

= Cross Road Blues =

" Cross Road Blues " (more commonly known as " Crossroads ") is a blues song written and recorded by American blues artist Robert Johnson in 1936 . Johnson performed it as a solo piece with his vocal and acoustic slide guitar in the Delta blues @-@ style . The song has become part of the Robert Johnson mythology as referring to the place where he supposedly sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his musical talents , although the lyrics do not contain any specific references .

Bluesman Elmore James revived the song with recordings in 1954 and 1960 ? 1961 . English guitarist Eric Clapton with Cream popularized the song as " Crossroads " in the late 1960s . Their blues rock interpretation inspired many cover versions and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame included it as one of the " 500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll " . Rolling Stone placed it at number three on the magazine 's list of the " Greatest Guitar Songs of All Time " in recognition of Clapton 's guitar work .

= = Recording = =

Little is known about Johnson 's life and musical career , although his recordings are well documented . In October 1936 , Johnson auditioned for music store owner and sometime talent scout H. C. Speir in Jackson , Mississippi ; Speir passed on Johnson 's contact information to Ernie Oertle , who was a representative for ARC Records . After a second audition , Oertle arranged for Johnson to travel to San Antonio , Texas , for a recording session . Johnson recorded 22 songs for ARC over three days from November 23 to 27 , 1936 . During the first session , he recorded his most commercially appealing songs . They mostly represented his original pieces and reflected current , piano @-@ influenced musical trends . The songs include " Terraplane Blues " (his first single and most popular record) along with " Sweet Home Chicago " and " I Believe I 'll Dust My Broom " , which became blues standards after others recorded them .

A second and third recording date took place in San Antonio after a two @-@ day break . Johnson reached back into his long @-@ standing repertoire for songs to record . The material reflects the styles of country blues performers Charley Patton and Son House , who influenced Johnson in his youth . The songs are among Johnson 's most heartfelt and forceful and music historian Ted Gioia sees a shift in the lyrical themes :

At the close of the San Antonio session , the darker , more apocalyptic side of Johnson 's work emerges ... [he] evokes the themes of damnation and redemption , darkness and light ... glimpses into the musician 's inner life , and all its attendant turmoils .

" Cross Road Blues " was recorded during Johnson 's third session in San Antonio , on Friday November 27 , 1936 . The sessions continued at an improvised studio in Room 414 at the Gunter Hotel . ARC producers Art Satherley and Don Law supervised the recording and used a portable disc cutting machine . It is unknown what input , if any , they had into Johnson 's selection of material to record or how to present it . Two similar takes of the song were recorded .

= = Lyrics and interpretation = =

A crossroads or an intersection of rural roads is one of the few landmarks in the Mississippi Delta , a flat featureless plain between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers . It is part of the local iconography and various businesses use the name , such as gas stations , banks , and retail shops . A crossroads is also where cars are more likely to slow down or stop , thus presenting the best opportunity for a hitchhiker . In the simplest reading , Johnson describes his grief at being unable to catch a ride at an intersection before the sun sets . However , many see different levels of meaning and some have attached a supernatural significance to the song .

Both versions of the song open with the protagonist kneeling at a crossroads to ask God 's mercy , while the second sections tells of his failed attempts to hitch a ride . In the third and fourth sections , he expresses apprehension at being stranded as darkness approaches and asks that his friend

Willie Brown be advised that " I 'm sinkin ' down " . The first take of the song , which was used for the single , includes a fifth verse that is not included in the second take . In it he laments not having a " sweet woman " in his distress .

The song has been used to perpetuate the myth of Johnson selling his soul to the Devil for his musical ability . The lyrics do not contain any references to Satan or a Faustian bargain , but they have been interpreted as a description of the singer 's fear of losing his soul to the Devil (presumably in exchange for his talent) . Music historian Elijah Wald believes that Johnson 's verses do not support the idea . Delta bluesman Tommy Johnson promoted himself as having made a deal with the Devil and Southern folklore identifies a crossroads or graveyard as the site of such a pact , which Wald identifies as likely sources of the myth . However , musicologist Robert Palmer points out that Johnson was " fascinated with and probably obsessed by supernatural imagery . " His song " Hellhound on My Trail " tells of trying to stay ahead of the demon hound which is pursuing him and in " Me and the Devil Blues " he sings , " Early this mornin ' when you knocked upon my door , and I said ' Hello Satan I believe it 's time to go ' " . These songs contribute to the Faustian myth ; how much Johnson promoted the idea is debated , although many agree " the ' devil angle ' made for good marketing " .

Blues historian Samuel Charters sees the song as having elements of protest and social commentary . The second verse includes " the sun goin ' down now boy , dark gon ' catch me here " , a reference to the " sundown laws " or curfew during racial segregation in the United States . Signs in the rural South advised " Nigger , don 't let the sun set on you here " . Johnson may be expressing a real fear of trumped up vagrancy charges or even lynchings that still took place . Others suggest that the song is about a deeper and more personal loneliness . Writers Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch argue that the fifth verse in the single version captures the essence of the song : " left alone , abandoned , or mistreated , he stands at the crossroad , looking this way or that for his woman " .

= = Composition = =

" Cross Road Blues " reflects Johnson 's Delta blues roots and may have been in his repertoire since 1932 . It is the first recording to show his mastery of his mentor Son House 's style , particularly in his slide guitar work . Music historian Edward Komara identifies parts of " Straight Alky Blues " by Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell (1929) along with Roosevelt Sykes ' subsequent adaptation as " Black River Blues " (1930) as melodic precedents . However , Johnson infuses their relaxed urban approach with a more forceful rural one . Komara terms Johnson 's guitar playing a " blues harp style " . It contrasts with Johnson 's finger @-@ picking " piano style " , which uses a boogie @-@ style accompaniment on the bass strings while playing melody and harmonies on the higher strings . Harp @-@ style playing employs sharp percussive accents on the bass strings (an imitation of the sharp draw used by harmonica players) and allows Johnson to explore different chordings and fills . Johnson uses this technique for " Terraplane Blues " , which shares many common elements with " Cross Road Blues " .

The song 's structure differs from a well @-@ defined twelve @-@ bar blues . The verses are not consistent and range from fourteen to fifteen bars in length . Additionally , the harmonic progression is often implied rather than stated (full IV and V chords are not used) . Johnson uses a Spanish or open G tuning with the guitar tuned up to the key of B. This facilitates Johnson 's use of a slide , which features as prominently in the song as the vocal . The slide parts function more as a second " answer " vocal than accompaniment , with the tension underscoring the dark turmoil of the lyrics . Charters characterizes the song 's rhythm as ambiguous , imparting both a 44 and 88 feel . Music writer Dave Headlam elaborates on Johnson 's rhythm :

Meter itself is a compositional and performance device which comes in and out of focus in response to the fluid rhythms and changing accents in the lower beats . The irregular groupings extend to smaller beat divisions , with an interplay between triplet ' swing ' and duple divisions of the beat ... Johnson 's irregular rhythms and variation in support of the metric beat suggest a more personal , idiosyncratic vision .

The two takes of the song are performed at moderate , but somewhat different tempos . Both begin slower and speed up ; the first is about 106 beats per minute (bpm) , while the second is about 96 bpm . Johnson prepares to go into the fifth section for the slower second take , but the engineer apparently cut him off because of the time limits of ten @-@ inch 78 rpm records . In addition to the slower tempo , Johnson sings the verses at a lower pitch , although both takes are in the same key . This allows for greater variation and nuance in the vocal . Together with refinements to some guitar parts , the differences serve to help further distinguish the second take from " Terraplane Blues " and give it more of its own character .

= = Releases = =

ARC and Vocalion Records issued the first take of " Cross Road Blues " in May 1937 on the then standard 78 rpm record . The single , with its flip side " Ramblin ' on My Mind " , sold poorly . The song remained out of print after its initial release until The Complete Recordings box set in 1990 . The second take was released in 1961 , when producer Frank Driggs substituted it for the original on Johnson 's first long @-@ playing record album compilation King of the Delta Blues Singers . This take was also included on the 1990 Complete Recordings (at 2 : 29 , it is : 10 shorter than the original 2 : 39 single version) .

= = Elmore James versions = =

American blues singer and guitarist Elmore James , who popularized Robert Johnson 's " Dust My Broom " , recorded two variations on " Cross Road Blues " . Both titled " Standing at the Crossroads " , they feature James ' trademark " Dust My Broom " amplified slide @-@ guitar figure and a backing ensemble . James ' lyrics focus on the lost @-@ love aspect of the song :

James first recorded the song in August 1954 at Modern Records ' new studio in Culver City , California . Maxwell Davis supervised the session and a group of professional studio musicians provided the backup . The song was produced in a newer style that Modern used successfully for B.B. King and James ' slide guitar was placed further back in the mix . Flair Records , another of the Bihari brothers ' Modern labels , released the single , backed with " Sunny Land " . The song became a regional hit , but did not reach the national charts . Labels associated with Modern included " Standing at the Crossroads " on several James compilation albums , such as Blues After Hours (Crown) , The Blues in My Heart ? The Rhythm in My Soul (Custom Records) , and Original Folk Blues (Kent Records) .

In 1959 , producer Bobby Robinson signed James to his Fury / Fire / Enjoy group of labels . In addition to new material , Robinson had James revisit several of his older songs , including " Standing at the Crossroads " . James re @-@ recorded it at Beltone Studios in New York City in late 1960 or early 1961 during one of his last sessions . Studio musicians again provided the backup and the horn section included baritone saxophone by Paul Williams . Bell Records ' subsidiary labels released the song after James ' death in 1965 ? Flashback Records released a single with a reissue of " The Sky Is Crying " and Sphere Sound Records included it on a James compilation album also titled The Sky Is Crying . Both the 1954 and 1960 ? 1961 versions appear on numerous later James compilations .

Homesick James , who recorded and toured with his cousin Elmore , also recorded a rendition titled " Crossroads " . Homesick derived his guitar style from Elmore , which music critic Bill Dahl describes as " aggressive , sometimes chaotic slide work " . Unlike Elmore , however , he uses most of the lyrics from Johnson 's second take , which had been first issued in 1961 . The July 23 , 1963 , recording session produced Homesick 's only single for Chicago @-@ based USA Records , " Crossroads " backed with " My Baby 's Sweet " .

= = Eric Clapton / Cream interpretation = =

== Background ==

In early 1966 , while still with John Mayall 's Bluesbreakers , Eric Clapton adapted the song for a recording session with an ad hoc studio group , dubbed Eric Clapton and the Powerhouse . Elektra Records producer Joe Boyd brought together Steve Winwood on vocals , Clapton on guitar , Jack Bruce on bass guitar , Paul Jones on harmonica , Ben Palmer on piano , and Pete York on drums for the project . Boyd recalled that he and Clapton reviewed potential songs ; Clapton wanted to record Albert King 's " Crosscut Saw " , but Boyd preferred to adapt an older country blues . Their attention turned to Robert Johnson songs and Boyd proposed " Crossroads " and Clapton chose " Traveling Riverside Blues " .

For the recording , Clapton developed an arrangement using lyrics from both songs with an adaption of the guitar line from the latter . Biographer Michael Schumacher describes the Powerhouse 's performance as slower and more blues @-@ based than Cream 's . Winwood sings and Jones plays the riff on harmonica similar to what Clapton later used with Cream (Jones also provides the instrumental solo ; Clapton plays rhythm guitar throughout the song) . Elektra released the 2 : 32 recording , titled " Crossroads " , on the compilation album What 's Shakin ' in June 1966 . After the Powerhouse session , Clapton continued playing with Mayall . Author Marc Roberty lists " Crossroads " in a typical set for the Bluesbreakers in the spring of 1966 .

== Cream version ==

" Crossroads " became a part of Cream 's repertoire when Clapton began performing with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker in July 1966 . Their version features a prominent guitar riff with hard @-@ driving , upbeat instrumental backing and soloing . Clapton previously recorded " Ramblin ' on My Mind " with Mayall and " From Four Until Late " with Cream using arrangements that followed Johnson 's original songs more closely . However , he envisioned " Crossroads " as a rock song :

It became , then , a question of finding something that had a riff , a form that could be interpreted , simply , in a band format . In ' Crossroads ' there was a very definite riff . He [Johnson] was playing it full @-@ chorded with the slide as well . I just took it on a single string or two strings and embellished it . Out of all of the songs it was the easiest for me to see as a rock and roll vehicle .

Clapton simplifies Johnson 's guitar line and sets it to a straight eighth @-@ note or rock rhythm . He and Bruce on bass continuously emphasize the riff throughout the song to give it a strong and regular metric drive combined with Baker 's drumming . Johnson 's irregular measures are also standardized to typical twelve @-@ bar sections in which the I ? IV ? V blues progression is clearly stated . Clapton does not adapt Johnson 's slide guitar technique or open tuning ; instead he follows the electric guitar soloing approach of B.B. King and Albert King . However , he employs a Johnson guitar innovation , the duple shuffle pattern or boogie bass line , while singing (Johnson only used it for two bars in " Cross Road Blues ") .

Clapton also simplifies and standardizes Johnson 's vocal lines . Schumacher calls Clapton 's vocal on " Crossroads " his best and most assured with Cream . In addition to Johnson 's opening and closing lyrics , he twice adds the same section from " Traveling Riverside Blues " :

During the instrumental break , Cream takes an improvisational approach characteristic of their later live performances . Bruce 's bass lines blend rhythm and harmony and Baker adds fills and more complex techniques typical of drummers in jazz trios . However , the momentum is never allowed to dissipate and is constantly reinforced .

== Recording and releases ==

Cream recorded the song on November 28 , 1966 , for broadcast on the BBC Guitar Club radio program . At less than two minutes in length , Clapton only sings the first and last sections , with his guitar solo replacing the middle " Traveling Riverside Blues " verse . It appeared on bootleg albums before finally being released in 2003 on BBC Sessions . On March 10 , 1968 , Cream recorded it again during a concert at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco . According to two music writers

, the recording was edited from a much longer performance that was typical for the trio ? in the notes for Clapton 's Crossroads box set , Anthony DeCurtis credits the trimming to engineer Tom Dowd , while critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine attributes the editing to producer Felix Pappalardi , who " cut together the best bits of a winding improvisation to a tight four minutes " , to allow the song 's drive more continuity. However , Clapton biographer Schumacher does not mention editing and adds " Given the passion of the solo performances on ' Crossroads , ' it seems almost miraculous that Cream is able to return to the song itself . " " Crossroads " became the opening number on the live half of Cream 's Wheels of Fire double album , released in August 1968 by Polydor Records in the UK and Atco Records in the US . After the group 's breakup , Atco issued the song as a single in January 1969 , which reached number 28 on the US Billboard Hot 100 pop chart and 17 on Cashbox . Both the original album and single credit the songwriter as Robert Johnson or R. Johnson , although Clapton and Cream extensively reworked the song .

Cream played " Crossroads " during their final concert at the Royal Albert Hall on November 26 , 1968 . The expanded version of Cream 's Farewell Concert film released in 1977 contains the performance . During their 2005 reunion , Cream revisited the song at the Royal Albert Hall and it is included on the Royal Albert Hall London May 2 @-@ 3 @-@ 5 @-@ 6 , 2005 album and video . After Cream 's breakup in 1968 , Clapton continued to perform " Crossroads " in a variety of settings . Live recordings appear on Live at the Fillmore (with Derek and the Dominos) , Crossroads 2 : Live in the Seventies , The Secret Policeman 's Other Ball , and other albums . Clapton has also used the name for the Crossroads Centre , a drug rehabilitation centre he founded , and for the Crossroads Guitar Festivals to benefit the centre .

= = Recognition and influence = =

In 1986 , Robert Johnson 's " Cross Road Blues " was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame . Writing for the foundation , Jim O 'Neal noted that " regardless of mythology and rock ' n ' roll renditions , Johnson 's record was indeed a powerful one , a song that would stand the test of time on its own " . In 1998 , it received a Grammy Hall of Fame Award to acknowledge its quality and place in recording history . In 1995 , the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame listed Cream 's " Crossroads " as one of the " 500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll " . Rolling Stone magazine placed it at number three on its " Greatest Guitar Songs of All Time " .

AllMusic 's Richard Gilliam identifies Cream 's " Crossroads " as the first recording to bring Robert Johnson to the attention of popular music audiences and allow reissues of his original recordings to sell over a million copies . By combining elements of hard rock and blues , he adds it inspired " a new generation of blues @-@ influenced artists " . Rock musicians have recorded numerous renditions based on Cream 's arrangement .