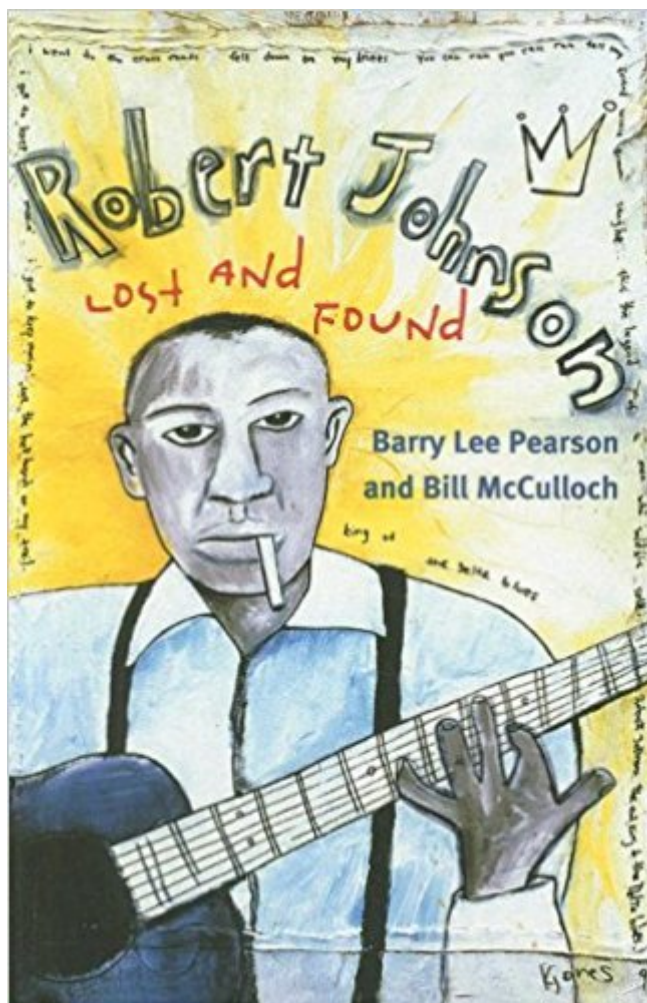


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# Robert Johnson: LOST AND FOUND (Music In American Life)



## Synopsis

With just forty-one recordings to his credit, Robert Johnson (1911-38) is a giant in the history of blues music. Johnson's vast influence on twentieth-century American music, combined with his mysterious death at the age of twenty-seven, has allowed speculation and myths to obscure the facts of his life. The most famous of these legends depicts a young Johnson meeting the Devil at a dusty Mississippi crossroads at midnight and selling his soul in exchange for prodigious guitar skills. In this volume, Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch examine the full range of writings about Johnson and sift fact from fiction. They compare conflicting accounts of Johnson's life, weighing them against interviews with blues musicians and others who knew the man. Through their extensive research Pearson and McCulloch uncover a life every bit as compelling as the fabrications and exaggerations that have sprung up around it. In examining Johnson's life and music, and the ways in which both have been reinvented and interpreted by other artists, critics, and fans, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* charts the broader cultural forces that have mediated the expression of African American artistic traditions.

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## Customer Reviews

œ[Pearson and McCulloch] traced the paper trail of the Johnson myth through the decades and found that white critics and promoters were telling tall tales about him while he was still alive. The authors tracked down misleading articles about him dating to 1937, and reconstructed the comical

spread of Johnson's Faust legend--that he sold his soul to the devil at a Mississippi crossroads in return for his extraordinary gifts as a guitarist--from a single, dubious 1966 interview of Johnson's friend and fellow blues musician Son House. "By far the best book yet on Johnson. . . . Dirty Linen's indispensable for courses. . . . A new and welcome seriousness in blues scholarship. . . . Essential. . . . Choice. . . . Pearson and McCulloch examine a number of the commentaries on Johnson since his death, tracing the origins of the various myths the better to deflate them. . . . [Their] argument that 'supernatural themes haunted not Johnson's music itself but discussions of Johnson's music' has a resonant ring to it."--New Republic "A reminder that Johnson's talent was enough; he didn't need the devil's help to become a legend."--Library Journal

With just forty-one recordings to his credit, Robert Johnson (1911-38) is a giant in the history of blues music. Johnson's vast influence on twentieth-century American music, combined with his mysterious death at the age of twenty-seven, has allowed speculation and myths to obscure the facts of his life. The most famous of these legends depicts a young Johnson meeting the Devil at a dusty Mississippi crossroads at midnight and selling his soul in exchange for prodigious guitar skills. In this volume, Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch examine the full range of writings about Johnson and sift fact from fiction. They compare conflicting accounts of Johnson's life, weighing them against interviews with blues musicians and others who knew the man. Through their extensive research Pearson and McCulloch uncover a life every bit as compelling as the fabrications and exaggerations that have sprung up around it. In examining Johnson's life and music, and the ways in which both have been reinvented and interpreted by other artists, critics, and fans, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* charts the broader cultural forces that have mediated the expression of African American artistic traditions.

This is a very interesting look at the 'myth' of Robert Johnson. The authors put everything in perspective in a well researched, informative way....bottom line...Robert Johnson was a gifted musician, a product of his time (like any other great artist).... a wonderful Blues Guitarist/Singer. Very well written! I bought a 'used' copy and it is in pristine condition. Bruce

Robert Johnson might be the most famous of all country bluesman. But we actually know very little about the man himself and what we think we know (the selling his soul at the crossroads story and forever being demon haunted) was a late addition to the legend. Pearson and McCulloch peel back

the layers of what commentators have said about Johnson to reveal what we can really know about him--and it is not very much. They then tackle the literature on Johnson and show how a legend is created through wishful thinking, academic desire, and faulty deconstruction of lyrics. This is a wonderfully written, intelligent book that exposes the flaws of some methods of interpreting entertainers and the danger of interpreting them outside of the artist's culture. Johnson emerges as a human not such much chased by demons, but who chases women and whiskey too much. A fantastic study that should serve as both a model and a warning for all who write about entertainers.

First, I should state my qualifications and prejudices. I am writing biographies of Robert Johnson's stepson Robert Lockwood Jr. and his best friend Alex "Rice" Miller AKA Sonny Boy Williamson II and I have done over 300 hours of original oral research interviews and many more hours of library research including collecting nearly every blues magazine and relevant liner notes on records from many countries to find the source interviews of many misunderstandings about the artists. Barrie Lee Pearson told me that Sonny Boy was the single blues musician mentioned more often in other blues musicians oral histories. So my expectations for this book were high and my first hand knowledge of the resources available for new insight into this subject were extensive. I could have written this book from my research. Therein lies the rub. While a new Robert Johnson book was never on my agenda, I was anxious to read this book. Sadly, this book never seeks to add to the original research on Robert Johnson that would have been available simply by asking the many researchers. It is largely a rehash of published resources. There is little evidence that these authors ever bothered to visit the Delta or talk to the many still living and very credible sources. They are suspect in the text of claims that were easily researched favoring the legend over the reality. Older Delta residents are amazingly accurate reporters and when their stories are coordinated by a researcher their remembrances dovetail in great detail. This is not a recommended addition to the Robert Johnson legend or history. I was heartbroken to see such a minor volume be published and possibly preclude the publications of a substantive volume. This is the history of the soundtrack of the Baby Boom generations and as such requires greater respect. Visit [...] for more information. Fessor Mojo AKA William E. Donoghue Host, [...]

Do not be scared off by the naysayers and one star reviews. I can understand that people who worship at the altar of myth are dismayed by this strong factual account. This is a highly professional publication that is strictly based of veritable facts and not rumours and hearsay, even when said heresay could be the truth. Every single essay, story, blurb you ever read about Robert

Johnson mentions his mythical pact with the devil. While it's fine to have romantic notions about an artist it is ridiculous, especially, in this case, to focus so exclusively on the myth when the facts are just as intriguing. That is what the authors are out to instill in our minds here. And yes they are occasionally repetitive but this is understandable when they are up against a half century's worth of material contending otherwise. The fact is that Robert Johnson was an amazing and talented musician who worked very, very hard to perfect his craft. This book asks the question "Why can he not be recognized for this fact?" Why is his prowess only explicable by referring to an ancient myth that he himself likely did not promote. The legends and myths are OK but they should not be the sole focus of conversation regarding this incredible artist. Read this book and you will come away with a new appreciation for this artist. I have been listening to Mr Johnson's recordings for over 20 years and that is the effect it had on me.

Pearson and McCulloch demythologize the stories about Robert Johnson in this well researched and fascinating study. The authors convincingly demonstrate that the story of Johnson's Faustian pact never appeared in print until decades after Johnson's death. They further debunk the legend by showing that even most of those who were closely associated with him also viewed the story with either a wry skepticism or total disdain. Although it's fun to talk about the legends that have been associated with this blues man, Pearson and McCulloch also argue that a gullible acceptance of the stories prevents blues fans from truly understanding the man and his music. I came away from reading this book with a better understanding of his life and a far greater appreciation for Johnson's abilities. In this respect, the book provides an excellent resource for learning to listen to blues music by clearing away the highly exoticized and even patronizing presuppositions that we may bring to the art form. In this fine study, a fine folklorist and journalist partner up to give us the real deal of Johnson.

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