

# Ms. Annye, Li'l Robert Johnson & Them

BY KEVIN BROWN

## I. Prelude Blues

Less blood pooled over juke-joint floors on hot Saturday nights than ink has spilled in the name of “Robert Johnson.” He wasn’t even born in the Mississippi Delta, didn’t always answer to the surname “Johnson.” Grown folk called him “Li’l Robert.” He called himself “R.L.,” short for Robert Leroy. How did a “1930s blues singer-guitarist who lived a short and colorful life” become a commemorative postage stamp? By what degrees was he transformed in life from the laughing stock of contemporaries into a “good player of old-time songs,” into a bona fide recording artist and thence in death into “the preeminent exponent of the Delta tradition”? Half a dozen books peel back layers of fact, truth, half-truth, “exaggerations or outright lies,” none diminishing the man or his music.

Until recently, we didn’t know much about him, except that R.L. was a “strange dude.” Before Conforth & Wardlow, our understanding of him derived almost entirely from R.L.’s recorded output—104 minutes of music, 16 original sides, a baker’s dozen of alternate takes, 29 songs in total, performed on just two dates, as documented in *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (Centennial Collection). But a musician’s



## Kevin Brown

repertoire is just one aspect of her or his career; “records,” Elijah Wald reminds us in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, “are not the whole story.”

We knew more about R.L.’s tunings and touring than we did about the bitterness Ms. Anderson and others hear behind his music, the dark crossroads of his inner life, the tears inside. Conforth & Wardlow’s evocations of his childhood out beyond the cotton fields, off dusty roads, among the wooden shotgun-shacks of Hazelhurst, stilted, on raised brick, over flood-prone flatlands, are as integral to R.L.’s music as Ry Cooder’s atmospheric slide is to Wim Wenders’ vision of *Paris, Texas*.

How much of R.L.’s life is reflected in his lyrics or vice versa?

*My poor father died and left me  
My poor mother done the best that she could  
My poor father died and left me  
My poor mother done the best that she could*

We may never know. Born illegitimate, R.L. never knew who his father was till his teens, when he adopted his father’s surname, becoming

“Robert Johnson.” What we know for a fact is that R.L.’s mother had to give him up when he was just an infant. His childhood was divided between the plantations of Mississippi and the city of Memphis, where he was sent to live with his extended family between the ages of two and nine, from 1913 to 1920. We can’t know how that made him feel—how it made her feel—when he was a boy. At one time or another, it might have seemed to R.L. that she’d abandoned him.

Perhaps R.L.’s is the archetypal coming-of-age story: a young man, his adventures and misadventures on the road. Seen another way, the parable of his talents is a cautionary tale of drunkenness and violence. R.L. was a blues traveler, but the major triad of his life consisted of the thirds or fifths of Memphis and West Helena, Arkansas, with Mississippi at the root.

Any given narrative solution is a finite sum of answers to an infinite series of questions relating to patterns in human life. There’s really no such thing as a “definitive” biography or autobiography, only alternate “takes.” Since there are as many ways to retell R.L.’s life story as there are ways to cover his songs, biographers should get creative with the storytelling. But not the facts.

Some R.L. stories ring true. Others don’t add up. Did he really hit a lick or strum a chord in the graveyard at midnight? Sure. Lots of players did that. On the one hand, poet Sterling A. Brown would never dismiss as mere “folklore” the survival of Yoruba and other West African belief systems among black transplants in Brazil, Cuba, the Delta, Haiti or Louisiana, so embarrassing to scholars, so fascinating to music fans. On the other hand, R.L.’s “Preachin’ Blues” never even mentions the Devil. Its subtitle, “Up Jumped the Devil,” wasn’t even R.L.’s idea. No PR is bad PR. R.L.’s record producers simply used this marketing gimmick to cash in on the success of R.L. predecessors like Peetie Wheatstraw, who alternately dubbed himself the “High Sheriff from Hell” or the “Devil’s Son-in-Law.” Who’s ultimately responsible for the legend that R.L., in a Faustian bargain, down at the crossroads, sold his soul to the Devil at midnight in exchange for supernatural skill? The Devil, probably.

“Johnson’s vision of the blues is more indebted to the phonograph than to the plantation,” Gioia writes, and is “as much a reflection of commercial tastes as the continuation of a folkloric tradition.” Muddy Waters

remembered several equally good players, ones who never got recorded. By Wald's estimate, for every R.L. there were thousands if not tens of thousands of blues players who simply never made it to the recording studio, much less the big time. R.L. seems emblematic of the commercial viability of essentially folk art in an age of mechanical reproduction.

Lead Belly, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Willie Johnson were blues musicians playing for passing change on sidewalks and street corners when R.L. was born. In New Orleans, white and black music—Cajun, Caribbean, Creole, Dixieland, white hymns—got gumboed all together. Later for “reasons,” Wald writes, “cultural and commercial rather than musical,” bluegrass versus blues, guitars and harmonicas versus banjos and fiddles, Nashville country versus Memphis gospel and jazz—these beautifully individual strains of American music you hear on a soundtrack recording like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* began to unravel and self-segregate.

When R.L. was a boy mainstream “white” records were produced by whites for white consumption. 78s existed to sell phonographs, bigger-ticket items sold in furniture stores most blacks couldn't afford. But the 78s themselves were sold at five-and-dime stores that blacks could afford to patronize. The juke joint was sharing the stage with the juke box. Though not the first so-called “race records” (those of Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter, among others, preceded her), the Bessie Smith “second-wave” recordings that date from when R.L. was about 12, precede the first Rolling Stones album by just 40 years. OK Records had no clue Mamie Smith's “Crazy Blues” would sell 75,000 copies in a single month. Neither did Columbia Records expect *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (1990) to sell hundreds of thousands during its first several weeks of release, more than 50 million to date. The race-record, produced by whites for black consumption, was born. But when we talk “race-records” what we're really talking about is economic disparity.

Before getting sidetracked into debates about “black music for white people,” let's put this into broader perspective. As for blues in general, up the Mississippi from New Orleans the Memphis of R.L.'s childhood was a river port with all the corruption that implies. Her cops were crooked as the Delta. Frank Stokes' “Mr. Crump Don't Like It” is wonderfully evocative of what R.L. heard while running wild in the streets.

That's not to say blues was any more welcome in the respectable home of R.L.'s mother, who sang in church, than rap/hip-hop was in certain houses I grew up in.

"Child, you play that zigaboo mess up hyeah in this howse, I beatchoo half ta deaf!"

Gioia's *Music: A Subversive History* is partly concerned with the role of class and caste in musical innovation, with how, tango or flamenco, "breakthroughs in music almost always come from outsiders and the underclass—slaves, bohemians, rebels." Peasant virtues, *Black Bourgeoisie* sociologist E. Franklin Frazier reminds us, are middle-class vices. Why on earth would the god-fearing celebrate on Sundays that devil-music which sang the life it lived on Saturdays around the saw mills and lumber camps, about sloe gin, fast women and razor fights? Blues guitarist B.B. King was not always a welcome accompanist for gospel singers.

As for Delta blues in particular, B.B. King himself reminds us that though scholars and record producers love categorizing blues into distinct styles, Piedmont or West Coast, when King was growing up in Mississippi his own boyhood idols were not from the Delta at all but rather Texas and Louisiana. The term "Delta"—Upper Delta, Lower Delta—is one that covers a vast area (the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta, "cotton-field" or "urban" styles) that doesn't always recognize hard and fast distinctions.

Until I was born in 1960, R.L. was known primarily to 78-r.p.m. record collectors like Wardlow, and/or was meticulously archived in private collections by cognoscenti like R. Crumb, cartoonist of the *Heroes of Blues, Jazz & Country* series. African-American audiences didn't rescue Lightnin' Hopkins, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James or Booker T. Washington ("Bukka") White from obscurity the way that blues revivalists did back then; most African-American radio stations before Woodstock (1969) didn't claim Jimi Hendrix as their own; black publishing houses or periodicals can't really take credit for the resurgence of African-American writing now.

But there's a more tolerant way to view this. Think of Little Walter's Chicago sound as more or less amplified Delta blues; think how blues influenced British skiffle music, which became the British Invasion. Two British expatriates, since inducted into the Country Music Hall of

Fame, were responsible for the 1936 San Antonio session by which “Robert Johnson” became known to the rest of America and Britain. It was the release of *King of the Delta Blues* (1961) that brought his artistry to that new generation of artists born around World War II, who in turn revolutionized rock music in particular and pop music in general. Peter Guralnick’s *Looking to Get Lost: Adventures in Music & Writing*, is informative about the influence of R.L.’s music on Eric Clapton and others a generation before the first Columbia boxed set appeared in 1990. Today, R.L. is perhaps without exaggeration one of your favorite guitarist’s favorite guitarists. So, when Wald talks about the “blues revival,” what he’s really talking about is the mass commercial distribution of an essentially black folk art to a post-urban white audience on the part of a handful of blues players and singers, Delta or otherwise—like Muddy Waters, left scratching his head about “how these white kids were playing the blues my black kids was bypassing.” Perhaps black folk simply moved on from down-home, country-blues music the way listeners of my generation moved on from “dinosaur rock.”

Call it “cross-over” or whatever, the pop I grew up on as I did, splitting a decade of formative years in The City and its pre-Silicon Valley suburbs between 1969 and 1985, seems enormously sophisticated now, though I couldn’t hear it that way. And already then it had re-miscegenated, due in part to the color-blindness of radio, to the point where The Swampers, five good ol’ boys outta Muscle Shoals, Alabama, formed those Stax and Atlantic Records rhythm sections backing some of the most iconic “soul” music in American history: Aretha Franklin on “I Never Loved a Man” (1967) or The Staple Singers on “I’ll Take You There” (1972). Listening to Phoebe Snow sing “Harpo’s Blues” (1973), I could not then and still can’t tell which accompaniment swings more “authentically,” pianist Teddy Wilson’s blue-veined white delicacy or tenor Zoot Sims’ black saxophone spit.

## II. An Old Woman Remembers

At birth, “Annye” C. Anderson was named “Annie Clara.” Conforth & Wardlow’s scholarly account of R.L.’s life from his birth in 1911 to hers in 1926 complements but does not supplant *Brother Robert*, an as-told-to memoir of Ms. Anderson’s impressions, dictated 80 years after R.L.’s death, of her life as a young girl during the Great Depression till the day, just before she entered her teens, when she heard the news announcing R.L.’s death.

Preserving folk tradition is what griot elders just naturally do. Oral history isn’t merely a component of *Brother Robert*. *Brother Robert* is the oral history of an oral historian. The grain of Ms. Anderson’s ancestral voice—“orality,” Lauterbach’s “showing” of Ms. Anderson’s “telling”—is as much what this book is about as is Robert Johnson himself. I’ve just come to assume an occasional disconnect between the way a thing is remembered and the way it really happened. *Brother Robert* is also an implied meditation on the distortion, selectivity and subjectivity—Ms. Anderson’s, ours, others’—of memory and memory’s role in shaping identity.

The Memphis blues W.C. Handy was “standardizing” the year before R.L. was born, the music R.L. grew up hearing live as he followed his working mother from plantation to plantation, was the music sharecroppers listened to after work in the rice fields and soybean fields around Robinsonville, or Clarksdale, heart of the Mississippi Delta. Without electricity or radios, ex-slaves who’d never ventured beyond the region and were curious to hear travel-tales sung by itinerant blues players depended on live music for entertainment. Country dances were always staged on Saturday nights with a musician providing the music.

Though Son House “learned him stuff,” by that time R.L. was already good enough that people came from miles around to hear him play parties, fish fries, picnics and jukes. Still he practiced, practiced, practiced. Later, he began writing his own songs. Acquired a distaste for working cotton fields. The boogie was *in* him, and had—though he endured beatings from well-meaning custodial adults for not wanting to work—to get out.

When R.L. discovered his teenaged bride was “percolatin’,” he married, settled down to farming by day, playing music nights and weekends. Once his child bride and newborn both died in childbirth while he was out playing the dances, 14 months after they’d married, R.L. never again attempted to settle down.

Li'l Robert grabbed up his ticking bag, took off down the road, down those lonesome blue highways, Route 41, U.S. 61, from Beale Street to New Orleans and back again, carrying around his guitar and his dirty laundry, crashing at the houses of extended family members for a day or two, just long enough to scarf a few square meals and get him a hot bath, and then—sometimes without so much as a thank-you or a goodbye—went back out on the road. As for the women, he loved them “like a hobo loves a train—off one and on another.” Why should he kill himself lugging an 11-foot, heavy canvas sack full of cotton for \$.50 a day? Memphis, where cops got bribed, dice got shot, and street-walkers cost as little as \$.50 apiece, came to know R.L. well.

“He played on the streets during the day, in local juke in the evening, and when they closed, unless he had a better offer, he would play on the nearby plantations. There was no closing time for a juke at a plantation, especially on weekends.”

A barrelhouse, or “juke joint,” was part speakeasy, part dance-club, part bordello, part flophouse. Sometimes, the take was all you could drink, plus \$5. On a good night, tips for playing requests upped the ante to \$25. Wasn’t like they had hotel rooms booked in advance. Singer-guitarist Johnny Shines says sometimes they didn’t even know where the next meal was coming from. Under the best of circumstances, a Saturday night juke joint was as dangerous as a house party or club in its inner-city equivalent. When I lived in Harlem, off-duty NYPD cops moonlighting as bouncers at night spots or house parties to pay off predatory mortgages in the bad neighborhoods of Long Island—Baldwin, Freeport—used to say the better the music, the more likely you were to get shot.

If we think “blues” in terms of regional centers instead of regional styles—Clarksdale, heart of the Mississippi Delta; Helena, heart of the Arkansas Delta, and Memphis—all that running back and forth R.L. did makes perfect sense. “Mississippi was still a dry state and liquor came across the river from Arkansas.” For R.L., the area between Memphis,



Robinsonville, Mississippi (40 miles south) and Helena, Arkansas—a gigging bluesman’s cash cow—was indeed a Devil’s triangle.

If we think Harlem “renaissance” as a global movement rather than an American place, it’s clear how much Beale Street had in common with 125th Street. In Harlem, blues incubated at rent parties, which typically began about midnight and lasted till dawn. The cover charge was \$.25, the refreshments included collard greens, bootleg liquor and jazz. Long, dark hallways abutted red-light rooms with sweaty couples bumping, grinding, slow-dancing, no dancing. Writers rubbed shoulders with blue-collar workers, numbers-runners and, of course, musicians. Duke Ellington was famous for playing rent parties. On Beale Street, or at rural juke joints, the party would “start about five o’clock and you’d go there and stay all night. You paid twenty-five cents to get in, twenty-five cents for a half pint of moonshine, and twenty-five cents for a fish sandwich. As long as you had some money you could stay all night, till the sun come up on Sunday morning. They’d have one or two guys who played so you could dance.”

What R.L. played really just depended on where he was playing. In Chicago, R.L. met Memphis Minnie, Roosevelt Sykes, Big Joe Williams, and Washboard Sam, active on the South Side at one time or another. In rural Illinois, where the locals had never even seen a black man before, he was a freak-show act, and might play a square dance. In black-bottom Detroit, on his way up into Canada, he might play a river-front baptism or the local gospel-radio show. In Jersey, where Sinatra was launched into stardom headlining the Hoboken Four, R.L. might play 6/8 tarantellas at Italian weddings, polkas, klezmer music or plain old waltzes in 3/4 time. Harlem and New York City might mean the big time—seven million inhabitants patronizing hundreds of clubs and speakeasies, radio stations and theaters, professional sports and arts venues, Maria Callas performing *Madame Butterfly*. Gioia says, no “traditional blues singer has ever sold more recordings or appealed to a broader slice of the public than Robert Johnson.”

My reason for interweaving blues history with personal history is this. The gulf between biography and discography was unbreachable until I approached R.L. from the inside out. In places, Ms. Anderson in *Brother Robert* reminds me of Cicely Tyson in *The Autobiography of Miss*

*Jane Pittman.* The pre-Depression Memphis world Ms. Anderson narrates survived intact until the early 70s, the time of my own upbringing, with its Sunday brunches of calf's brains and scrambled eggs, smack-talking relatives seated on folding chairs, slamming dominoes down on portable card tables, snacking on pickled pigs feet and pork rinds with plenty of hot sauce. Sunday dinner might be the whole hog roasting on a backyard spit, with sides of collard greens, skillet corn bread, red beans and rice; might be that pervasively fecal funk of chittlins soaking somewhere in bathtub bleach. So much of what I took almost for granted in Ms. Anderson's recollections—caste, class, music, religion—may not be at all familiar to millions of record collectors on the Mississippi Delta bus tour, most of them not African-American.

Supported like R.L. by a far-flung network on both sides, distaff and sinister, I grew up in a non-nuclear family. I know what she means when Ms. Anderson says she and Brother Robert, not blood-relatives, were very much "kin." I was born in the Conforth & Wardlow "Upper South." Kansas City, Missouri was a blues hub better known for "shouters" like Big Joe Turner than for "crooners" like R.L. Mine was a family of professional musicians on both sides. Before she'd fled Jim Crow Missouri for New York, not realizing that, as Ms. Anderson put it, "you're either up South or down South," my great-grandmother—whose brother recorded with Fats Waller in 1929, when Ms. Anderson was still a toddler, and L'il Robert a teen—told me: "Back in Kansas City, where I grew up, I heard Basie play for the first time. His band had just broken up, and a fella by the name of Bennie Moten played all the local private dance clubs. He had a tonsillectomy, and died on the operating table. Meanwhile, Basie had been at Jap's Place, the colored movie house, playing organ. When Bennie Moten died, Basie took over the band. That's how Basie got his start. That's when I met Basie."

1969 was a watershed, both in music history and personal history. I remember living with my mother, in Haight-Ashbury, when hippies hitchhiked from gig to gig the way blues musicians used to "ride the blinds." In the late 60s and early 70s, my summers during school vacation were spent driving cross-country in eight-cylinder, four-door sedans choked with food, visiting family after family after family throughout what Conforth & Wardlow call "the Lower South"—Oklahoma, the Ozarks of Arkansas—as

well as the western Rockies of Colorado, beneath wide Wyoming skies, through Nevada, New Mexico, into Arizona and on to California, then back again through midwestern flatlands of Kansas, Nebraska, and on down Deep South, across vastnesses of Texas, through bayous of Louisiana. Always and everywhere, on reel-to-reel tape decks, on vinyl, on 8-track tapes, music marked my adolescence: work songs, field hollers, blues. Shrimping camps were so much a part of the natural soundscape of my childhood that it took decades of distance for me to “hear” this music.

R.L.’s ubiquity is such that, in context, these Grateful Dead lyrics, from “Truckin’,” (1970) make perfect sense:

*Arrows of neon and flashing marquees out on Main Street  
Chicago, New York, Detroit and it's all on the same street  
Your typical city involved in a typical daydream  
Hang it up and see what tomorrow brings*

*Dallas, got a soft machine  
Houston, too close to New Orleans  
New York got the ways and means  
But just won't let you be*

*What in the world ever became of sweet Jane?  
She lost her sparkle, you know she isn't the same  
Livin' on reds, vitamin C, and cocaine  
All a friend can say is, "Ain't it a shame?"*

*Truckin', up to Buffalo  
Been thinkin', you got to mellow slow  
It takes time, you pick a place to go  
And just keep truckin' on*

*Busted, down on Bourbon Street  
Set up, like a bowlin' pin  
Knocked down, it gets to wearin' thin  
They just won't let you be*

*You're sick of hangin' around and you'd like to travel  
Get tired of travelin', you want to settle down  
I guess they can't revoke your soul for tryin'  
Get out of the door and light out and look all around*

*Truckin', I'm a goin' home  
Whoa, whoa, baby, back where I belong  
Back home, sit down and patch my bones  
And get back truckin' on*

But R.L. dreamt bigger dreams than just performing. A hit record would mean he could command higher takes at the juke, and a wider reputation among women. So, he borrowed a Borsalino hat, a pinstripe suit, had his picture taken on Beale Street, had his cap-toed shined up almost sharp as his knees, held up his high-mileage Gibson L-1 guitar, its fretboard stripped near-clean above the sound-hole. One Saturday morning R.L. took a ride with a white couple, the whites riding behind like Ms. Daisy with R.L. at the wheel (so as not to rouse suspicion, 'y'unnerstand'). R.L. drove three days and 700 Texas miles from Memphis, by way of Mississippi and Louisiana. 'Ya see, he was headed way over in San Antone; make him some reckids; maybe git famous; somethin' you might call, like dat dere, a 'recordin' artist.'

R.L. was 25.

When R.L.'s first recording, "Terraplane Blues," was released in March 1937 with "Kind Hearted Woman Blues" on the b-side, ten-year-old Ms. Anderson took the entirety of what she might earn in a day running errands around the neighborhood—\$0.25—skipped down to the five-and-dime, and bought her very own copy of Brother Robert's record. I can imagine what Ms. Anderson felt as a 12-year-old when she heard the news.

"Li'l Robert, he dead."

R.L. was 27.

Without a word a warning that morning, Old Devil Blues met R.L. in some juke joint on that hot Saturday night. There was hell to pay for the life he'd led. R.L. had his share of the bad luck and trouble

blues musicians traditionally sing. He'd lost two wives and two children. Night before that first recording session in San Antonio, he was arrested, beaten, thrown in jail, his guitar busted all to pieces. Then he got bailed out, just in time for his 10 a.m. recording session, borrowed (legend has it) a guitar and laid down 8 tracks from 10 till late. R.L. got run over by a truck; another guitar burnt up in a fire. He died months after both James Weldon Johnson and Bessie Smith were killed in car accidents. The cause of death is listed on his certificate as "no doctor." But, really, all the doctors in Mississippi couldn't have helped him. Lethal admixtures of women, corn whiskey (from which R.L. developed internal bleeding) and geography would eventually have spelled "the end." There was no sheriff's investigation, no coroner's inquest, no autopsy. Locals shrugged the news off like they would that of any another rambling juker's death in a place where rowdy patrons drank, danced, shot dice and hooked up for casual sex. Yet another rapper gets shot in a club. 1938, August, somewhere around the 16<sup>th</sup>.

Was R.L. murdered by one of the many jealous husbands who caught him messing around with their wives? Did some jilted wife get her a mojo hand, "hoodoo" the hoodoo man? Was R.L. poisoned, shot, bled out by straight-razor? Or did he simply die of pneumonia? Hindsight suggests involuntary manslaughter. Mason jars of moonshine corn-liquor spiked with mothballs were routinely slipped to the unwitting, like a mickey. Such a naphthalin agent, in combination with the ulcerated gastro-intestinal tract in R.L.'s already enlarged lower esophagus, the tears inside, could internally have bled him out, in acute agony, crawling round the floor, over a period of days, howling like the wolf.

*. . . stuff I got'll bust your brains out  
baby, it'll make you lose your mind*

Short shovel, hot day, deep grave dug in that hard Mississippi "gumbo dirt." R.L.'s tarantula-fingers, same day he died, were wrapped in linen, along with the rest of his corpse. A "jack-leg," one of those unpaid itinerant preachers like you hear on Reverend Wilkins' "Prodigal Son," ones who took their fee out in trade for food or drink as opposed to passing around a tip jar like the gravediggers in Balzac, officiated as

they nailed shut that wooden box. R.L. was lain six feet in the ground, somewhere near Greenwood.

Vast Mississippi plantations got parceled into smaller share-cropping lots. Spacious single-family houses in Memphis, like the brownstones of Bedford-Stuyvesant, got chopped up, for a black population “made-redundant,” as they had before, down on Parchman Farm or at Angola, now subcontracted out, up South, to private, for-profit prisons, into an urban kindling of rooming houses. Inner cities still smoldering to this day erupted, in Memphis, into the riots of 1967, 1968, 2016 and 2020.

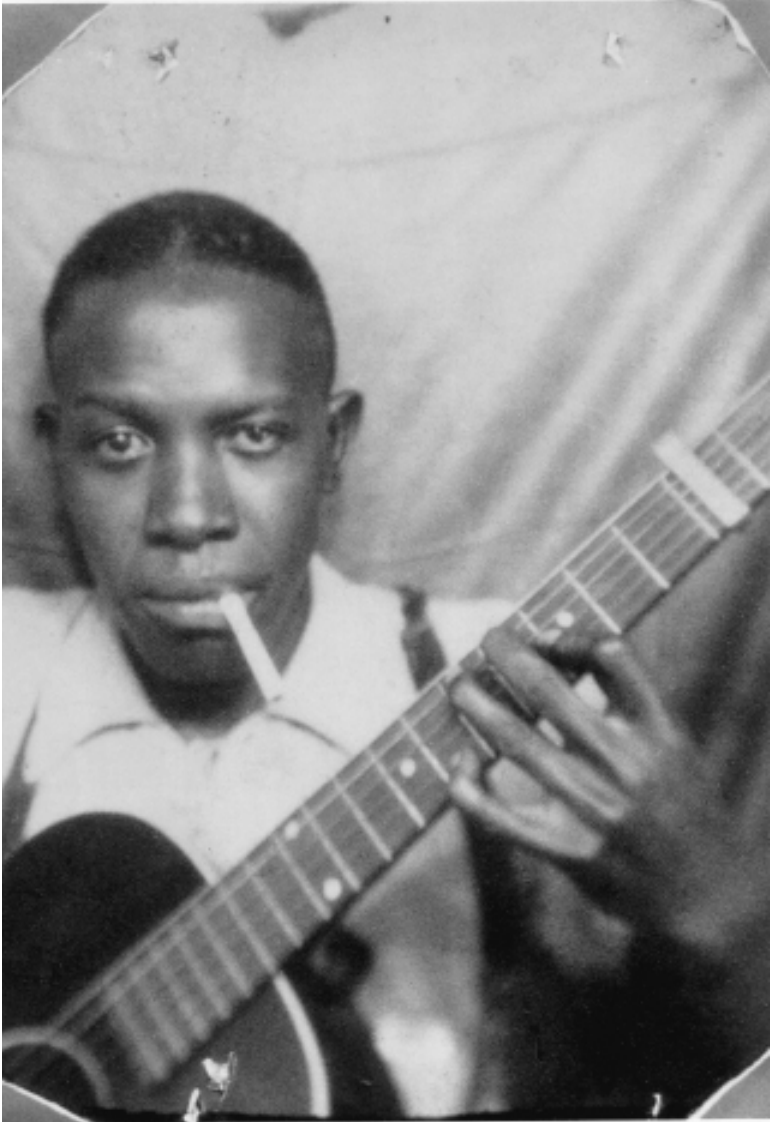
In Boston or Cambridge, in jazz clubs like Scullers, at blues clubs advertised in *The Phoenix*, Ms. Anderson discovered a nightlife forbidden during her “strick” upbringing as a girl in Memphis. As griot elders will, she sought out players who remembered R.L. personally—James Cotton, Willie Dixon, John Lee Hooker, Big Walter Horton, Albert King, Sunnyland Slim, Hubert Sumlin. Others, young whites whom Ms. Anderson fully credits for the blues revival—Paul Butterfield, Mick Fleetwood, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bonnie Raitt, the Steve Miller Band, Johnny Winter—now knew “Robert Johnson” only by name.

The story of L’il Robert has been written and written countless times since his death. Ms. Anderson’s story has now been told in her own words for the first time.

### III. Preachin’ Blues

Wald doesn’t even attempt a “scholarly” interpretation of “the meaning of the blues.” This is the virtue of his approach, not its failing. Some readers will care more about how the music works—where Conforth agrees Wald is superb—than about what certain unambiguous lyrics might “mean.”

In R.L.’s day, many members of a rural audience could not even read lyrics. Though he took music lessons in Memphis, we don’t really know whether or how easily R.L. could sight-read music. Triad structure and repetition, Lydia Davis reminds us, are mnemonic devices common to



**Robert Johnson**

Photobooth Self-Portrait, early 1930s

oral cultures in transition. Blues storytelling conveys maximalist humor, pathos and bottomless depths of folk wisdom with minimalist economy: powerful few chords, two almost identical opening lines, each paused in the middle, followed by a third “turnaround line.” Take “Buddy Brown’s Blues,” by R.L.’s almost exact contemporary Lightnin’ Hopkins.

*I'm gonna get up in the morning  
Do like Buddy Brown  
I'm gonna get up in the morning  
Do like Buddy Brown  
Yeah, I'm gon' eat my breakfast  
Man, I'm gon' lay back down*

Throw in Southern idiomatic expressions you haven’t heard in 50 years, metaphors and similes, a pinch of double-entendre sexual innuendo (Tampa Red says, “she crazy about it / ‘cause it fit just right”) and there you have it: a blues verse.

“It don’t take but five verses,” Big Bill Broonzy explained, “to make a blues.”

“Musical language,” says Robert Palmer in *Deep Blues*, “expresses, in a way words cannot, something profoundly important about the depth, vitality, and continuity of . . . culture.” Sometimes the greatest moments of so-called “deep blues” are moments of wordless utterance, when a self-accompanied singer instrumentally “lays out,” and just moans, rhythmically taps her foot.

As a young writer in search of a voice, I could relate to R.L.’s quest to master his instrument. At age 27, I went from absorbing music subconsciously to wanting consciously to write about musicians like R.L. Wald won a Grammy for liner-notes, and is, like Peter Guralnick, an exemplar of what sinkholes to avoid in music-criticism. Robert Palmer is instructive on that “mush-mouthed delivery” of Sonny Boy Williamson II, who sings as though he’s left his dentures steeping in a studio bar-glass. Palmer is felicitous on the “uniquely orchestral style” Williamson brings to the blues harmonica. A carefully “musical” writer thinks of words as “notes” and sequencing; overdubs sentences, paragraphs and entire essays or even books of essays with allusional overtones—voicings and grace



notes; gives careful thought to “turnarounds” at the ends of sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters; knows how to perform but also transform a piece; how to use sound-associations to make one thing resemble another—the way R.L. suggests a ukulele in the endnotes of “Malted Milk,” a tune noted for its jazz feel; the way R.L. Burnside suggests a gallop of horseshoes by drumming his nails on the body of his wooden guitar on “Skinny Woman”; the way Robert Leroy himself imitates a hobo-train chugging along like a steam-engine locomotive on those “Last Fair Deal Gone Down” bass strings; the way R.L. might “peal” a bell using harmonics on his guitar string; or how R.L.’s slide “shimmers,” with a single note, “the leaves tremblin’ on the tree.” Like a guitarist, a skillful writer will sense when to bottleneck that riff or when to let her naked fingers feather goose-bumps up and down the listener’s neck; when to add a verbal fillip, as R.L. does on those last four notes of “Stop Breakin’ Down,” and when to hold back; will use rubato—quickening or slackening the pace—instead of playing a piece metronomically, with what Wald calls “antiseptic exactitude.” What makes a literary piece endlessly “listenable” is a writer who knows when to whisper, when to shout; when to play it safe and when to take chances; how to make adjustments for both timing and timbre; how much tremolo to shake on that slide chord; knows when to be concise and when expansive; R.L. recorded just two sessions before he died; hadn’t yet learned how to sustain inspiration over the course of the half-dozen alternate takes a writer calls “drafts/revisions”; R.L.’s “Come On In My Kitchen,” so trance-like on that first take, is by the second take, Wald says, void of magic; how a writer says essentially similar things in utterly novel ways; how effectively to counterpoint, their melodic lines picked out and their accompanying chord changes strummed, the main points and subpoints a writer is trying to make; how in “Dead Shrimp Blues” R.L. creates the illusion, convincing even to other guitarists, of two players jamming simultaneously, one on bass and the other playing melodies and chords; how to expand one’s own tonal range by sometimes resorting to understatement and other times indulging hyperbole; R.L. could play fast, as we hear on “Preachin’ Blues (Up Jumped the Devil),” which Wald says is one of R.L.’s “wildest and most exciting performances”; but among the first things a young writer forgets, and later has to relearn in the progression from “virtuosity” and back to almost childish simplicity

again, is that “chops” is as much about executing clean break-outs as it is of digital dexterity at high tempos, or what Conforth & Wardlow call “guitar gymnastics.” Ultimately, what a writer needs to learn is when, as Miles learned Coltrane, to “take the harn outcha mouf.”

Blues comes all different ways: blues to boogie; blues for screamin’ and cryin’:

*You don't know what love is  
'Til you've learned the meaning of the blues  
Until you've loved a love you've had to lose,  
You don't know what love is.*

There’s gallows-humor blues for chain gangs, sitting around the Big House, killing hard time.

*Lord, if you can't send me a woman  
please send me a sissy man.*

R.L.’s hero Leroy Carr recorded a drunkard’s anthem called “Corn Licker Blues.”

*Now I love my good corn liquor and I really mean I do  
Now I love my good corn liquor and I really mean I do  
Now I don't care who knows it and I really mean that too  
Now I've been drinking my good corn liquor  
I mean don't no one get rough  
Now I've been drinking my good corn liquor  
I mean don't no one get rough  
Now I try to treat everybody right  
But I mean don't start no stuff*

Now “that’s,” said Son House during a Newport Festival interview, “the blues—B-L-U-S-E.”

## IV. Blues-Snake Vipers

As family histories will, R.L.'s gets depressingly ugly. During his lifetime, few of R.L.'s records sold well, compared to the five or ten thousand copies "Terraplane Blues" had sold, and certainly in comparison with the Columbia releases. Until *King of the Delta Blues*, "Robert Johnson" was remembered by few locals, some blues contemporaries and what Wald calls "a handful of white folk and jazz fans." Tales got taller. Memories got hazier. Brother Robert's guitar got pawned, never to be redeemed. "Money grabbers," as Ms. Anderson calls Stephen C. La Vere, acquired rights to the multi-million dollar R.L. estate for a proverbial song. Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax went down to the Delta, recorded blues artists like David "Honeyboy" Edwards for the Library of Congress. But it was backstage impresarios like John H. Hammond who kicked R.L.'s posthumous career into high gear.

Was R.L., like Ray Charles, a brilliant synthesizer, a cover-artist skilled at adapting others' melodies or songs and making them his own? Or was he an originator from whom much was stolen and too little credit given? If the latter, wherein does R.L.'s originality consist?

As instrumentalist, R.L.'s playing style ranged from that of a blues "picker" influenced by Scrapper Blackwell and others to a one-man rhythm section. He had, some say, eidetic memory; he may or may not have been able to read music, but had only to see A-natural played once, or watch a basic C position finger-picked, or see Johnnie Temple tune his own guitar to open E-minor to commit these things to memory. Take that signature, hard-charging "boogie beat," what Wald calls the "surprisingly effective trick" of a slide riff on the 1st through 3rd bass-strings (E, B, G) against triplets on 4th, 5th string and 6th strings (D, A, E). Ever since R.L. recorded "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" or "Sweet Home Chicago," countless juke box heroes have used it to danceable effect.

Let's sidestep the question of whether or not it was first recorded by Johnnie Temple on "Lead Pencil Blues" in 1935 but was still a novelty when R.L. recorded it later; forget about whether R.L. really "invented" it any more than Colonel Sanders invented Kentucky Fried Chicken. The better question might be where did Johnnie Temple himself learn it? From

some other player out in the juke, one who didn't get into the studio first? The point is that R.L.'s using the bass strings to imitate the left-hand of a barrelhouse pianist had an effect on contemporary guitarists like Robert Lockwood, Jr. in 1937 or 1938 that seems akin to the effect Glenn Gould had on the classical recording world of 1955 when Gould played the piano as if it were a harpsichord. R.L., says Lockwood, "played the guitar like you played the piano."

Tunings can get technical—open-tuned bottleneck, standard-tuned straight blues—even for guitarists, much less non-musicians. Until guitarist Rory Block tinkered with "Ramblin' On My Mind," and hit upon a solution, since confirmed by computer analysis, even Eric Clapton couldn't figure that one out. There are arguments pro and con about whether or not, because it would have been too time-consuming to change between individual songs, R.L. would change them between sets, often turning his back to the audience to keep them secret. Which bring us back to the cross-roads. Perhaps "wizardry" is a better word than "devilry" for how R.L.'s art struck contemporaries.

As for the "originality" of R.L.'s songwriting, the question of which blues, like "32-20," are covers and which original compositions I leave to musicians. No published lyrics or sheet music survives the 78 sessions. Many blues, like those you hear on the 2011 centennial reissue of, are reworkings of "traditional" tunes passed down from musician to musician, often with no originator credited. The matter of who stole what from whom I leave to intellectual property attorneys. This much seems clear: his two recording sessions, the first in San Antonio and the last in Dallas, were work-for-hire gigs paid at a flat rate. R.L. owned no rights to his masters, received no royalties. It was a Faustian bargain: either sign a royalty contract from which, if it ever recouped production costs, he could hypothetically earn \$0.25 for each disc sold on a pressing of 10,000 copies; or take \$300 in cash for just under 30 songs—more money, during the Great Depression, than he'd ever had in hand at any one time. R.L. took the fast money.

Some complain that, on vocals, R.L.'s alternate takes—even when they slow down or speed up the tempo—stick too closely to the originals. Casual listeners are perhaps better served not listening to all 29 tracks from the 2-CD set, session after session, originals and alternate

takes, back to back sequentially. That can make R.L.'s output seem less varied than it really is. Gioia is struck by the versatility of these 29 songs. But they represent only a fraction of the popular tunes he could play by ear or make up on the spur of the moment. R.L. hoped the San Antonio sessions would be the big break he was looking for. Given this rigid 78 formula of 3-minute sides—the A-side up-tempo, the B-side a slow number—Conforth & Wardlow prefer to see R.L.'s careful studio takes in that pre-slicing era of recording history as consistency rather than lack of adventurousness, a “codifying of his material.” No wonder R.L. played it safe, planning out “every word, note, and nuance.” “Johnson was one of the most carefully calculated singers,” Wald writes, “in blues.” Charley Patton routinely aped and clowned 20-minute live versions of what we have on record. For all we know, the “Robert Johnson” we hear on record might have been a fundamentally different performer live. Think of a song from that first Allman Brothers Band album, “Dreams” or “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed,” both stretched out to 19:30 or more on *Live at Stony Brook*.

Returning to the controversy of whether R.L. was not just an innovator but an originator, not a cover-artist slapping together pastiches of hit tunes, “originalists” argue that the genius of Robert Johnson went well beyond knowing which songs to cover. Wald writes that R.L. “rewrote” hit songs like Hambone Willie Newbern’s “Rollin’ and Tumblin’,” on which he based “Traveling Riverside Blues.” R.L. changed up the tempos, added riffs, capoed his guitar to match his singing voice. The beginnings, middles and endings were all carefully worked out. R.L.’s recordings were unlike anything previously heard on juke box. Was R.L. a synthesizer or an originator? Wald argues the former. Conforth & Wardlow think the latter. “His songs, his tunings, his playing style were all his: he owned them.”

## **Books Drawn On For This Essay**

Annye C. Anderson with Preston Lauterbach, and with a forward by Elijah Wald, *Brother Robert: Growing Up with Robert Johnson* (New York: Hachette, 2020).

Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2019).

Ted Gioia, *Music: A Subversive History* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Peter Guralnick, *Looking to Get Lost: Adventures in Music and Writing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2020).