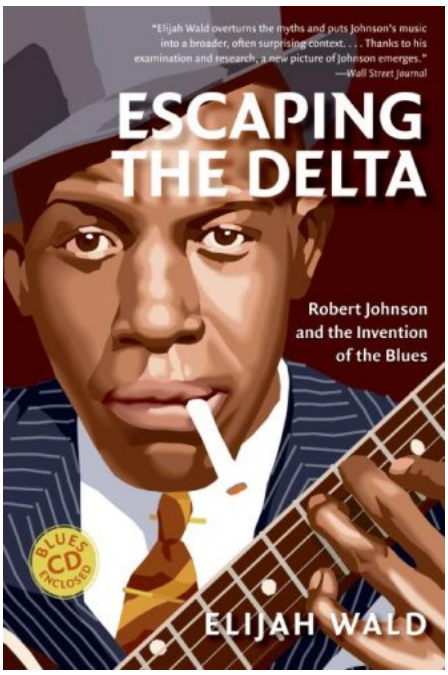

Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues

Elijah Wald

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The life of blues legend Robert Johnson becomes the centerpiece for this innovative look at what many consider to be America's deepest and most influential music genre. Pivotal are the questions surrounding why Johnson was ignored by the core black audience of his time yet now celebrated as the greatest figure in blues history.

Trying to separate myth from reality, biographer Elijah Wald studies the blues from the inside -- not only examining recordings but also the recollections of the musicians themselves, the African-American press, as well as examining original research. What emerges is a new appreciation for the blues and the movement of its artists from the shadows of the 1930s Mississippi Delta to the mainstream venues frequented by today's loyal blues fans.

Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues Details

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From Reader Review Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues for online ebook

Ian says

The author really belabors some stale points, chiefly that are modern perception of the biggest names in the blues world are not reflected by the sales data and feedback from people who were around at the time. Some of the biggest stars and best-selling artists of the early decades of the blues era have been neglected and even forgotten to time—guys like Peetie Wheatstraw, Lonnie Johnson, and Tampa Red have been overlooked for the Robert Johnsons, despite the fact that they sold tons of records and Johnson actually sold very few (he only sat for 3 recording sessions before his murder at age 27, and only recorded about two dozen songs, and only a couple of those registered as modest hits at the time).

While his points are valid, he repeats himself often and supplies reams of data with an academic rigor, which does not exactly make for compelling reading. There were times when I could swear I'd read the exact same paragraph in separate parts of the book, only to dig back and find the other parallel paragraph from a few pages previous and discover that it is saying the exact same thing with only a slight re-arrangement of the words. This is one of the few books that actually made me shout at the pages in frustration, "YOU ALREADY SAID THAT LIKE 5 TIMES, JUST MOVE ON ALREADY!"

He also spends a painful amount of time talking about white blues fans, and talking about white blues fans have a skewed perspective on the blues scene. He keeps coming back to the same point over and over again: modern white blues fans prefer different artists and styles than black blues fans of the historical era. So what? As a white blues fan, I got really tired of him telling me how I perceive blues music and how my perceptions are somehow faulty because I like Leadbelly and Robert Johnson even though they didn't sell many records in the 30s.

All in all, it is thoroughly researched and very informative book, and I feel that I got a lot out of it, but it is far too long for such a narrow subject. The author really should have choose to expand the scope and cover more of the history of the blues (many of the early stars are barely discussed outside the scope of sales numbers, and it basically covers up until just after WWII and then only casually mentions the later stars of the 50s and 60s). Alternately, he could have edited the book down for brevity and it would be compelling reading. The scope he chose could be covered with about 75 less pages without leaving anything important out.

Richard says

I probably thought I knew the Blues. After all, I was born and raised in Mississippi, and have lived most of my life within 40 miles of HWY 61 and within spitting distance of the Delta. Turns out I didn't know squat, either about Robert Johnson or the Blues in general. This book by Elijah Wald was both a revelation and an education. If you're at all interested in the Blues and how it relates--and more importantly, perhaps-- how it DOESN'T relate to the early roots music of America, you need this book. Wald does a great job of separating fact from legend. The legend remains, of course. Legends are awfully hard to kill, and Robert Johnson at the Crossroads is too good a story. But if you want the *real* story, or at least as close to it as any of us are likely

to get, this book is the place to go.

Jay B. Larson says

This book actually annoyed me. The author's premise is worthy enough - to demystify Delta Blues musicians by asserting that they were professional musicians just as in search of success as anyone else. However, the author's main agenda seems to be telling the reader OVER AND OVER that he's the only one who gets it, which he does with irritatingly faulty logic. He insists that all accounts of Johnson's life are subject to skepticism since nothing is verifiable. Then he insists that he KNOWS Johnson intended to include an extra verse to "Crossroad Blues" because "he can be heard preparing to go into it before the engineer must have signaled he was out of time." Somehow the author who disputes first-hand accounts of those who knew Johnson knows precise occurrences in a motel room recording session over seventy years ago because of a momentary catch he perceives in Johnson's voice. I could go on and on, but the point is simply that the author's intrusive and insistent voice render the book a displeasure to read, even if one agreed with the author's premise.

David Dixon says

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Highway 61 Revisited
By Glenn Dixon • January 23, 2004

The blues was invented by white people: Although that’s the incendiary thesis behind Elijah Wald’s provocative new book, "Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues," it’s unlikely to anger many African-Americans. Because Wald isn’t talking about the music per se; he’s challenging the way the nostalgic modern idea of the blues has been constructed by the liberal, supposedly educated white audience that has constituted the music’s main fan base for the last few decades. Readers are likely to be pissed off in direct proportion to their having bought into the myth that the “real” blues is an authentic folk expression that taps into the hoodoo mystery of primitive black America, a devil-haunted cri de coeur that rises like fog from the cotton fields of Mississippi. Readers are likely to be pissed off in direct proportion to their being Greil Marcus.

No, seriously: Just about everybody who made "Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings" the unlikeliest of platinum-selling smashes has another think coming. Wald hangs his argument on Johnson not just because getting the bluesman’s name in the subtitle and picture on the cover exponentially increases the audience for any book about the blues, but because the cherished myth of the blues has been hung on Johnson by several generations of white admirers. If any one person currently symbolizes the genre, it is the tortured, solitary wanderer who sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads at midnight, in the bargain gaining a genius unforetold, and died in 1938, poisoned by a jealous husband at the rock-death-magical age of 27.

Wald starts out on his quest to dismantle the fuzzy-minded exceptionalism that has grown up around Johnson by giving him back his historical context. Even if baby-boomer intellectuals don’t take the crossroads legend literally, they have largely been suckered by the notion that the customary patterns of example and influence

don’t apply in Johnson’s case, that though he was of the place and time that was the Mississippi Delta in the ’30s, he somehow stood outside it. The country bluesman is often pictured as a hunched and shadowy figure shouldering his guitar down a lonesome road on the outskirts of town; Wald methodically fills in the missing landscape, taking care to contrast the actuality of the milieu that can be reassembled from historical fragments with the expectations of the cult that latched on to "Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers," the compilation issued by Columbia Records in 1961.

Wald fleshes out his account with a bevy of inconvenient facts: "Laugh-In" comic Pigmeat Markham performed in blackface as late as the ’40s. Lawrence Welk “had a strong enough following among black listeners to reach the R&B top ten in 1961”; Mamie Smith’s oft-cited “Crazy Blues” is the first blues recording only if you discount earlier performances by white artists, who had better access to record labels. “The world is not a simple place,” Wald writes, and we should expect Johnson’s story to be no simpler than anyone else’s.

If "Escaping the Delta" is never less than thoroughly compelling, it’s in part because Wald draws on decades of experience as both musician and writer, having toured on the folk and blues circuit, served as a world-music critic for the Boston Globe, and authored a biography of folkie/bluesman Josh White, as well as "Narcocorrido," an excursion into the world of the Mexican drug ballad. As persuasive as the lesson he imparts is, Wald never puts you in mind of the dusty academic, largely because he is his own best pupil. Once a member of the Johnson cult, and still much enamored of the raw “down-home” sound, he had to update his own views as he was drawn ever deeper into the music.

Wald reclaims early recorded country blues as commercially conditioned popular music, as opposed to the untainted folk expression it is sentimentally taken to be. The success of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s Paramount recordings in the mid-’20s opened the floodgates. “Within months, the Race catalogs filled with a varied panoply of Southern street-corner players,” Wald observes.

The author also rebalances the history of prewar blues, giving pre-eminence back to the glitzy female shouters of the ’20s. Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Bessie Smith, and their ilk not only packed urban theaters, they also were favorites in the countryside. “[D]uring the period when blues was at its peak of popularity, transcending all other black styles,” Wald emphasizes, “the female singers...were always the music’s biggest stars.” The aesthetic represented by these women and their horn-blowing backing bands is at odds with that of Son House, Skip James, and other down-home singer-guitarists, little-known bluesmen whose few recordings sold poorly upon their initial release. But in the ’50s and ’60s, the hip-shakin’ mama decked out in more beads and spangles than a whole crew of Neil Diamond impersonators got crowded out of the record bins by compilations that drew from the collections of shellac fiends who “[b]y emphasizing obscurity as a virtue unto itself...essentially turned the hierarchy of blues stardom upside-down: The more records an artist had sold in 1928, the less he or she was valued in 1958.” Or 1998, for that matter.

Wald shades in the picture further by emphasizing the influence that record men had over which material was cut, released, and distributed, making plain the difference between what (and how) a country bluesman might play live and what was represented by his body of recorded work. Although Johnson and others like him certainly brought some fully conceived, polished performances to their sessions, the three-minute 78 also had a way of codifying as compositions rambling numbers that might originally have consisted of “floating” couplets that could be strung together willy-nilly over any number of arrangements, which themselves might be selected from a stock of interchangeable 12-bar patterns livened up with grab-bag licks.

These licks weren’t always handed down from teacher to student in the flesh via live performance and tutoring. Many early bluesmen conducted part of their apprenticeship at the Victrola or by the radio, Wald

argues. And although A&R men wanted original material, juke-joint dancers wanted the hits. It may come as a disappointment to some of their fans to learn that the down-home exemplars could play the human jukebox as well as anyone—they were, after all, the bar bands of their day—and that their tastes weren't nearly as rigid as those of their admirers. Wald notes:

"Charley Pride is not the only African American who ever loved country-and-western music. When Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James got together in the 1960s, they would sometimes trade yodels on Jimmie Rodgers's 'Waiting for a Train.' Just as in the 1920s, no one saw fit to record this duet, since it was not what the public expected of them. So Hurt and James sang the hillbilly harmonies for their own pleasure, then went onstage and played the blues songs that their audience wanted to hear."

Having thus prepared his readers to hear Johnson anew, Wald loads up the CD changer and lets it rip. For blues enthusiasts who aren't professional musicologists, particularly those unfamiliar with obscure Johnson predecessors and contemporaries such as "Hambone" Willie Newbern and Johnnie Temple, there may be few more illuminating, more satisfying ways to spend a weekend than trekking through "The Complete Recordings" with Wald as their guide.

Wald holds up to the light the 42 surviving Johnson sides (one of which, the first take of "Traveling Riverside Blues," appears on the 1998 reissue of "King of the Delta Blues Singers" but hadn't been discovered when "The Complete Recordings" came out in 1990), pinpointing the influence not only of fellow Mississippi guitarists such as House and Charley Patton, but also that of the Tennessee-born singer-pianists Peetie Wheatstraw, based in East St. Louis, and Leroy Carr, who had grown up in Indianapolis. (Selections by these artists can be found on the separately sold companion CD, "Back to the Crossroads: The Roots of Robert Johnson," not to be confused with a less comprehensive 1990 disc, also on Yazoo, titled simply "The Roots of Robert Johnson.") Throughout, the author emphasizes that the notion of the blues as a music that holds guitar heroics above all else is strictly ahistorical, a fancy of post-folk-boom revivalists; in Johnson's day, the blues was first and foremost a singer's métier.

Wald finds Johnson "going for some hits" at his earliest session, but once those prepared, up-to-date selections are exhausted, the musician starts dipping into the song bag, plundering his past. Given the veto power of his label, ARC, Johnson was able to cut a surprising variety of material, from the quick-tongued hokum of "They're Red Hot," ostensibly a celebration of "hot tamales," to the folky "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," which Wald calls "by far the most 'country' piece he recorded." Such songs do little to advance the familiar portrayal of Johnson as demon-possessed Delta primitive, but they're part of his repertoire just the same.

Because ARC didn't seem to care which approved takes were pressed, it often issued different performances under the same title and catalog number, making it possible to compare Johnson not only with other recording artists but with himself. And so we find him altering performances to better conform to the running time, and we discover that seemingly offhand asides follow a script. Those performances that went unissued reveal how standards have changed. The plaintive first take of "Come on in My Kitchen," idolized by everyone who approaches it from the self-expressionist perspective of Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones, is seen not to pass muster with Johnson's producers, who required that a "hot, upbeat" second take be made.

Despite Johnson's concessions to the tastes of his time, much of his work seems to have had little impact before being taken up by the revivalists of the British Invasion. Wald even asserts that "[a]s far as the evolution of black music goes, Robert Johnson was an extremely minor figure, and very little that happened in the decades following his death would have been affected if he had never played a note."

But having disabused Johnson's admirers of their dearly held beliefs, Wald offers something richer in their stead: clear-eyed, vibrant history rather than misty fairy tale. In Wald's narrative, Johnson takes his place as a musician who displayed "genius as an adapter and synthesizer," one whose recordings provided "a better survey of 1930s trends than we can hear in the work of any other single player."

In an "Afterthought" titled "So What About the Devil?" Wald goes after the Johnson cult's most sacred myth, the supposedly demonic origin of the man's talent, tracking parts of the legend to other performers, such as the unrelated Tommy Johnson (whose preacher brother LeDell was quite the spinner of tales) and Wheatstraw, né William Bunch, who billed himself as "the Devil's Son-in-Law." Wald also observes that the lyrics to purportedly witchy Johnson fare such as "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day" and "Me and the Devil Blues" were likely to be perceived by their original audiences as jokes rather than the dire prophecies that rock-raised fantasists made of them decades later.

Although "Escaping the Delta" doesn't line up Johnson's mythologizers by name, it ought to make it impossible for its readers to ever again approach Marcus' "Mystery Train"—once dubbed "probably the best book ever written about rock" by Rolling Stone—with a straight face. And as for the messy slaverings of the late All Music Guide scribe (and "Smokin' in the Boys Room" auteur) Cub Koda, who wrote that most "historical naysayers" have "never made a convincing case as where the source of [Johnson's] apocalyptic visions emanates from," Wald has formulated the most well-reasoned response yet: It emanates from you. CP

Rodney says

Outstanding revisionist history of the early blues. Fascinatingly informative throughout. Helps appreciate Robert Johnson, Skip James, Son House, and other icons no less--but also see how Lonnie Johnson and others were much more popular in their day and time, and how the white cult of the blues created the images of early blues and blues musicians . . .

Michele says

Great exploration of blues and their original place in popular music. However, Wald is obviously fighting some blues scholar group-think that doesn't seem as prevalent anymore. Perhaps this book is what helped show scholars that the popular lonesome, weary, traveled blues player icon was not the only, nor the most common blues singer out there.
I found his assertion that women were the original consumers of blues and women vocalists (like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, etc) were the ones who originally propogated blues especially fascinating. Apparently the 60s revival, spurred largely by white, British, male rockers, pushed guitars and the lonesome male blues singer to the forefront. This says more about Western culture in the 1960s than it does about blues music from the 1920s, I think.

Interesting, thoroughly-research read, if you can get through the condescending bits.

Darren says

Nice analysis of early blues and our misperceptions of what the early blues musicians were listening to, what they were trying to be, and the target audiences' own account of the history of the blues being so different from the mythology mostly perpetuated by white blues fans 30/40 years after the fact.

Jamie Howison says

I've begun to dig into some serious reading on the blues, in preparation to some related writing of my own. Wald's book was recommended to me by the musician and writer Adam Gussow, whose book "Seems Like Murder Here" was part of my research for my previous book.

This is good read, and in the end Wald's point is pretty basic: what most of us (and by "us" I mean people who have come to the blues by way of the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and that host of mostly English rock musicians who "discovered" blues and brought them to a wider audience) imagine the blues to be is not necessarily what they actually were. We tend to think of the Mississippi Delta, with rough edged blues men sitting on the front steps of wooden shacks playing music of pain and suffering. We think of Robert Johnson, but a Robert Johnson of legend.

Wald wants us to think in terms of pop music, played not only by guitar-toting lone males but also by the women blues singers, by polished bands, and by musicians singularly disinterested in staying on the Mississippi front porches. Wald wants us to think not only of the Delta, but also of Texas, Chicago, Detroit, and Kansas City. He makes this point by way of a consideration of how Robert Johnson has been turned into the stuff of legend, and all but canonized by a later generation of rock musicians and folk music purists.

I like the fact that Wald's personal voice comes through with real clarity; he's unapologetically offering a perspective and making an argument against thinly romanticizing the blues genre and all it has come to represent. On the other hand, I wouldn't want this to be the only book I'd ever read on the blues, because even though Wald's perspective is important, it certainly isn't the only one to attend to.

Nelson says

Excellent overview but not so much of Robert Johnson as the history of the Blues in America. The book is divided into three parts: the land where Johnson lived (Mississippi Delta), what we actually know of Robert Johnson's life and to what degree the blues was actually influenced by Johnson who Clapton said, "was the greatest blues man whoever lived".

A primary theme of the history is how blues is perceived by its two primary audiences. First, blues was originally a popular form of music played and marketed to African Americans. In time the high society felt a romantic nostalgia for this primitive folk style with obvious roots in West Africa. Eventually this would lead to the second and primary consumers of marketed blues music today, white people.

There are some major problems with this idea of blues being simply folk music. All of the major early blues artists were professional musicians and the best ones (Lonnie Johnson) were proficient in a number of different styles. No doubt there are strong roots in Africa (the blue notes, slide guitar technique began on a

diddley bow, an instrument with strong similarity to instruments played on the West African coast) but the greats no doubt had professional training and acted as professional musicians. Just as musicians are asked to play songs today from standard radio fare the old blues musicians did the same. Also people in the Delta though primarily African American had wide variety in tastes. Thanks to the invention of the phonograph and growing popularity of radio the idea that blues was the only thing they were exposed to is absurd. Other styles (i.e. jazz, jug bands, classical, ragtime, etc.) also influenced these artists. There is proof available that blues artists could well have been trained by classically trained former slaves; the influence of 19th Century Spanish guitar master Tarrega is cited in particular. It wasn't uncommon for the southern aristocracy to train their slaves to perform chamber music and have classical ensembles.

After the blues revival in the 1960s the audience became increasingly white. To this day there are many areas in the rural south where African Americans listen to the blues, but with the mainstream African American audience music evolved and moved on (soul, r&b, funk, hip hop). Whites may have romanticized these rugged rural folk artists singing their days laments but for the general African American audience it came to be associated with places like Mississippi. Not only was it considered old fashioned or countrified, it also came to be associated with the severe oppression old south.

Robert Johnson himself is often viewed by whites as this 'ghost' out of the Delta who hoboed around the country. To a degree this part of his myth is true, he was definitely well traveled and probably received some training in New Orleans. Johnson was a young, talented and very ambitious musician in his time. Outside of Mississippi he had one song that made wide appeal, Terraplane Blues. The remarkable thing about the 36 recordings we have of him are the variety. He's a much more versatile player than many of the other artists from the same region. This indicates he really hadn't found his voice as a musician and had he lived into his sixties may have well been part of the jump blues of the forties, or Chicago Blues of the 1950s & 1960s. We just don't know. One thing you can count on, he had dreams of escaping the Delta and no doubt had his eyes on the wealthier cities to the north.

Finally, Wald points out that Johnson had relatively little if any impact on the blues world in the years after his death. Even today most blues musicians like the idea of listening to Johnson better than actually listening to him. His primary influence has been via the 1960s folk revival and his adoption among sixties rockers (especially the British rockers) as a cult figure, the ultimate Byronic hero of the blues. After all, the man did die at 27 after being poisoned in a Juke Joint by the owner. The owner's wife was amid an affair with the wandering musician. Today he has three grave markers in the Delta and no one is actually sure where he resides. Personally, I like to think Bob wouldn't have it any other way. "You may bury my body, down by the highway side. Baby I don't care where you bury me when I'm dead and gone. You may bury my body, down by the highway side. So my ole evil spirit, can catch a greyhound bus and ride" ~ Robert Johnson, Me and the Devil Blues.

Steve says

Seeing colossal blues hero Robert Johnson on the cover of Elijah Wald's "Escaping the Delta" made me pause with doubt because what I certainly was not in the market for was another feverish bio of Robert Johnson that focused on the mystical to the exclusion of all else. Most pleasantly, this is definitely not the case with this interesting and readable work.

The book starts slowly as author Wald consumes nearly seventy pages with an exhaustive history of the pop music scene of the Delta region of the American South. Chronicling juke box lists, the careers of artists both

well-known and obscure, and emphasizing his thesis over and over again, Wald lays thorough groundwork for the chapters that follow. Once you get rolling, however, the book is a pleasurable read and we get a complete overview of the ingredients that went into the blues, its curious nurturing process, the artists themselves, and the fruits that grew from the seeds of these musical pioneers. We even get a track-by-track analysis of the songs Johnson recorded, a canon of work that has possibly influenced more people than any other body of work in rock and blues history.

Wald's purpose is to shine a light onto the real world of working musicians during the early part of the century and show that the invention of the blues was not what you might have been told. Seminal artists like Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, Son House, and, yes, even Robert Johnson did indeed play the blues, but they also played lots of other music from Bing Crosby to Broadway and even hillbilly songs. The musicians of this era were simply trying to get paid as working musicians, which meant playing what the people wanted to hear. Then, as now, popular music was rarely genre specific, it need only be catchy, danceable, and innocuous. Say what you will about Robert Johnson's work, it is certainly not often described using any of those adjectives and the earthier, acoustic blues Johnson is known for has never had a huge pop music audience, then or now. The author devotes much of his time to pounding this point home, but it's a worthwhile endeavor if you care to see the reality instead of the fantasy.

Wald's knowledge of the artists and songs and his dogged devotion to cutting through the baloney and getting to the facts within the folktales is fresh and largely free of hyperbole. There are plenty of revelations in the book, for instance: I had no knowledge of the true roots of hillbilly music and how popular this music form was among blacks or how white executives suppressed it for the purposes of segregation. Also, we are given a unique behind-the-scenes peek into the milieu of the musicians commonly referred to as blues artists during the early part of the 20th century. It is both fascinating and informational reading for me because Wald demystifies the clichéd image of the tormented blues singer, schooled by Satan, and destined for a life of misery that matched their lyrical tales, myths spread by the single-minded agendas of the record company men who were trying to market a product. The Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and scores of others, who were influenced by these artists and their live hard, die young reputation, particularly the infamous Mr. Johnson, helped perpetuate these exaggerations to their fans and thus we have the distortions Wald sought to correct.

You don't have to be a fan of the blues to appreciate the breadth of research and myth-busting that is achieved here. Elijah Wald has put a great deal of research into this book and augmented it with the words of those who were there, living and playing the blues (along with all the other genres of music their audiences wanted to hear). I have read some of the reviews and the angry ones seem to be from fans that have had their romantic world of lonesome crossroads in the middle of the night, tortured souls howling at the moon, and deals with the devil put through the shredder of reality. While that's a lot of hard luck for them; it's good news for those of us who'd rather get the straight dope than the well-worn fairy tales. I believe any fan of popular music will enjoy it and take away a much more informed mind about an art form and an artist long on superstitions, folktales, and legends but woefully short on facts and candor.

Jeff says

Robert Johnson has a couplet, from "Me and the Devil Blues," that stands out among the many superb lyrics in his catalogue: "You may bury my body down by the highway side | So my old evil spirit can take a Greyhound Bus and ride." That stands with an image out of the 18th C. Japanese poet, Basho, "far on a journey, my dream hovers over the withered fields." (I'm paraphrasing Robert Hass's translation.) Such a comparison tends -- Greil Marcus must have inoculated this tendency -- to read Johnson's lyrics for their

poetry, their images, and for Elijah Wald, no backsliding hyperbolist himself, such tendency is "absurdly misleading." What misleads, to begin with, is ignoring the soliloquized aside Johnson tosses off between these lines, full of the gallows irony of a practiced blues performer: "Babe I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead and gone." In other words, "Me and the Devil Blues" is a performance, which through sheer luck got down on tape in San Antonio, Texas in February 1937, when Johnson was asked to perform for a second (of two) recording sessions that have come to represent him, amid however much distortion, to posterity. There is so much of the miraculous in our having these 30-odd "sides" at all that listeners have tended to remove Johnson from his context, much to the chagrin of those legatees of his original audience for whom "the blues cult" is a white boys' minstrelsy. For Marcus, the mistake must have been -- in his second book, *Mystery Train* (1975) -- to see Johnson in terms of the music Marcus was trying to ennoble in his using Johnson to sketch in "the background": a music that ranged from The Band & Randy Newman to Sly & the Family Stone and Elvis Presley. If it was a hunch that the music the Band made behind Bob Dylan had its origin in Johnson, that throwaway of Johnson's on "Me and the Devil Blues" shows it was a pretty sneaky one. And yet I do agree with Wald that insofar as Johnson is used as a prototype for the confessional song-poets of what Dave Van Ronk called The New Song Movement (Newman is Marcus' prototype singer-songwriter), there's something fishy going on. Wald's response to this is to make Leroy Carr the prototype of Robert Johnson. It's a minor point, but I see nothing wrong with it as far as history goes, it's only Wald's penchant for hyperbole that seems unbefitting a musical historian. (He repudiates music criticism.) Wald's knowledge of Thirties popular music -- which he tendentiously refers to as "pop music" -- is encyclopedic. He'd be a good village explainer if he was always certain of what it was he's trying to explain. His motive to inform can get in his own way. But I did enjoy sitting down with the recordings, and the middle section of Wald's book. The third section of the book may have a firmer, more terse formulation in Wald's short book on *The Blues*. I enjoyed that book a lot, and the windier sections of this less.

Benjamin says

This was painful. Like I need some hippy blues nerd to tell me that black people listen to all kinds of music and that white audiences bring their racist baggage to how they hear the music... All his points are valid, but they are so belabored. If you are after "truth" and "authenticity" then this dude is fighting the good fight in the culture wars. If you just dig the blues, and you know it's phony, then this is going to hurt. He should of just written a biography of Leroy Carr instead of gunning for all the claptonclones who'll buy this polemic because the unholy robert johnson is on the cover and in the subtitle. Or maybe not. I just don't care what most blues fans think of the blues, I don't feel the need to convert the hoards of beer bellied white boys from worshiping chicken-choking guitar solos to dancing to barrelhouse piano. I guess if Elijah Wald broadens a few horizons that would be a good thing, though. Maybe the Chicago blues scene would unfreeze and start innovating again if the tiny bit of money it does make wasn't mostly coming from wannabe outlaw bikers who want to hear "sweet home chicago" a million times. Part of the problem... as the author keeps assuring us, he's just like us, he prefers the creepy outsider art obscure deep blues to the stuff that was popular at the time. It's like he's trying to convince himself to stop thinking of his favorites as the most authentic and to recognize how his own whiteness has informed his taste in black music at the same time that he is trying to convince the reader. There's a generational thing happening here too, cuz if you're post-civil rights, like me, then you didn't get into blues when bob dylan went electric at newport, and yeah, okay, sure, I followed british white rockers down their rabbit holes, but Al Green singing Hank Williams didn't confuse my assumptions about race either. I mean, are there really still people who think an illiterate ex-con blues man is more authentic than say Dinah Washington? Knowwhaddimean? Pulling Yakub's white supremacy pins out of our devil brains is painful, and this book brings the pain, so if you can stand being lectured to, this is good.

Chris says

Very thorough and well researched history of the blues. The author's primary aim is to separate myth from fact, specifically in regard to Delta blues and Robert Johnson. Mr Wald emphasizes the differences in perspective between black and white blues audiences and recounts the formation of the white blues revivalists' romanticized view of the Mississippi Delta blues. For me, it was a fascinating approach and after reading the book, I've come to question my view of the blues and what I perceive as blues music in general. The book is divided into three sections with part two devoted fully to Robert Johnson, including his influences, the development of his style, the infamous recording sessions in Texas, and the mystery surrounding his death. In addition, Mr Wald critiques and compares all versions of each song from the point of view of a blues fan and musician. Overall, a very enlightening read. Well done, Mr Wald.

Bill says

The premise of this book is blues history as we know it is all wrong. What we take for blues history is a string of musicians picked by a handful of English blues enthusiasts, notably the Rolling Stones and rolled into a the myth of the poor outsider. Real Blues history is far richer and diverse than what we think of when we think of the classical cannon of blues musicians today. Whether you buy into that or not (I do) the book is a must read for any one interested in today's popular music or in the popular and folk music of the last century. He even explain mysteries like why is the Mississippi Delta not the Mississippi River Delta which has been a question on my mind for some time and where exactly is this place located. Most articles and books on the blues assume the general public knows more than some of us do or blues bound authors simply like being arcane turning the blues into a private club where the mysteries are know only to a chosen few. Mr Wald explains it all.

Andrew says

This book ended up being one of my most enjoyable reading experiences, though not in the typical sense. I'll get back to the good stuff later, but I'd first like to comment on what I didn't like.

The book was not terribly well written. Long stretches were repetitive which led to a confusing narrative. Yes, the thesis of the book is clear by the time you are finished. However, it is a meandering journey that seems to go in circles at times. A more concise narrative and a more clearly laid out thesis would have bumped this book up to near 5 stars.

What I DID like (aside from the thesis in general) was how the book can be used in conjunction with YouTube. Almost every example that Wald uses to lay out his thesis is available for free on YouTube. This helps immensely and I can't imagine reading the book without listening the the songs as one reads. The same is even more true for the chapters on Johnson's own songs. Wald is extremely knowledgeable and I would imagine there is something there for even the most die-hard Johnson fan.

In short, it's a music book written by someone who is clearly a fan of the style. There's enough sociological comment here to provide a strong thesis. Using YouTube in conjunction with the reading provides an in

depth reading experience that I highly recommend. A warning though, I wouldn't recommend this book for anyone looking for a straight forward biopic of Johnson.
