



Searching for Robert Johnson

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Guralnick's extended essay about the life and legend of the "King of the Delta Blues Singers", and the time and place that produced both, illuminates much of the obscurity around the man without forfeiting any of the mystery. Photos.

Searching for Robert Johnson Details

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Jo says

Peter Guralnick did the impossible and had the last word on Elvis with his essential *Last Train to Memphis & Careless Love* biographies; culling a life on which far too much information is available down to a vibrant, character-driven thousand or so pages. Here, he's done the opposite by taking a life about which we know almost nothing and stretching it out to 85 pages. But the same intimacy is there, as Guralnick's worked hard to form a coherent character from the scraps of history.

We learn how other bluesmen described Johnson as "bashful but imposing", friendly but moody, and willing to up and jump a train at the drop of a hat. He'd pick up women by asking upfront "Do you want to come home with me?"; and the same women would wake up in the middle of the night to find him sitting at the window, playing to the moon and stopping when he realised he was being watched. Reading this eery book you feel as close to understanding Robert Johnson as anyone is probably ever going to get.

Megan says

First - I read this book in one night...in fact, it was probably in two hours. I don't mean to boast of my "incredible" reading speed, but this book ended up being an easy and short read. And that can't be a bad thing!

Although this wasn't a "joy read", but a read for a blues class I'm taking, I found "Searching for Robert Johnson" to be mostly enjoyable and slightly enlightening almost all of the time. Included were lots of interesting anecdotes and Guralnick pieced them together in a way that (mostly) seemed plausible and probable. Also included were some interesting pictures of life during Johnson's lifetime. Thankfully, Guralnick didn't spend forever talking about dry, pointless, factual information, but concentrated on the discussion of Johnson and his fame. Overall, a good read.

Jeff Crompton says

As others have said, this book is little more than a sketch. The information is good, as far as it goes, but little was known about Johnson in 1989, and not that much more is known now. For instance, I have visited all three "Robert Johnson graves" around Greenwood, Mississippi. Each site has its proponents as Johnson's final resting place, but nobody really knows which of these graves, if any, contain the remains of one of the most remarkable musicians of the 20th century.

And that, of course, is why the mystery of Robert Johnson continues to fascinate us: he was indeed an amazing musician. The best pieces from his meager recorded legacy are haunted, haunting, and unforgettable.

Guralnick frequently refers to Mack McCormick's unfinished biography of Johnson, seemingly presenting his own little volume as an appetizer to McCormick's main course. But almost 25 years later, McCormick's book has still not appeared. Perhaps when it's finally published, we'll have a fuller picture of this mysterious musician. Until then, except for his recordings, Robert Johnson remains more legend than man.

Bart says

More of an essay than a book, written with a poetic, unwieldy style I don't appreciate too much. Its topic however, the mysterious and legendary king of the Delta Blues singers Robert Johnson, is extremely interesting. The book offers a nice view into what the life and the persona of Robert Johnson could have been, back in the 1930s.

David James says

The immensely influential and maddeningly elusive Robert Johnson has bedeviled many a writer. This book - which is more a long essay than a full work - manages to convey these two contradictory traits but never gets beyond them. It was, however, one of the earlier efforts at solving the puzzle, so in the time in which it was written, it covered some under-explored territory.

Guralnick, to his credit, didn't dwell too heavily on Johnson's fabled and by now pretty decisively debunked deal with the devil, a story that originated in some out of context comments coupled with the fevered imaginations of white fans during the early sixties blues revival. He's more interested in Johnson the singer, guitarist, and composer, and here he offers some fine analysis and criticism, acknowledging what some blues fans can't - that not all of

Johnson's recordings are top notch; a couple sound tossed out - and saving his truly lavish praise for those of Johnson's songs that were truly transcendent.

This is a good introduction to Johnson and his work if you are fairly unschooled in it, but if you've read some of the more penetrating books that have come in its wake, it won't provide any new insights. However, it's enjoyable regardless, because Robert Johnson is as vexing to readers as he is to writers.

Kiof says

still waitin' for Biography of a Phantom

Lemar says

Nice work fleshing out the enigma, the legend. Guralnick really did his research and is willing to let the man emerge, not deify him in his mind and find proof for his conclusion.

I was lucky enough to meet Honeyboy Edwards in Blue Hill Maine in the early 1990's. He had traveled with Robert Johnson in the 1930's. I tried to think of something to ask him about Robert Johnson that I couldn't

find out somewhere else, ended up asking him, "was Robert Johnson funny?" He replied, "not really" and then added a cool anecdote. When they traveled somewhere, hitchhiking or a train car, they would typically arrive in a town early in the morning Honeyboy would be rumpled, tired, hair a mess, wrinkled but he said Robert Johnson always looked neat.

Honeyboy himself turned out to be a gifted player and a fascinating man in his own right. Also there were Etta Baker, Roy Bookbinder, John Jackson and Howard Armstrong. Yes!

D. says

This is a short (96 pages -- very short!) examination of the life of the great bluesman Robert Johnson. This is the book that really kicked off the popular resurgence of Johnson's fame (along with the box set that collected his complete recorded sides.)

It's sketchy, of course, because the details of Johnson's life are sketchy, but it does a nice job of placing him in his proper context, and looking at what made him (and his short career) so special. It's a love letter to the blues, and the men that created the blues, and a paean to a lost time in American history.

It's a bit frustrating, of course, because there are so many details that are simply lost to time, and it's especially frustrating because it keeps talking about a book about Johnson that was in progress at the time of the writing (late 1980s) that has apparently never been published. (McCormick's PORTRAIT OF A PHANTOM)

Well worth reading, especially for music fans, especially if you love the blues!

Dylan says

There's not much to go on...a handful of dusty photos...29 ghostly recordings...a midnight myth conjured up in the Southern dust...perhaps a poisoned death that left him howlin' at the moon...and so America always prints the legend.

The truth was probably less obscure, but why let that get in the way of a great story. No one knows too much..not many remembered him, but he was an almost supernaturally gifted musician who worked very hard on his devilish talents. Hearing him now is a time travelling link to the spirits of a lost world and an older, stranger America. This essay can be no more than a sketch...a faded image in a broken frame. Fractured, strange, haunted and almost unreal. Like Robert Johnson's timeless music - once heard, never forgotten.

Conrad says

I used to know this (white) ragtime guitarist who, in the 60s, had been one of those young blues fiends who ran around, finding half-dead and ignored folk musicians like Mississippi John Hurt, and giving them a few bucks to play in front of a recorder. By the time I met him, I was teaching a classroom full of black kids, and I wanted to do a lesson on Robert Johnson for Black History Month. My friend had been teaching and playing guitar for twenty-thirty years, so I asked him if it wasn't a little dirty that I was going to lecture these

kids on someone as distant from them as Ulysses Grant or Popeye cartoons, a guy Zep and Clapton stole from, and if that wasn't appropriation, or presumptuous in some way. He got really incensed.

"Say you're walking down the block and you hear some really kickass music someone's playing from their car," he said. "You love it, and you want nothing more than to listen to it some more. You go out and you hunt those records down and you start filling your own tunes with some of that guy's licks because he's all you listen to. What difference does it make if that guy's black or white? It might matter when you get a record deal and you do a lot of covers, but not when you're just listening to that car go by. Plus, those blues guys were all ripping off white gospel singers, too. You can't keep good music to yourself."

I don't know how much I agree; it's an open issue and one I think about sometimes, and one well worth exploring. Schopenhauer was right, though - music might be the most universal medium, just 'cause it's furthest from language; it has a way of effacing its origins, of kind of leaking through any bounds, like no other medium I can think of, whether you want it to or not. Maybe it always does what's dirtiest.

Patrick Book says

Pretty well drawn, considering its brevity. But I'd expect nothing less from Guralnick.

Edmund Davis-Quinn says

The book fetishes that great but in my opinion overrated Robert Johnson. To me players with longer careers like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf are far more important.

The discography is fascinating though, and I expect to spend some time on Spotify with it.

Although I definitely do like the idea of crossroads magic, it is part of my old traditions of Appalachia and can go both ways.

Rade says

Ah yes, the great bluesman that....my coworker told me about.

Anyway, this is a book about a short life of a great man who has been told to have sold his soul to the devil himself. His slender fingers were said to have produced magic every time he picked up his musical instrument. The book dwells into his early life as well as his life touring the country and hooking up with ladies. Some dubbed him as shy while others dubbed him as stern and decisive.

Like many parts of his life, the complete story will never be told in truth. It will always be surrounded by a layer of stories that his admirers have told over the years. Like the nature of his death, it will stay a mystery. Just like the nature of his death, people will always find ways to tie up the loose ends, preferably in a way that will show the greatness of this man and his talent.

Short book (can be easily read in a day) and recommended to anyone who is fan of music (any).

Alana Cash says

Sample sentence from this book: "Through the research of David Evans and Gayle Dean Wardlow in particular, the origins of the unique style - generally considered to be the richest and most emotionally intense vein of a genre that began sweeping the South in the early days of the century and, then, much assisted by the new technology of the phonograph record became a central strain in the diffusion of Afro-American culture over the next fifty years - have become clear."

Dustin says

This was a really great read as well as a thorough examination of the life of a very mysterious and interesting figure. Robert Johnson is not only one of the greatest blues musicians and writers in the history of the genre, but he is at the center of a great deal of mythology and folklore. While not the first, he is one of the most famous (or infamous) musicians said to have made a deal with the devil for his skill on the guitar, and his talent makes the story seem more believable, to whatever extent that sort of folklore can be believable. If you have an interest in blues, Johnson, the Delta, or the folklore, read this book. It won't take long, and you'll be happy you did.

Mike says

"Baby, I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead and gone
You may bury my body, hoo
Down by the highway side
So my old evil spirit
Can get a Greyhound bus and ride" -Robert Johnson's Me and The Devil Blues.

In Peter Guralnick's 1989 book, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, he describes The King of The Delta Blues voice this way, it "...possessed a plasticity and adaptability that lent itself to every variety of emotional effect."

Through interviews with men who knew him and played along side him, Guralnick examines Johnson's life, his music and his death.

Did he sell his soul to the Devil?

Eddie Villanueva says

A fun, quick read about the legendary bluesman who sold his soul to the devil. Filled with myth enhancing stories by his contemporaries and many listening recommendations.

Brandon says

This short book is a lot like it's subject. It is brief and sketchy and leaves the reader wanting more. The life of Robert Johnson was full of myth and legend but is best remembered for two recording sessions in did in the mid 1930's and from these sessions 29 songs were captured on vinyl that would influence popular music the world over for decades to come. Within a few years Robert Johnson was dead but his music lived on and probably influenced more people than any of us can imagine. Much like his Woody Guthrie, a contemporary of his, Johnsons' songs would transcend race, musical styles and generations and this book does well to appreciate the genius of Robert Johnson as a songwriter and performer. However, unlike Guthrie, Johnson's life was so brief and clouded in mystery that there is not much left to write about. Guralnick makes a noble effort to try to flesh out his subject but there is just not much info to work with. What is a writer to do with a subject that meant so much to so many yet there is no record about his school years or early influences and who died just as he was beginning to get noticed. No-one even knows what day Robert Johnson was born or why he used the surname he did when he had other options.

This explains the shortness of the book . Promoted as an extended essay it might have been better to call it liner notes in book form under the title 'Robert Johnson and the Delta blues movement' since that is the real focus of the book. Johnson is certainly the focus of this lovingly written book but he is as much an example of the life of a delta bluesman of the time as he is the main driving force of the book. There are many more Delta bluesmen mentioned - often in the vain of how Johnson influenced them - and the juke joints and rambling lifestyle that made them are well depicted but the man in the title too often seems like a supporting character, like the long lost son/cousin from a Dickens novel who suddenly reappears after years of being away. There is very little in this book to explain why he wrote the songs he did. Why was he haunted by the devil chasing him, why did he write such original songs both lyrically and musically instead of just rehashing the existing music of his peers, where did his ambition and drive come from and how did he learn to play a guitar so uniquely that people thought he was being supported by other musicians. None of these questions are answered convincingly and many more are not addressed.

This isn't the authors fault, of course. He is writing about a man who is a true mystery. No-one is even sure if Johnson could read or write or what level he could. He was married twice but little is known of these relationships and though he knew many people it doesn't seem to have gotten close to anyone. The man was a ghost to all around him. He would appear, shake things up and than disappear leaving behind the two things that made him the great man that he became; his music and his mystic.

There is some source material and the writer uses them as best he can. He interviews people who knew Robert Johnson and also references written material but these sources often conflict one another and none of them really add any depth to subject. There are no explanations among these stories about how he composed his music or why nor is legacy ever truly addressed. There is no real depth added to Robert Johnsons story, nothing to add to his mystic. That's a shame really because this book is a well and lovingly written account of one of Americas great songsmiths but it probably is not the book that will guarantee his legend will last forever.

Tom says

Not a book that terribly impressed me the first time around, which must've been 10 years ago, but after making an evening of it just now, I'm prepared to change my tune.

I think I was originally underwhelmed by *Searching for Robert Johnson* because I was expecting something more definitive and expansive, which I'll admit was ridiculous since it's an 85-page book with uncertainty embedded in its very title. Returning to it now, entirely as a result of rereading Greil Marcus' wonderful chapter on Johnson in *Mystery Train*, I'm struck by how much Guralnick makes out of such a little bit of solid information. Indeed, the "facts" of the Johnson tale are less interesting than the mysteries and the myths.

Frankly, Guralnick is such a master that this book *couldn't* miss. It occupies a middle ground between his mammoth biographies and his expert profiles, and I'm no longer of the opinion that it's a blight on his otherwise essential canon.

Shoshana says

I didn't finish it, because it was written in such a dull dull dull way. It gets two stars instead of one because the subject material was so cool, and because it reminded me to listen to Robert Johnson. But, you know, you'd think I could finish a hundred page book, but it was just too dull.
