

SEARCHING FOR ROBERT JOHNSON

by Gayle Dean Wardlow

PART ONE

The first of three articles by Gayle Dean Wardlow on his 1960s research into Robert Johnson, which provide the background to – and a preview of – the forthcoming book, 'Up Jumped The Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson', by Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow.

FIRST FAIR DEAL GOIN' DOWN

Meridian, Mississippi, Spring 1961

"Anybody home?" I called out in my white southern accent as I banged on the front door of the old, wood-frame house. The old place sat on a corner lot underneath two old water oaks whose branches protruded lazily over the old, rusting tin roof.

"Whatchu want?" an old black woman's voice asked.

"Have you got any old Victrola records?" I asked. "You know, I buy them old blues records. The ones that played on them old windup machines."

It was a sunny, spring afternoon in early 1961 and the temperature was nearing eighty degrees. I was searching for old 78 records in what white southerners called the 'coloured quarters' of my hometown. Over the past two months, I'd been pleasantly surprised to find that some people still had records from as far back as the 1920s.

I had turned to door knocking in the afternoons to occupy my time, trying to find my purpose in life. Records had been my best friends since I was a twelve-year-old, and I reached for them again like a drowning man grabbing at a raft of old tyres. I planned to trade any jazz 78s I found to a well-known California record dealer for records by Roy Acuff, the reigning king of country music. I had been unable to find many of his 1937-1940 releases.

Somehow, I had stumbled across the idea that blacks who had bought jazz records in the 1920s might still have some they hadn't junked.

I had been pleasantly surprised to learn, after one of my close friends had shown me his grandmother's records in an old wind-up Victrola, that she had bought black jazz band records by Jelly Roll Morton. If whites bought black jazz, then I suspected that blacks must have bought more of those records. That was my hope and I intended to find out if I were right.

"If I can only find a record or two today, maybe I can feel better about myself," I told myself silently as a twenty-year old struggling to find my identity and a purpose in life. "I just need to find something – anything – that I can feel like I can be good at."

Suddenly, the old lady interrupted my thinking and glanced suspiciously at me, as I nervously explained further.

"I'm buying records, not selling 'em," as she waited by her screen door and gaped at me – a young white man trying to buy something totally unusual. White men who collected monthly burial insurance premiums had no interest in old records, although they often panhandled antiques from their unsuspecting owners who had no idea of their value.

"I buy them old blues records like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Leroy Carr," I explained further. I'd learned that the names of popular blues singers from the 1920s stirred memories. "I'll pay 25 cents apiece for old records like them. Do you still have any?"

She paused for a few seconds, sizing me up before she responded.

"Old records, you say? Well, wait a minute – let me go look," she said. "My older sister left some old records here somewhere, if I can still find them." As she turned around, she paused and asked. "You say you pay how much?"

I replied quickly: "At least a quarter or maybe 50 cents each. I could pay up to a dollar if a record is in real good shape. It depends on how good it still plays."

I had quickly learned that elderly blacks were more comfortable if I waited on the porch for them to return, hopefully with some old jewels, so I never asked to come inside. Sometimes, they found 'them their old records' inside an old windup Victrola and occasionally they brought out treasures long ago hidden away in some old wooden cheese crate they'd shoved under an old squeaky, iron bed.

Satisfied, the woman retreated inside and returned in a few minutes. "Well, I found these two or three," she said, smiling. "Don't know what they are, but she played them all the time before she left here to live with her son in Chicago."

The second record had a familiar blue and gold Vocalion label. I'd had plenty of those by great western swing bands recorded from 1936-40, by the likes of Bob Wills, the Blue Ridge Playboys, the Light Crust Doughboys and, especially, the Crystal Springs Ramblers, one of the bluesy western swing groups of that era.

I looked the label over closer. Robert Johnson. Who was he? I didn't know anyone who had ever heard of the guy. One side was named 'Last Fair Deal Gone Down'. The other side was '32-20 Blues'. It had to be about some kind of gun, but what kind? I'd heard of .38 and .45 calibre pistols and .50 calibre machine guns from reading World War Two histories, but I had no idea of what a 32-20 was.

I looked up at her, tried to smile and slowly said: "Yes Ma'am. I can pay you fifty cents for these two records. I don't want the third one. They're pretty well worn, and I don't know how good they gonna play."

She hesitated, and then refused. "Well, that ain't much money and my sister loved them two records. I know she paid more than fifty cents for them. I want a dollar for which ever one you want."

What now? Do I take a chance on guys I never heard of? I was strapped for money as I made only \$10 a week from my part-time sports writer job with the daily newspaper (*Meridian Star*).

I wasn't sure I really wanted either of them. "I won't know if they're any good until I play them," I told her, to re-assure her of my \$2 offer.

"All right then, that's okay," she said. "They don't mean nothin' to me anymore. Give me that for them."

Thrilled that I'd found anything after two hours of door knocking, I tried houses further down the street, carrying the two records under my arm to show what I was buying when I made my pitch. No luck. I'd made my finds for the day.

I was learning that I was lucky to find even one house that still had records. Often, I only saw records made after World War II by Chicago bluesmen such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Rarely, did I find post-war and pre-war records together, probably because the style of blues music changed from acoustic to electric instruments after 1945.

After dinner, I retreated to my room and popped Tommy McClennan on my ancient old Newcomb 78 record player. The needle hit the first grooves and 'Highway 51' was pretty darn good.

"Highway 51 runs right by my baby's door," he sang, describing the highway that ran from New Orleans through Mississippi towards Chicago. His singing style – he sounded halfway drunk – reminded me of Wolf's records that a local rhythm & blues station played daily for Meridian's black listeners. But his voice was stronger than Wolf's, or even Waters, the other popular postwar blues singer whom I had been told was from Mississippi.

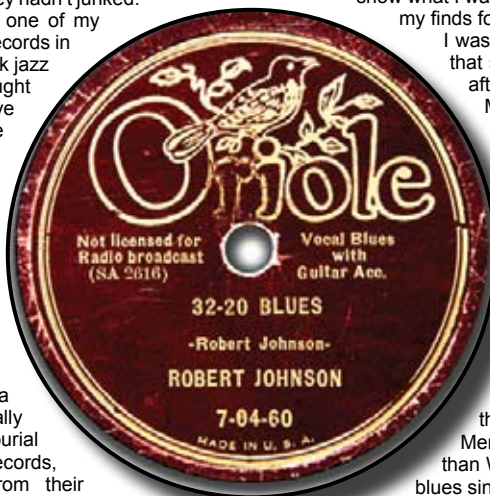
I laid the record aside and shuffled the Vocalion on the turntable, wondering what it would sound like. 'Last Fair Deal Gone Down' was pretty worn. The black woman's sister must have really liked it 'cause it had severely worn grooves. Out jumped a throbbing, acoustic guitar sound that I'd never heard by anyone from Elvis or Jimmy Reed, the two musicians I had known best from my high school days.

Moreover, this Johnson was playing a guitar differently and it didn't sound like an electric guitar. His instrument had a sizzling Hawaiian flavour that reminded me of the sound I got from my 1930s Dobro guitar that I played with a steel bar. I wondered if he was playing the guitar on his lap, as I had no concept of bottleneck playing, a term I'd never heard of then. I only knew that steel guitar players used a round metal bar on strings that were three-eighths of an inch off the fretboard.

And this Robert Johnson was doing something that made his bass strings sound much louder. I didn't know what it was, but today musicians call his technique 'damping' – placing the palm against the strings to mute the response, to create a heavier dance rhythm. Obviously, he played with intense power, although his voice was not as strong as McClennan's.

So, I thought: "Where's this guy from?" I had no concept of what music was native to my state besides Jimmie Rodgers, who was from Meridian and was considered the father of country music.

"I'm working my way back home, good Lord, on that Gulfport Island Road," he stressed. Hey, I thought, that's gotta be about Gulfport, a small Gulf of Mexico seaport near Biloxi, the most wide-open town in Mississippi. So, this guy had some connection to my state. I realised he was singing about a railroad, but I had never heard of the Gulfport Island Road. Only the Southern, Illinois Central and GM&O ran through the state.





The flip side, '32-20 Blues', was interesting in his choice of locations outside of Mississippi. He sang about doctors in both Hot Springs (Arkansas) and Wisconsin, who "shor" can't help her none." He also had that fiery, driving bass rhythm with the Hawaiian effects. He also sang about a 'gattin' gun', an early forerunner of the modern-day machine gun, and dropped the word 'hell' outta of his lyrics on one verse.

But there was no Hot Springs in Wisconsin. Maybe, he was a storyteller and dropped those towns in his verses to attract record buyers. If country music songs had story lines, then maybe blues did too. I had always thought blues were just sad songs without a story line. Maybe, I was wrong.

Did that Johnson record absolutely floor me? Not really. But it was unlike anything I had heard, though it was too archaic for my tastes that had been grounded by Acuff and western swing records. Granted, his guitar had a pulsating, eccentric rhythm that I'd never encountered, so I reminded myself to pick up any of his records I saw later.

I wondered if this was the only record he made, but the master numbers on the label were nonconsecutive, so he'd probably recorded more songs. I'd studied Acuff's records for five years on the same Vocalion label and I knew that the song's master number was also listed on the label. So, I figured he had recorded more titles.

I had no concept of who was a Delta blues musician. I'd only been to the Delta once, in 1957 on a high school football trip to Greenwood, and I knew nothing about Delta music. I'd heard postwar Chicago blues on the 50,000-watt radio station WLAC out of Nashville, which played R&B nightly. It was the most popular radio station in the south that catered to blacks and white rebellious southern kids.

Later, in 1962, New York City blues collector Bernie Klatzko solved my initial questions about Johnson's music and life. He wrote to me that Johnson had been killed shortly before he was scheduled to appear at the 1938 'Spirituals to Swing Concert' in Carnegie Hall. As far as Bernie was concerned, though, Charlie Patton, not Johnson, was the greatest Delta bluesman, though his life was just as mysterious as Johnson's was in those years of the early 1960s.

I also learned from him that Pete Whelan and his co-partner, Bill Givens, had planned a Robert Johnson reissue for 1960 from their 78rpm copies of his best recordings. But after months of preparation, they got a call from fellow New Yorker Frank Driggs, director of re-issue projects for Columbia Records, who informed them he was already working on a Johnson project.

Whelan and Givens cancelled their Johnson album and released three hundred copies of an album simply titled 'Charlie Patton' on their new Origin Jazz Library (OJL) label. It was the initial offering of Patton's music to a select audience of young guitar enthusiasts. "Johnson would have made more money for us and got us on our feet quicker, because he was better known to a lot of collectors," Whelan said in a 2003 interview.

But they had no choice. Columbia owned the rights to all of Johnson's Texas recordings issued on various labels from 1936-39, including several unissued masters. Columbia's album, released in 1961, was entitled 'Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers'.

It was the first release of Johnson's material since 1939, and it brought him to the attention of future rock stars such as Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards and Peter Green. But he still remained a mysterious figure of which little was known. It took me six more years to discover a death certificate showing his place of death that led to even more controversy: whether he had died in the Delta town of Greenwood or on a nearby plantation; even three cemeteries in the area would eventually claim his burial site.

Ramblin' Bob had left few clues to follow and those were from album notes by Driggs and Vocalion recording director Don Law, who had recorded 29 songs by Johnson in Texas. But I was living in Mississippi and segregation was still the law. Strangely, I wanted to document the life and careers of musicians like Johnson, but fellow Mississippians had no interest. It was the start of a lonely journey for more than forty years with twists and turns leading to a dusty Delta crossroad and one of the most controversial legends and deaths in music history.

Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow are co-authors of the book: 'Up Jumped The Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson', to be published this summer by Chicago Review Press.

Label shots from the collection of John Tefteller and Blues Images. www.bluesimages.com Used with permission.

★ LETTERS ★

GET IT OFF YOUR CHEST!

I enjoyed Otis Grand's article in *B&R* 335 on B.B.'s 'Blues Is King', it was a well-made case but I also found it rather sad, for while I appreciate that it was written from a musician's stand point, it somehow typified a view of the blues that is all too common these days. Many listeners just seem to like the way the music sounds and are often obsessed with the guitar elements but take little notice of the singer and the content of the songs. My experience of black audiences does not concur with that of Otis. They certainly don't 'scream at everything' and they rarely if ever applaud guitar solos in the manner of white crowds. For them the singer and the song are of paramount importance and when a verse or a line strikes a chord they respond because it usually represents a shared experience they can relate to.

Too many white listeners will not entertain black blues if it doesn't feature traditional instrumentation and reject records that have modern electronic sounds and rhythms. However, here, mainly due to economics and changing fashions, is where the new songs can be found with singers performing numbers that actually mean something to their intended audience. Certainly, it is not always brilliant stuff but occasionally something surfaces that is so much better than what too often passes for blues these days.

Had to get that off my chest and I feel better already.

Dave Williams
Via email

CHUCK AT NEWPORT

I read with interest Howard Rye's excellent review of the 'Jazz On A Summer's Day' DVD in *B&R* 336. I was pleased to see 'Long Distance Information', my book about Chuck Berry's music, still gets referred to after all these years, albeit to correct the mistaken identity of the clarinet player in Chuck's support band.

In mitigation I'd say that a whole lot of water has drained from the swamp since the pre-internet days when I researched the book and the mistake had been spotted some time ago. The main purpose of this letter, however, is not to justify my error but to point any committed Berry fans to Dietmar Rudolph's weblog 'A Collector's Guide To The Music Of Chuck Berry' <http://www.crf.de/ChuckBerry/>, probably the best Berry website in the world. In it you can find an updated, searchable, database of all Chuck's recordings, a whole raft of Long Distance Information sessionography updates plus lots, lots more. C'est la vie says this old folk, you know you never can tell what you'll find.

Fred Rothwell
Norfolk



SHELDON STUDIOS IN 1958 CASH BOX

Further to Deitmar Rudolph's fine article on Jack Wiener and Chicago's Sheldon Studios in *B&R* 335, I was checking through some old *Cash Box* issues and found this interesting piece from their 15th March 1958 issue.

Also, I discovered this one sided Sheldon acetate by Amos

Milburn, made for Ace Records in Jackson, Mississippi. Amos recorded it in Chicago circa 1959. This was issued in the U.K. on the Stompin' CD 'Sixties R'n'B/Blues/Soul Crossovers' Stompin' (E) CD ST 333.

Dan Kochakian
Saugus, Massachusetts

