RURAL BLUES

In contrast to the relative urbanity of classic blues, the lonely and timeless sound of rural blues came straight from the farm fields and cotton plantations of the rural South. The field holler singing and acoustic guitar backing—often played slide-style with a knife or bottleneck, supplemented by an occasional harmonica—of rural blues were a stark contrast to the jazz stylings of the classic blues it pre-dated and influenced. W.C. Handy, for one, had his musical life altered by his first rendezvous with the rural blues of the Mississippi Delta, which happened one desolate night in 1903 in the Tutwiler, Mississippi, train station. While Handy dozed off waiting for a train that was nine hours late, a tattered black man with "the sadness of the ages"[i] etched on his face began singing and playing a guitar, sliding a knife across the strings to get a slurred, mournful sound that mirrored his voice. Robert Palmer describes the fateful encounter: "Handy woke up to this music, and the first words he heard the man sing were 'Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.' The line was repeated three times, answered in each case by the slide guitar. Politely, Handy asked what it meant, and the guitarist rolled his eyes mirthfully. In Moorehead, farther south near the Sunflower River in the heart of the Delta, the tracks of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, known to the locals as the Yellow Dog, crossed the tracks of the Southern at right angles. The man was on his way to Moorehead, and he was singing about it."[ii]

Handy stumbled onto a fully-formed style that night in Mississippi, although two more decades would pass before the rough lyrics and "primitive" music of the rural blues were finally recorded.[iii] The first downhome blues recordings were made in 1925 by Blind Lemon Jefferson, a Texan whose songs included "Match Box Blues" (later turned into a rockabilly standard by Carl Perkins), "That Black Snake Moan" and "See That My Grave's Kept Clean." The success of Jefferson's recordings and those of another blind singer, Blind Blake, from Georgia, inspired further digging on the part of the record companies that uncovered a treasure trove of rural blues styles. Jefferson's single string leads and jazzy rhythmic feel helped establish the distinct Texas blues style, while Blake's recordings (including the much-covered "Diddie Wah Diddie") were in a more melodic, ragtime-ish dance style that was popular in the Southeast. The records of Blind Willie McTell ("Statesboro Blues"), Skip James ("I'm So Glad"), Leroy Carr ("How Long—How Long Blues"), Kokomo Arnold ("Milk Cow Blues"), the Mississippi Sheiks ("Sitting On Top of the World"), Big Joe Williams ("Baby, Please Don't Go"), Big Bill Broonzy, Peetie Wheatstraw, Lonnie Johnson, Scrapper Blackwell and many other great bluesmen illustrate the rich diversity of rural blues styles throughout the South and Southeast in the twenties and thirties.

Mississippi Delta Blues

The cotton fields and plantation towns of the Mississippi Delta were home to the deepest blues of all. The Delta blues, and the urban styles it spawned upriver, made an especially easy transition to rock & roll with the addition of a band and a bit of amplification, as evidenced by the many rock covers of Delta blues songs, especially those of the legendary Robert Johnson. (The lead riffs and driving boogie-bass figures of Johnson's "Dust My Broom," for example, formed a virtual blueprint for Chicago blues and hard rock guitar.)

An expanse of flat, fertile land stretching from Memphis to Vicksburg, the Mississippi Delta remains a mythic landscape of towns (Clarksdale, Rosedale, Friars Point, Yazoo City, Helena), roads (the infamous Highway 61), rivers and railroad lines immortalized in songs more than a half century old. The decaying plantations, abandoned sharecropper shacks and desolate crossroads retain a haunting power to this day, and it still seems that it would be entirely possible to make a deal with the Devil himself on any dark night. The Delta bluesmen, like the one in the Tutwiler train station, sang so eloquently of their everyday life that the landscape seems strangely familiar to any blues fan, yet it is still hard to believe that this small, bleak area was once the scene of one of America's truly great and spontaneous explosions of talent. Roebuck "Pop" Staples, founder of the Staple Singers, recalls the old days in the Delta: "On Saturday afternoons everybody would go into town and those fellows like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, and Howlin' Wolf would be playin' on the streets, standin' by the railroad tracks, people pitchin' 'em nickels and dimes."[iv]

The Delta blues had an aggressive intensity unmatched in other blues styles: the best players could very nearly turn their acoustic guitars into an entire band, with driving rhythms and bass figures, strong chords and cutting bottleneck-slide leads all simultaneously propelling the equally intense half-shouted vocals. The lyrics, too, took on an unmatched expressive intensity, ranging from simple destinations ("Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog") that took an eerie, ominous feel, to utter tragedies and meetings with the Devil depicted as chillingly mundane, everyday events. Most were about love—in other words, about sex, despair and/or revenge—and were expressed bluntly and peppered with indecipherable slang and haunting voodoo imagery. The spontaneous poetry of the Delta was often violent (the harsh sexism of the blues is one of its unhappier legacies to rock & roll), never prettified and never very popular beyond its southern base, but its influence has been far-reaching and its ability to astound is undiminished by the decades.

The blues of the Mississippi Delta reached a peak in the 1936-37 recordings of Robert Johnson, though he was more a brilliant synthesizer of existing styles than an originator. Charley Patton ("Founder of the Delta Blues") was nearly 50 and had been playing for decades by the time he began recording in 1929. Although the unrecorded origins of the music are lost to history, Patton, Son House and Willie Brown are three famous influences on Johnson, and their astonishing music, like that of Tommy Johnson, Willie Newbern, Bukka White and other Johnson predecessors, provides a glimpse into the rich musical world of the Delta in the first decades of the century.

Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues

The "King of the Delta Blues," Robert Johnson, has also been referred to as the "Father of Rock & Roll," in a nod to the crucial influence of the Delta blues. Johnson soaked up the influence of his Delta peers and predecessors and along with the influence of bluesmen from other areas who reached him via recordings (particularly Kokomo Arnold, Peetie Wheatstraw and Skip James). His fusion of technique and emotion matched Bessie Smith's, though on a darker and more disturbing level. The raw power and possessed intensity of Johnson's music lends some romantic credence to the legend

that he "sold his soul to the Devil" in exchange for his talent. (By all accounts, Johnson was a mediocre and uninspired player before he disappeared for a period of time; he returned with a jaw-dropping talent and a colorful story for those who wanted an explanation for the miraculous change.) Johnson may have believed it himself, or at least seemed to see it as an apt metaphor for the inner demons that drove his furious playing and singing and his equally hell-bent life. A sense of foreboding and dread colors even his lightest efforts, and the blues seems a palpable, terrifying *presence* in his most riveting songs, such as "Preaching Blues":

> I's up this morning, blues walking like a man,
> I's up this morning, blues walking like a man,
> Worried blues, give me your right hand.
>
> The blues is a low-down shakin' chill
> The blues is a low-down shakin' chill
> You ain't never had 'em—I hope you never will.

Johnson's guitar playing inspires and mystifies today's great players just as it astounded his peers, and provokes the same displays of unabashed awe and envy. His simultaneous mix of rhythm and lead playing was a dazzling perfection of Delta styles, while the sheer focused intensity of his playing lifted it into another realm altogether. Johnson's wonderfully evocative lyrics, too, transcended the disjointed songs and shared common phrases of the blues and entered the realm of poetry, as in "Love In Vain":

> I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand,
> I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand,
> It's hard to tell, it's hard to tell, when all your love's in vain,
> All my love's in vain.
>
> When the train rolled up to the station, I looked her in the eye,
> When the train rolled up to the station and I looked her in the eye,
> I was so lonesome, I felt so lonesome, and I could not help but cry,
> All my love's in vain.
>
> When the train left the station with two lights on behind,
> When the train left the station with two lights on behind,
> The blue light was my blues, and the red light was my mind,
> All my love's in vain.

Robert Johnson's rambling life and early death in 1938—poisoned by a jealous husband at the age of 27—added to his legend when his recordings were reissued in the 1960's and a new generation fell under his spell.[v] Cream's version of "Crossroads," the Rolling Stones' "Love in Vain" and "Stop Breaking Down," and the many other Johnson covers join his original recordings as testimony to his influence and legacy. Eric Clapton summed up his admiration this way: "Robert Johnson to me is the most important blues musician who ever lived... I have never found anything more deeply soulful. His music remains the most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice." Or as Rolling Stone Keith Richards put it: "Everybody should know about Robert Johnson. You want to know how good the blues can get? Well, this is it."[vi]

[i]W. C. Handy, "Father of the Blues" (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 184.
[ii]Robert Palmer, "Deep Blues" (New York: Viking, 1981) p. 45.
[iii]ALthough known as "The Father of the Blues," Handy certainly did not "invent" the blues any more than Elvis Presley invented rock & roll. He was, however, the first to publish, commercialize and popularize the blues, and for this he is honored with a statue in Handy Park on Beale Street, the legendary blues district of Memphis. At the other end of Beale Street there is, appropriately enough, a statue of Elvis, the man who commercialized and popularized the blues beyond Handy's wildest dreams.
[iv]Robert Palmer, "Deep Blues" (New York: Viking, 1981) p. 61.
[v]Johnson's voodoo spell seemed to reach through the ages for his spiritual godson, Jimi Hendrix, and the equally hard-living Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison, who all died at the age of 27, and for Elvis Presley—another great American synthesizer of styles—who died on August 16, the same day as Johnson.
[vi]Clapton and Richards quotes from liner notes for the 1990 Columbia Records release, *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*.