

Handout - Robert Johnson, "Cross Road Blues"

Beyond a collection of a few dozen recordings, few records exist documenting the short life of Robert Johnson. The Blues musician is believed to have been born in May 1911, in Mississippi. As a young man, he began performing music at juke joints - small informal gathering places featuring music and dancing. In 1936 and 1937 he traveled to Texas to record his songs with the American Record Company. A year later, he died under mysterious circumstances, at the age 27. His burial remains a mystery - three different headstones throughout Mississippi claim to mark his final resting place.

What little factual information exists on Robert Johnson's life has been filled with legend. One of the most common legends attribute Johnson's unique and influential guitar playing to a deal the musician made with the Devil on the crossroads. But scholars argue that the "Devil" in the story is in fact a version of Eshu, or Elegba, the Yoruba Orisha (or energy) of choices and the crossroads. While considered a trickster, Eshu does not have the evil associations of the Devil.

Legends aside, Johnson's role in influencing American popular music is undeniable. Thanks in part to a re-release of his recordings organized by famous producer John Hammond, Johnson's music inspired musicians including the Rolling Stones, Big Bill Broonzy, Magic Sam, Arthur Crudup, Bob Dylan, and Led Zeppelin. In 1994, the United States Post Office unveiled a postage stamp in Johnson's likeness, declaring him a national hero.

Cross Road Blues

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, now, save poor Bob if you please"

Ooh, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
Ooh-ee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee-eee, risin' sun goin' down
I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down

And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked East and West
Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress

Source: Ayodele Ogundipe, EsuElegbara, the Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty: A Study in Yoruba Mythology, II, 133-35.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Johnson doing at the crossroads in this song?
2. How would you describe Johnson's emotion while at the Crossroads? Is it positive, negative, or neutral?
3. Why might the crossroads be an appropriate place for someone to feel distressed? What about the crossroads might put someone in that state?