and back-country music of the past, even when he was singing new compositions.

Indeed, Jefferson was the first blues singer to be advertised in the black press as old-fashioned and specifically southern. The blues queens, whether northern vaudevillians or southern tent show singers, had always been marketed as hot, contemporary hitmakers. Even a pioneer like Ma Rainey was presented as a sophisticated theater star, "the wonderful gold-neck woman who starred for five years in three theaters in Pensacola, Atlanta, and Jacksonville…[and] the only Blues singer in the world elevated to the heights of 'Madame'." By contrast, the first ad for Jefferson's records promised "a real, old-fashioned Blues by a real, old-fashioned Blues singer…[who] strums his guitar in real southern style." By his third record, Paramount was describing Jefferson as "down home," a phrase that would continue to be used for gritty, rural-sounding southern blues artists like Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters in the 1950s.

"Down home" was a new idea in the Race record market. White rural "hillbilly" music was marketed from the beginning as an old-fashioned style recalling a simpler past, but black record buyers, then as now, tended to show relatively little interest in old sounds—especially the old sounds of the southern plantations, which to most of them were reminiscent not of simple virtues but of the miseries of slavery, poverty and racist oppression. Just as with rap, which also has deep roots in rural African-American culture, blues was originally marketed as the new sound of industrial cities. By the later 1920s, though, there were millions of black Southerners who had traveled north, and while they tended to go out dancing and partying to new sounds, a lot of them also had moments of nostalgia for the music they had heard in their childhoods (just as they continued to appreciate the southern cooking that would become known as "soul food"). These "down home" musical styles would always attract a smaller proportion of the black audience than the latest urban hits, but over the next few decades they remained part of the African-American pop mix. And as the first blues boom receded into the past, blues styles came to be regarded more and more as a down-home, southern sound—which in turn would be part of the process by which they became recognized as the roots of rock 'n' roll.

Blind Lemon Jefferson did not get booked on the black vaudeville theater circuit, and his music was not heard on the radio, but his records sold very well, and the record companies were quick to respond to this success. Soon, all the big labels were sending scouts and recording teams south in search of other streetcorner guitarists. To the northern scouts, most of these guitarists sounded raw and amateurish, and because they didn't really understand why buyers had gone crazy for the style they had no way of judging what would sell in the future. As a result, from 1926 to 1929 they were

willing to record pretty much any black Southern guitarist whose playing seemed to appeal to local listeners, and that willingness to experiment meant that an astounding range of music was preserved. Versatile artists like Henry Thomas in Texas, Blind Willie McTell and Peg Leg Howell in Atlanta, and Frank Stokes, Gus Cannon and Jim Jackson in Memphis recorded not only blues but hoedowns, ragtime dances, country ballads and comic minstrel numbers.

There was also a flood of African American religious recordings, many of them by "street corner evangelists" who were the religious equivalent of Jefferson's down home blues singers (indeed, even before he recorded blues, Jefferson had cut two religious songs under the pseudonym "Rev. L.J. Bates"), and they often used very similar styles and instrumentation. One of the first Texas artists recorded in Jefferson's wake was a gospel singer-guitarist named Blind Willie Johnson, whose rough, shouting vocals and shimmering slide guitar style was imitated by gospel and blues artists alike, and he would be followed by other players who—though devoting themselves to Christian songs—would have a profound effect in the blues world, such as the Reverend Gary Davis and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Blues Regions: Texas, the Piedmont and the Mississippi Delta

In the 1920s, blues was still considered singer's music, and most listeners do not seem to have paid much attention to guitar styles. Indeed, many fans didn't even know which performers played instruments and which used hired accompanists, since there were no interviews or articles about rural blues musicians and even the most popular performers were often advertised with cartoons depicting the themes of their songs rather than the musicians' photographs. The records themselves came in plain brown sleeves and usually had no more description of the artist than the singer's name, followed by a strictly informational heading like "vocal with guitar accompaniment."

It was only with the folk-blues revival of the late 1950s and the arrival of blues-rock in the 1960s that blues historians and musicians began to focus seriously on guitar techniques—by the early sixties, the guitar had become the most popular amateur instrument in the United States—and to research the styles and biographies of the black virtuosos of the late 1920s and 1930s. In the process they began to notice that players in some regions had formed distinctive playing styles, and to use these as a way of sorting and classifying the dozens of idiosyncratic artists who had been discovered in Jefferson's wake and dividing them into three broad geographical areas: Texas, the Piedmont and the Mississippi Delta. This was not the way blues fans or musicians had thought about the music when it was being recorded, and the divisions are by no means clear—especially since artists routinely imitated records by performers from other regions—but it does provide a broad sense of how blues guitar styles developed over the broad expanse of the Southern United States.

The first generation of guitarists to take up blues had grown up before the blues era, and they showed a fairly uniform range of influences regardless of region. This style can be heard in a lot of Piedmont playing, in Jefferson's more countrified and rhythmically steady records, and in the work of older Delta musicians like Mississippi John Hurt and Furry Lewis. It had a strong ragtime flavor mixed with techniques adopted from the semi-classical "parlor guitar" instruction books of the mid-19th century, which taught students to play simple tunes by keeping a steady, alternating bassline with the right-hand thumb while picking out melodies with the fingers. The parlor influence survived all across the south: a simple composition called "Spanish Fandango" was typically the beginner piece in the instruction books, and the "open G" tuning in which it was played continued to be known from the Atlantic seaboard to the Southwestern prairies as "Spanish" tuning.

This parlor and ragtime styles hung on particularly strongly in the Piedmont and Appalachian mountain region that runs from Virginia through the Carolinas, Georgia and eastern Tennessee. The

African American populations in those areas had been there for many generations, and as a result there was always an audience of elders who liked to dance older dances and listen to older tunes. This area was also more closely connected to eastern cities like New York, Philadelphia and Washington, so it got more mainstream pop entertainers, and since there were few huge plantations, the black population was not as large or as isolated as in the major cotton-farming regions. So when blues came in, the Piedmont players picked up the new 12-bar songs but continued to back them with older guitar techniques, and to mix them with other pop styles, giving them a bouncy, ragtime flavor. The most popular Piedmont blues artist was a singer-guitarist who went by the name of Blind Blake. Blake was the next major blues star that Paramount signed after hitting with Jefferson, but he was a very different kind of musician. Where Jefferson had a huge voice that blended the power of the blues queens with the older field holler tradition and a quirkily off-beat approach to the guitar, Blake was a smooth, fast ragtime virtuoso, whose guitar lines were clearly based on popular piano styles and who sang in a light, soft voice flavored with hip humor. His rhythms had the supple swing of ragtime dance music, and that steady, syncopated beat was a hallmark of the Piedmont style, from early masters like Blake and Blind Willie McTell to later artists like Josh White, Buddy Moss and Blind Boy Fuller, who would become the most popular Piedmont player of the 1930s.

The Texas style was less uniform than the Piedmont style, since the state's black population was made up of immigrants from all over the South, the vast majority of whom had arrived after the Civil War. That region had been pioneer, cowboy country, where ragtime and dance music was heard only occasionally and African-American traditions blended with Anglo-Celtic and Mexican styles. Jefferson set the model for many Texas bluesmen, singing in the loose meter of the field hollers and not bothering to keep a steady dance rhythm, and this pattern was followed by his most popular rival, Texas Alexander, who carried a guitar with him when he traveled around the state but did not play it himself, and who sang the most traditional-sounding and rhythmically and melodically free-form hollers to be recorded in this period.

Both the Texans and the Piedmont bluesmen were heard on records throughout the South and in cities that large populations of Southern immigrants. In terms of rock 'n' roll history, though, neither area would be as influential as the Mississippi Delta. Again, the reasons for this had a lot to do with the region's population and history. For one thing, the Mississippi River had always provided the Delta with a close link to New Orleans, which because of its French and Spanish colonial past and its connections to the Caribbean had a far more cohesive tradition of African drumming and what we would now call "Latin" rhythms than anywhere else in the United States. For another, Mississippi had not been a major agricultural state before the Civil War, and especially in the Delta, which had been swampland until the late 1800s, the black population was almost entirely made up of new arrivals from further east. That meant that rural Mississippians had fewer deep-rooted musical tastes than the long-settled inhabitants of the Piedmont, and they were more densely grouped and had fewer white neighbors than the Texans—in the early 20th century many Delta counties were 80-90 percent African America. As a result, Delta dwellers were particularly open to the new blues styles. Some, like John Hurt and the Mississippi Sheiks, played them in ways that recalled older guitar and fiddle traditions, but others cast aside those styles in favor of complex, polyrhythmic patterns, to the point that they often used their guitars almost like tuned drums. The master of this kind of playing was Charlie Patton, the favorite dance musician on Dockery's Plantation in the countryside near Cleveland, Mississippi, in the heart of the Delta.

Because the style Patton helped to pioneer is what most people mean today when they talk about "Delta blues," it is worth emphasizing that he was a unique artist and his style was not typical of the other local musicians, blues or otherwise. A more typical group of players, who actually sold far

more records than Patton in the 1920s and 1930s, were the multi-talented members of the Chatmon family, which included the Mississippi Sheiks and the guitarist-singer Bo Carter (who also played violin), and their friends and sometime playing partners, Joe and Charlie McCoy. The Chatmons and McCoys recorded a lot of blues, but they also could play all the other styles of music people wanted to hear around Mississippi in those days, from square dances to the latest Tin Pan Alley and radio hits. Sam Chatmon, a guitarist and singer who sometimes worked with the Sheiks, claimed that Patton occasionally tried to join them on gigs—by some reports, he was a half-brother to the Chatmon clan—but that he wasn't a good enough musician. Blues fans have tended to resent this claim, but it is undoubtedly true that he couldn't have played the fancy chord changes of a George Gershwin song or sung in the style of Bing Crosby or the yodeling country star Jimmie Rodgers. But if Patton lacked the professional versatility of the Chatmons, he had other talents that in retrospect seem far more important.

What Patton could do better than anyone else was use his guitar to beat out a multiplicity of interlocking rhythms, while singing with a gruff, ferocious power and composing lyrics that directly mirrored the feelings of his rural audience. On records like "Down the Dirt Road" or "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues," he took the basic pattern of Blind Lemon Jefferson's songs and changed them from vocal hollers answered by guitar riffs into driving, rhythmic workouts that made people want to twist and stomp. With songs like "High Sheriff Blues" and "High Water Everywhere" he captured the immediacy of life in the Delta in piercing detail. And on top of his musical and lyrical skills, he drew crowds with his showmanship, playing guitar behind his head, between his legs and with his teeth.

Patton's style was picked up by a generation of young Delta guitarists. Tommy Johnson added a smoother vocal approach marked by a mournful falsetto. Son House mixed Patton's rhythms with biting slide guitar, and sang with a passion that no other Delta musician could match. Willie Brown teamed up with House, and after House traveled north with Patton for a recording session at Paramount's studio in Grafton, Wisconsin, House and Brown settled in the northern Delta near Stovall's Plantation. It was during their time there, playing for weekend parties at the plantation juke joint, that House became a model and mentor to both Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. By that time, though, the rage for rural bluesmen had all but ended on the national scene, killed off by changing fashions and the most devastating economic downturn in American history.

The Great Depression and the Urban Blues

The original blues recording trends—first for the blues queens and then for rural and streetcorner guitarists—both flourished in the strong phonograph record market of the 1920s. By the end of the decade, though, things were very different. Shifting fashions, shifting populations, shifting technologies and the Depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929 virtually wiped these early styles off the blues map. The Depression caused a huge decline in record sales, exacerbating the effects of radio, which had already wooed away a lot of phonograph customers. Race records seem to have held on a bit better than white pop records, since mainstream pop was widely available on radio but even the top black artists rarely appeared on the air (and also because wind-up phonographs, unlike radios, could be used in rural shacks that had no access to electricity), but many of the record companies that had been devoted to blues, including Paramount, went out of business entirely. Others cut back severely, especially on the sort of southern field trips that had produced most of the rural singer-guitarists. Sending crews of engineers and equipment south to record itinerant bluesmen no longer made economic sense, nor were record makers willing to take chances on idiosyncratic street singers who might not suit the tastes of a broad audience. As a result, old

styles fell by the wayside and were replaced by a new, more studio-oriented and uniform blues sound.

The new style was more streamlined, hip and urban, usually featuring piano or piano-guitar duets. The piano had always been the most popular barroom instrument—it was the only instrument that was loud and versatile enough to allow a single player to entertain a full room of dancers and listeners who wanted everything from ragtime, jazz and Tin Pan Alley hits to blues and boogie-woogie—and it was common to find pianos even in a lot of rural areas, since plantations and lumber and levee camps often had a company saloon where the owners could get the workers to spend their pay on Saturday night. In urban areas, especially after Prohibition cut down on the numbers of legal cabarets, a lot of people had begun hosting “rent parties”—parties that people in apartment buildings would throw to make the rent money—and the more prosperous often had a piano and would invite an “ivory tickler” to attract paying guests.

Apartment parties called for quieter music than vaudeville theaters or street corners: a loud blues shouter would annoy the neighbors, and if you were selling bootleg liquor you did not want anyone calling the cops. Meanwhile, electronic microphones had appeared, which made it possible for vocalists to sing quietly even when they appeared with bands. So the focus in both mainstream pop and blues shifted from big-voiced singers like Al Jolson, Bessie Smith and Lemon Jefferson to intimate “crooners” like Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallée and, in the blues world, Lonnie Johnson, Leroy Carr and Tampa Red.

Johnson had pioneered the male crooning style in the mid-1920s—along with the virtuosic single-string guitar technique that would influence generations of lead guitarists—but the style really took off with two records that appeared to great success in 1928: “How Long, How Long Blues” by Leroy Carr and “It’s Tight Like That” by Tampa Red and Georgia Tom. Both featured duos of guitar and piano, playing songs that had some of the flavor of the down-home singers, but smoothed out and professionalized for an urban audience. “How Long” was a moody, reflective song, and it established Carr as the defining blues balladeer, whose warm, intimately soulful vocal stylings would be adapted by thousands of later singers, from blues-associated artists like Peetie Wheatstraw, Bumblebee Slim, T-Bone Walker and Charles Brown to the Count Basie Orchestra’s Jimmy Rushing, Nat “King” Cole, Ray Charles and Sam Cooke. By contrast, “It’s Tight Like That” was an upbeat, double-entendre number that would spawn dozens of sequels with titles like “It Feels So Good” and “It’s All Worn Out,” and laid the foundation for the hipster jive comedy songs of the 1940s.

Both of these records caught on across the spectrum of black record buyers and musicians. Within a few months, they were covered not only by blues recording stars like Blind Lemon Jefferson (who recorded “How Long”) and Clara Smith (who did “Tight Like That”) but by hordes of barroom buskers (Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, a black Texas-Louisiana guitarist who would be discovered in prison in the 1930s and became a favorite of folk music fans, did both songs) and even by mainstream dance orchestras. Both Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf later recalled that “How Long” was the first song they ever learned to play, and few blues-oriented entertainers of the time can have avoided adding both songs to their repertoires.

As the success of these records was followed by the economic constraints of the Depression, the focus of blues recording shifted from idiosyncratic individualists to reliable studio musicians who could write and perform hit styles on demand, and from the streets and juke joints of the South to the urban clubs of the Midwest. Carr and his regular accompanist, the guitarist Scrapper Blackwell, were based in Indianapolis, Tampa Red and Georgia Tom were in Chicago, and there was also a thriving circle of pianists and guitarists in St. Louis and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Detroit. Thanks to its central location and the fact that it already had an established recording industry, Chicago became

the center of this scene, and through the 1930s it would be home to a group of singers and instrumentalists who formed a kind of mix-and-match band of studio artists, regularly guesting on each other's discs and performing each other's songs. Among the most famous of these performers were Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, Washboard Sam, Kokomo Arnold, Casey Bill Weldon, Memphis Slim, the harmonica players Jazz Gillum and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, and comic "hokum" bands like the Hokum Boys and the Harlem Hamfats. These artists were impressively prolific—Broonzy and Tampa Red each released over a hundred records under their own names and appeared as sidemen on hundreds more—and although the Chicago style would be criticized in later years for turning blues into a repetitive studio style in which the same licks and rhythms were recycled ad infinitum, their trademark blend of boogie-woogie piano, lead guitar, and often a harmonica and bass set the pattern for virtually all the blues bands to come.

The modern feel and studio expertise of the Midwestern blues singers made them particularly attractive to an audience whose tastes were expanding in a marketplace dominated by radios and jukeboxes. The mellow voices of Carr and his followers, and the hip urbanity of their lyrics, fitted with the new swing jazz styles that were taking over the pop mainstream, and the percussive piano rhythms and biting guitar solos were perfectly suited to cut through barroom noise even when heard on small jukebox speakers. Jukeboxes had taken off with the end of Prohibition in 1933: thousands of small bars and saloons opened all across the country, and with the tough economic times their owners were tempted to install the new music machines rather than hiring musicians—musicians cost money, while jukeboxes were offered by operators who charged nothing to install them and paid a portion of their profits the bar. Blues was very popular on the jukeboxes, but it needed to be a crisp, clear style of blues with steady rhythms and clear instrumental solos.

The urban blues style also suited the mood of the times, not because it was depressing and this was the Depression, but because it was the direct, gritty expression of people who had no money or power but could still love, party and see the humor in their situation. The hard times brought an exodus of country folk and southerners into the cities, and singers like Carr and Roosevelt Sykes, who had southern accents but sang about city concerns, helped them both to understand their new environment and to be aware that a lot of other people were sharing their experiences. More than at any other time, blues in the 1930s resembled modern rap: lyrics were full of sex and violence, flavored with street-smart comedy and in-group slang. Sykes opened his "47th Street Jive" with a flow of hip patois—"Hello, Morning Glory, what's your story? Charlie Chan, what's your plan?"—and sang about meeting "the hip cats and the fly chicks." Memphis Minnie, in "Me and My Chauffeur," sang about how she wanted a man who would "drive me around the world." And Lonnie Johnson threatened his cheating girlfriend: "The undertaker's been here and gone, I gave him your height and size/You'll be making whoopee with the Devil in hell tomorrow night."

The success of the urban blues style overlapped a new focus on African American rhythms in the mainstream dancehalls. By the mid-1930s, swing had supplanted the more sedate orchestral styles for young dancers in cities across the country, and in the Southwest it was also being blended with cowboy and hillbilly music in a style dubbed Western swing. Swing records played side by side with urban blues records on barroom jukeboxes, and many of the swing bands adopted blues tunes: Benny Goodman had one of his biggest hits with Joe McCoy's "Why Don't You Do Right," Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys recorded many blues tunes, including Memphis Minnie's "What's the Matter with the Mill," while his brother Johnnie Lee Wills and Cliff Bruner's band both hit with Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues," and black stars from the Ink Spots to Count Basie recorded Carr's moody ballads.

In live performances, the jazz and Western swing orchestras played very different venues from the blues guitarists and pianists, but their records sold to a broadly overlapping audience, and it was common to see an advertisement for the latest "Race" hits that included a Mississippi guitar blues by Bo Carter alongside Louis Armstrong and his orchestra playing "Stardust." Indeed, blues and swing overlapped to the point that by the mid to late 1930s the Count Basie Orchestra was probably the most popular blues band in America. Basie was from New Jersey and had started out playing in the sophisticated style of Fats Waller and the Harlem "stride" pianists, but after moving west to Kansas City he found himself surrounded by blues specialists, and his band's early hits were overwhelmingly twelve-bar blues, whether upbeat instrumentals like his theme, "One O'Clock Jump" or soulful vocal numbers like "Going to Chicago." In keeping with this repertoire, Basie reworked his piano style, recording several covers of Leroy Carr tunes and pairing down his playing to match the spare, rhythm-oriented approach of the Midwestern guitar-piano duets, while his horn section favored a driving, riffing style that stressed blues-rooted call-and-response over melodic solos. In the 1940s, when electric amplification allowed guitarists and singers to be heard over full bands, the Basie orchestra would be the model for the rocking, horn-powered "jump blues" style, and everyone from Louis Jordan and T-Bone Walker to Ray Charles, B.B. King, and eventually James Brown and the soul stars of the 1960s based their arrangements on Basie's charts.

As the big bands got into blues, Female singers came back into the mix, with Billie Holiday hitting in 1936 with "Billie's Blues" and providing a female counterpart to Carr's cool ballad style. Unlike the earlier blues queens, Holiday had a thin, almost wispy voice and her phrasing owed as much to Louis Armstrong's trumpet solos as to Bessie Smith's vocal style. Her more laid-back approach would be followed by counterparts like the Basie band's Helen Humes (who had recorded with Lonnie Johnson as a teenage blues queen in the 1920s), Lil Green and Dinah Washington. Across the Midwest, in eastern cities like New York, and out west in Los Angeles, horn bands and jazz-inflected singers would be the dominant blues figures from the mid-1930s through World War II, and their work would be echoed by R&B, rock 'n' roll and soul bands forever afterwards.

Roots, Records, and Robert Johnson

To most blues fans of the 1930s and 1940s, the music's evolution would have looked pretty much the way it is outlined above: from early compositions like W.C. Handy's to the reign of the blues queens, the emergence of country-sounding artists like Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton, a shift to smooth urbanites like Leroy Carr and Tampa Red, then the rise of bandleaders and singers like Basie, Holiday, T-Bone Walker and Dinah Washington. In hindsight, though, there is an equally important story that most listeners would not have been aware of at that time. While the national fashions were changing and urban sounds were dominating the record market, a lot of blues fans in the South continued to enjoy the older, rougher rural styles. A black farmer named McKinley Morganfield, out on Stovall's plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi, listed the New York pianist Fats Waller as his favorite radio artist, owned records by the urban stars Sonny Boy Williamson and Peetie Wheatstraw and sang the Hollywood cowboy songs of Gene Autry, but he also played the raw Delta slide style he had learned from Son House and sang songs adapted from traditional field hollers. And it was this older, local music that would make Morganfield famous in later years, when he was better known as Muddy Waters.

Until the 1920s, African Americans living in rural Mississippi would rarely have been aware of the music people were listening to in New York or Chicago. They might have heard some recent hit songs, but those songs would have been played by local groups like the Mississippi Sheiks, who sounded very different from the orchestras and string ensembles of the urban dance palaces and

Broadway restaurants. It was only with the recordings of the blues queens that outside artists were regularly heard on the Delta plantations. The early phonographs were driven by a spring mechanism and required no electricity, so they could be used even in the most isolated country shack. The "Race records" boom provided black farm-dwellers with records tailored to their tastes, and it was these records that made blues the music of black America. As Son House put it, "The old songs they used to sing way back yonder, weren't *none* of them pertaining to no blues." His father and uncles had a brass band that played ragtime, and his father fooled around on guitar and apparently played the kind of country songs that by the 1920s were being called "hillbilly" music and were more popular with white audiences than blacks. To House's generation, the blues craze began with the recordings of Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Bessie Smith. But unlike the Midwestern urbanites, who took those styles and smoothed them out to fit new technologies and city lifestyles, the Delta musicians adapted the sounds they heard on records to fit their own local styles.

Two particularly strong features of the Delta style were complex guitar rhythms and a vocal approach that was directly derived from the field hollers. This kind of singing, with its drawn out, moaning cadences, and strong melisma (the technique of stretching one syllable over a series of notes) was dubbed "Deep Blues" in a book of the same name by Robert Palmer, and for many modern blues fans it is the music's greatest strength. For Delta singers, though, it was as natural as breathing. As Muddy Waters told one researcher, "Every man would be hollering, but you didn't pay that no mind…. You might call them blues, but they was just made-up things." Waters recalled the records his grandmother played on her wind-up Victrola phonograph as his introduction to what he called blues—but when he sang the songs he learned off those records, they were mixed with the sounds he had picked up as a child in the fields.

In the same way, Delta musicians adapted guitar styles, lyrics and melodies from records to fit their own styles. Charlie Patton took the tune and some verses of a Ma Rainey song called "Booze and Blues," but rather than just singing Rainey's version, he changed it to a guitar-accompanied story-song about his arrest by a local sheriff, "Tom Rushen Blues." Even the yodeling style of the country singer Jimmie Rodgers resurfaced in a new guise, adapted into the lonesome, holler-infused falsetto that became the vocal trademark first of a twenties-era Delta singer named Tommy Johnson and later of the Delta-raised Chicago star Chester "Howlin' Wolf" Burnett.

Aside from Patton, none of the people we now think of as deep Delta blues players made an impact on the national market in the 1920s, and even he sold very little outside Mississippi. The only local performers who really hit on record were the fiddle-powered, lighter-voiced Mississippi Sheiks; Bo Carter, who caught on in the early 1930s with a string of naughty comic numbers like "Banana in Your Fruit Basket;" and Delta-born players like Memphis Minnie and Walter Davis who had moved north and helped create the mainstream urban style of Chicago and St. Louis. The Mississippians who kept playing in the rural "juke joints" of the Delta—often just a country shack or grocery store that was temporarily converted into a music venue—were pretty much left in a small world of their own, unheard by anyone but their neighbors and the local folks who hired them to play at dances and picnics. However, that did not mean that their music stagnated. Thanks to the arrival of radios and jukeboxes, they were hearing all the new sounds, and blending the latest styles with the music Patton, House and Tommy Johnson had pioneered in the 1920s. And in 1936, Robert Johnson proved how powerful that fusion could be.

Though modern listeners hear Johnson exclusively as a blues artist, his sometime partner Johnny Shines recalled that blues represented only one facet of his very varied repertoire:

He did anything that he heard over the radio. . . popular songs, ballads, blues, anything. It didn't make him no difference what it was. . . . He could play in the style of Lonnie Johnson, Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie McTell, all those guys. And the country singer, Jimmie Rodgers, me and Robert used to play a hell of a lot of his tunes, man. Ragtime, pop tunes, waltz numbers, polkas -- shoot, a polka hound, man. Robert just picked songs out of the air.

This versatility was by no means unique to Johnson. The record companies and folklorists who preserved what little music survives from this period by black Delta artists were focused on blues–the record companies didn't need local versions of Tin Pan Alley hits or hillbilly favorites since they could get Bing Crosby or Gene Autry to do those, and the folklorists were looking for music that was unique to the region—but at Delta dances and picnics the people we think of as blues singers were playing whatever their listeners wanted to hear, from Autry's cowboy ditties to big band dance tunes like "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" and "Red Sails in the Sunset."

Though he could play all this music, Johnson was well aware that blues was the style that was most likely to work for him on record, and sometime in the mid 1930s he went to see a furniture store owner named H. C. Speir in Jackson, Mississippi, who had become sort of a freelance talent scout, connecting record companies with regional artists like Patton, the Sheiks, Tommy Johnson, and Skip James. Johnson apparently walked into his store and played him some songs, and Speir was impressed enough to contact the American Record Corporation, which arranged for Johnson to travel to Texas and do his first session.

By that time, the Delta blues Johnson had grown up on was out of fashion in most of the United States. The urban singers and Basie-style rhythm bands were leading the blues field, and record companies were no longer looking for quirky artists who might sell a few discs in some region of the South: they were looking for national jukebox hits. But Johnson was a new kind of artist. He had learned songs and guitar licks by hanging around Son House and Willie Brown at a juke joint near his home, but also was aware of all the latest pop-blues trends, and he could write sophisticated lyrics that sounded like Leroy Carr's urbane ballads. If he had the eerie, haunted sound of Skip James and House's driving rhythms, he also had the highly salable vocal stylings of Peetie Wheatstraw and Kokomo Arnold, the hip humor of Lonnie Johnson and Tampa Red, and the conversational intimacy of the microphone-trained urban crooners.

In short, Johnson was the first major figure in a new generation of down-home bluesmen, equally informed by the sounds of his own region and all the myriad styles he had heard on jukeboxes, phonographs and radios. Some modern listeners have preferred to think of him as a fascinating primitive figure, raised in the strange and isolated Delta, who got his sound by selling his soul to the Devil—an entertaining myth that rock fans in the 1960s inextricably attached to his image. But in a lot of ways, he was more like the future rock 'n' rollers than like his older peers in the Mississippi Delta. Like the rockers, he grew up in a musical world where local players were less important than national stars and where someone living in rural Mississippi could dream of national stardom. In fact, his biggest-selling disc was on a theme that would become a rock 'n' roll staple: the appeal of a hot new car.

"Terraplane Blues" celebrated the Hudson Terraplane, a sleak, powerful automobile of the 1930s, and Johnson made the excitement of driving it into a comical stand-in for a sexual experience:

I'm gon' get deep down in this connection, keep tanglin' with your wires,
And when I mash down on your little starter, then your spark plug will give me fire.

It was a fun, and funny record, and fitted the blues market of 1936 very neatly. Along with the wry, double-entendre lyrics, Johnson adapted the singing style of one of the most popular blues hits, Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues," imitating Arnold's distinctive vocal trick of using a falsetto whoop to end certain words. Arnold's song was widely covered by jazz and country artists and remained popular enough to be among the first recordings of both Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan, but no one reworked it with more humor and imagination than Johnson, and it is not surprising that it was his most successful record in 1936.

Looking backward, though, it is not "Terraplane" that earned Johnson his place in history. It got him on the Delta jukeboxes and excited his friends and other young musicians, but it was just a one-off hit, and seems to have been quickly forgotten. It was another of his songs, "Sweet Home Chicago," that would become a blues standard. This was also adapted from a Kokomo Arnold recording—"Old Original Kokomo Blues," the flip side of "Milk Cow"—but Johnson made two significant changes. First of all, where Arnold had sung about going to Kokomo, Indiana, Johnson sang about going to Chicago, the most popular urban destination for black Mississippians who wanted to escape the poverty and racial discrimination of the plantation South.

That geographical switch not only gave Johnson's version instant popularity—it was covered in the next few years by a series of better-known blues artists including Tommy McClennan, Walter Davis, and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup—but made it an enduring classic once Chicago was hailed as the number one Home of the Blues. But the lyrics were not the only thing that made this record significant. Johnson's guitar arrangement for "Sweet Home Chicago" established a new style of playing that would become ubiquitous in later blues and rock. Instead of playing like earlier blues guitarists, he adopted a repetitive lick that that sounded like the left hand part of a blues piano piece, laying down a loping, boogie shuffle. It was the same bass rhythm that Leroy Carr had used on upbeat numbers like "Sloppy Drunk Blues," and when other guitarists picked it up—not only blues guitarists, but white country players—it became the fundamental rhythm of rockabilly and rock 'n' roll.

The same boogie guitar pattern had been recorded a little earlier by Johnny Temple, another Delta player, and though Temple might have learned it from Johnson, it also may have been common among a generation of young local musicians. But Johnson was the first to use it regularly on a series of records, and when we look back from the rock era, the driving rhythm licks of "Sweet Home Chicago" and "Rambling on My Mind" make him feel like a kindred spirit. That modern flavor was also a great part of what made his work so attractive to his younger neighbors. Muddy Waters, who grew up in the area where Johnson spent his teens and likewise studied at the feet of Son House, was inspired by the fact that a young man from back-country Mississippi could play and sing with the hip flavor of national stars like Carr and Arnold. Elmore James, who would join Waters in electrifying the Mississippi style and making it a staple of 1950s R&B, got his defining hit by covering another of Johnson's records, "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," while Sonny Boy Williamson, the first great Chicago harmonica star, reworked Johnson's "Stop Breaking Down."

Unfortunately for Johnson, he was not around to enjoy those successes. He was killed in 1938, reportedly by a jealous husband who put poison in his whiskey. And for the next twenty-plus years, although some of his songs were reworked and recorded by other musicians, his name was forgotten by everyone but his friends and acquaintances and a small group of record collectors.

That changed dramatically in the 1960s, when Johnson's music was reissued on an LP album titled *King of the Delta Blues Singers* and inspired a generation of young musicians, from acoustic blues revivalists to rock stars like Keith Richards and Eric Clapton. Most of these new fans were white and lived a long way from Mississippi, in cities like New York, San Francisco and London, and they had never heard people like Son House or Charlie Patton. So Johnson's music seemed to them

to have come out of nowhere, and it changed their lives. There was a subtle control of rhythm and dynamics in his acoustic guitar style that no electric player had matched, and the direct emotion of a single artist singing his own words over his own accompaniment. By combining the older Delta styles with the urban professionalism of the 1930s blues world, Johnson had created a fusion that the rock generation found instantly attractive. Meanwhile, his lyrics combined the polished compositional style of Leroy Carr with the startling imagery of Delta folklore, creating poetic lines like, "I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving, blues falling down like hail… And the day keeps on worrying me, it's a hellhound on my trail." In the Depression years, these darker songs were not what the blues world was looking for, but in the 1960s Bob Dylan took them as a model for fitting abstract poetic images into folk and blues forms, creating the modern genre of rock songwriting.

The Past and the Future

In the forty years between the first blues hit and the US entry into World War II, the music evolved from a form spread by brass bands, vaudevillians and printed sheet music to an electric style jumping off the nation's jukeboxes. The upheavals and population shifts of World War II would shake up the American entertainment business in all sorts of ways, and blues would go through many further transformations. The rise of an R&B radio format featuring saxophones and guitars wailing over amplified rhythm sections, and new trends in recording, dancing, and race relations would profoundly reshape not only the way blues sounded but the way people thought about it. It became common for most people to associate the word "blues" with old-fashioned, Southern music, and the style's more trendy offshoots would tend to have new names: R&B, rock 'n' roll, soul, rock, funk, rap—one can argue about how much each of those genres owes to older blues forms, but all of them contain elements that would have been familiar to the blues audiences of the twenties and thirties.

To some extent, blues remains alive in virtually all American music, and shows up as we trace the roots of almost any current star. Fans of Queen Latifah, Amy Winehouse and Norah Jones can follow their styles back through Aretha Franklin, Etta James, Dinah Washington and Billie Holiday to Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Fans of Snoop Dogg and Fifty Cent can travel back through James Brown and Bo Diddley to Johnny Otis, Louis Jordan, Tampa Red and generations of minstrels and juke joint poets. Fans of heavy metal can find the roots of the most virtuosic guitar heroes in T-Bone Walker, Lonnie Johnson and Kokomo Arnold. Fans of smooth soul singers like John Legend can reach back past the Temptations, Sam Cooke and Charles Brown to Leroy Carr. Fans of Garth Brooks can go back to Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Jimmie Rodgers and then the black artists who inspired their lonesome hillbilly styles. And, of course, fans of the White Stripes or the Rolling Stones can go back to Delta blues musicians like Robert Johnson, Son House and Charlie Patton, whose songs they are still covering today.

But all of these quests for roots are ways of explaining how we got to the present, not ways of understanding the past. When Bessie Smith, Leroy Carr and Robert Johnson were alive, they were not the roots of anything. They were hip, innovative artists, in tune with their times, making modern music to catch the ears of their contemporaries. When we listen to their records in the 21st century, it is tempting for a lot of us to think of their work as deeper, purer and more heartfelt than the pop music of our own time—and if that is how we hear it, then it can be all of those things for us. But in its day, it was popular music, and if we want to understand how it was heard back then and what the early blues stars were trying to accomplish, we need to think of them not as the past of rock 'n' roll, but as brilliant, up-to-date entertainers pleasing crowds of drinking, dancing partiers who were as young and trendy as any teen today.