Michael Roberts
Eng 122-016
Miss Christina French
Feb 21, 2011

Ramblings of Genius: A Discussion of the Importance of Robert Johnson in the Development of 20th Century Music

"Earthy" is the first word that comes to mind when listening to the few remaining scraps of Robert Johnson's body of work. A great song can create this connection regardless of the time period in which it was produced. Recorded in the late 1930's on a phonograph, the tracks have an eerie personal aura that plunks you square in the center of a dilapidated tavern, filled with chatter and smoke. Johnson captivates his audience with music and lyrics so distinctive that all other thoughts slip from consciousness. As this familiar stranger tells us his tale of woe, we can't help but commiserate. The blues arouse empathy in a way that is rare in the music industry. When we listen to a piece of music that both tells a story and excites our auditory senses, we are drawn in and the story becomes our own. All that remains of Robert Johnson's contribution to music are twenty-nine gritty tracks laid down in two private sessions. And yet, Johnson is regarded as one of the greatest blues musicians of all time. His music, with its enigmatic blend of vocals coupled with remarkable guitar skills, stands the test of time.

Born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, circa 1911, Robert Johnson was introduced to blues music at a young age. Johnson spent his formative years passing back and forth between parents who considered him a burden. His mother left him to his stepfather's care at the age of three; a few years later, difficulties with his father forced his mother to take him in once again (this time with her new husband). A lack of consistent parental support was devastating to Johnson's emotional outlook on life. This perhaps is why he was so drawn to the soulful emotion of the

Blues (Brown). It was in Robinsonville, Mississippi, that Robert Johnson fell in love with blues music. “The Robinsonville area was a hotbed of Delta Blues in the 1920’s and 1930’s” (Brown). Blues was everywhere; Johnson became enthralled with the styling of great blues musicians in the area (Son House, Tommy Johnson, and Charley Patton, to name a few). Johnson began his musical endeavors fiddling with the “jew’s harp” and harmonica. However, when Robert found the guitar in the early 1920’s, his path became clear. Through the blues Robert Johnson found an outlet for his creativity, a marketable skill (at least enough to survive), and a means to interact with people in a personal yet detached way that felt comfortable for a man starved of intimacy.

Throughout his life, Robert Johnson roamed the backroads of the Mississippi Delta. The “traveling blues musician” became an integral part of his persona and adds a great deal of mystique to his legend. In his article “Really the ‘Walking Blues,’” an interesting discourse regarding Muddy Waters’s contribution to Delta Blues, John Cowley presents an enlightening quotation from Waters about Robert Johnson, divulging how Robert’s contemporaries viewed the man:

> Then of course there was Robert, Robert Johnson. He used to work the jukes. I don’t know what sort of work he did. He always had a guitar with him whenever I saw him around. I never did talk to him much. He was the kind of guy you wanted to listen to, get ideas from… but he didn’t seem to stay in one place too long you know, kind of restless. (62)

Even to fellow blues artists, Robert Johnson was a mystery and an inspiration. In the latter half of 1930, Robert Johnson took a sojourn of sorts. During this time he was more scarce than usual, spending a great deal of time in reclusion, fine tuning his music. Robert developed his guitar skills so much in this period that other musicians in the area were flat-out astonished (Brown). Rumors began circulating that perhaps Robert sold his soul to the devil for such fantastic skills on the guitar. Often when listening to one of Johnson’s tracks, it seems as though there must be a

second guitarist playing. This style of self-accompaniment is evident in “I believe I’ll dust my Broom.” Throughout the song, he maintains a solid bass strum while simultaneously striking high notes every few bars. His intricate slide work and a technique called “bottle necking” allow Johnson to envelope his audience with auditory stimulation from both ends of the spectrum. Johnson’s awe-inspiring guitar work, the intimate atmosphere created in his performance, and his legendary elusiveness have all contributed to Robert’s eerily prophetic place in music history.

Although many fellow bluesmen regarded Johnson well, the larger part of society at the time saw an outcast, often shunning him. While people would happily listen to Robert spin a tale on his guitar, once the performance ended, many viewed traveling blues musicians as a dangerous element, not to be trusted amongst impressionable youth. Rarely welcomed, Robert kept on the move. This vagrant lifestyle is a major theme in Johnson’s music. Song titles such as “Rambling on My Mind,” “Traveling Riverside Blues,” and “Crossroad Blues” exemplify the importance of traveling in his life. Henrietta Yurchenco pays tribute to the power of Johnson’s lyrics in her article recounting the blues of the early twentieth century: “No song about the homeless man adrift … is more tragic than “Crossroad Blues” by Robert Johnson” (452). In this piece Johnson weaves a tale of heartache that no one can listen to earnestly without empathizing. While lamenting “I tried to flag a ride/Didn't nobody seem to know me babe/everybody pass me by” in a deep full voice, Johnson simultaneously plucks high notes in a muted fashion creating a discord and heightening the listener’s sense of distress. As “Crossroad Blues” progresses, a scraggly hobo strolls the highway of our mind; we ask ourselves: “would I pick him up?”, “could that be me someday?” We imagine this drifter at the end of his rope, struggling to survive. Transposing ourselves into his tattered shoes, our perspective of our own lives shifts. Suddenly a

rough day at the office is no reason to fuss. Anyone who has experienced a difficult stretch of life can relate to this aspect of Robert Johnson.

In addition to traveling, many (perhaps a majority) of Robert Johnson's songs are about women and the many torturous ways they mistreat him. It is even rumored that Johnson's troublesome meddling in the affairs of married women led to his death by strychnine poisoning when an angry husband caught Johnson flirting with his wife after a show. Relationship troubles are yet another aspect of Johnson's music that exhibits universal relatability. All of us have loved, lost or felt miserable due to the fickle nature of our affections. "Kindhearted Woman" is a tribute to unrequited love. Beginning with the chorus, "I love my baby/ my baby don't love me," each verse of the song draws out old familiar feelings. Halfway through the song, the line, "There ain't but one thing that makes mister Johnson drink," has us salivating for the reassuring comfort of spirits. By the end of the song we're rooting for Robert to "shake her hand goodbye."

Behind the sad story of a Blues song is an all-too-familiar beat. Part of Robert Johnson's genius is the way in which he twists this familiar pattern to his liking. In his detailed analysis of Robert Johnson's music, "Robert Johnson's Rhythms," Charles Ford states: "One of the principle sources of irregularity in Robert Johnson's songs derives from the way in which he pastes together pre-formed elements with no respect for their metric continuity" (72). At first glance, this may seem a criticism: it is not. Many of Robert Johnson's songs have drastic shifts in rhythm and pitch as well as quick scales, seemingly inserted at random. These rapid changes keep the listener engaged actively in the music, trying ever so hard not to miss a beat. Blues singers at the time would often incorporate rhythm, beats, and verses from other musicians whom they had met in their travels and jammed with. One way of describing the playing of the blues is as "the playing of *a* blues" (Ford 75). Many songs are so similar that in essence they are just that artist's

version of a folk tune. Robert Johnson's are often the most intricately composed versions of these tunes. The seemingly improvised elements are very well-structured to emphasize the emotion he is exploring. In "Walkin Blues," a song that is arguably one of these "folk tunes," Johnson uses a variety of techniques to engage his audience (Cowley 65). The song begins slow; each subsequent verse seems a little faster. The snowballing tempo creates a sense of urgency that grows along with it. A twitch starts in our toe; by the end of the song we need to move. At the same time, Johnson mingles falsetto "ooo's" and quick rifts between verses that help solidify this sense of urgency deep in our mind. Incredible talent and infamous dedication to his craft allowed Johnson to mingle a variety of lyrical and structural elements in a single song, distinguishing him from other artists of the era. It seems each time a track is played, yet another subtlety emerges.

In the style of many great musicians of the twentieth century, Robert Johnson died at the age of twenty seven. Very little remains of his music. During 1936-37, Johnson recorded two sessions, totaling just over two dozen tracks (Brown). This relatively small body of work, however, influenced subsequent generations immensely. Bands such as the Who and the Rolling Stones, as well as song writers Eric Clapton and Bob Dillon, list Johnson as a major influence. These artists were integral in the development of Rock n' Roll throughout the 1960's and 1970's. Furthermore, Johnson resides at the top of many "Top 100 Guitarists" lists. With just a scant few recordings, Johnson has managed to earn himself a spot in history. Because of his extraordinary talent and the brevity of his career, a great deal of myth and legend has developed around Robert Johnson.

Perhaps the most common legend recounted of Robert Johnson (and one likely believed by many of his contemporaries): he made a pact with the devil. The story goes, some peculiar

night Robert Johnson met the devil at a crossroads. Wanting nothing more than to be the greatest blues man of all time, Johnson sold his soul in exchange for supernatural abilities on the guitar. Advocates of the legend point to the fact that there are several allusions to the devil in Johnson's lyrics. Titles such as "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Hellhound on my Trail" are fodder for believers convinced that Robert Johnson had a dark secret. The town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, has erected a monument to the blues at just such a crossroads. Although it is more likely that if such a place exists it is in Hazlehurst, where Robert spent his years of reclusion and developed his excellent guitar skills. Scholars, in their ever-present lack of faith, tend to believe that Johnson's incredible skills were a gift of nature coupled with great diligence and practice (Brown). Whether you prescribe to the supernatural or not, the myth and mystery surrounding Robert Johnson is an integral component of his historical significance.

Sitting on a creaky stool in some dreary hole in the wall with a single musician baring his soul; each of us will develop our own unique relationship with this musician. The hustle and bustle of life fades and we begin to *truly* listen. The blues musician becomes a familiar stranger, his woes reflecting our own. In that moment the essence of blues takes hold of our entire being. This intimate experience transcends our consciousness; the next day we find ourselves humming the beat or singing verses we connected to most. Robert Johnson's ability to captivate his audience placed him amongst the highest-regarded blues musician of his time. However, his genius and dedication elevated him to the heights of legend. In order to understand the evolution of guitar playing, song composition, and lyricism in the blues and rock, one need only download a few dusty old tracks by this short-lived musician from the Mississippi delta.

Works Cited

Brown, Robert N. "Traveling Riverside Blues: Landscapes of Robert Johnson in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta." *Focus on Geography*. 01 Jan. 2006: 22. *eLibrary*. Web. 15 Feb. 2011.

Cowley, John. "Really the 'Walking Blues': Son House, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson and the Development of a Traditional Blues." *Popular Music Vol. 1, Folk or Popular? Distinctions, Influences, Continuities*. 1981. 57-72. Web..

Ford, Charles. "Robert Johnson's Rhythms." *Popular Music* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1998): 71-93. Web.

Johnson, Robert. "Crossroad Blues." *King Of The Delta Blues Singers.* Columbia Records, 1961. Cd.

-- "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." *King Of The Delta Blues Singers.* Columbia Records, 1961. Cd.

-- "Kindhearted Woman." *King Of The Delta Blues Singers.* Columbia Records, 1961. Cd.

Yurchenco, Henrietta. "'Blues Fallin' Down Like Hail' Recorded Blues, 1920s-1940s." *American Music* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter, 1995): 448-469. Web.