

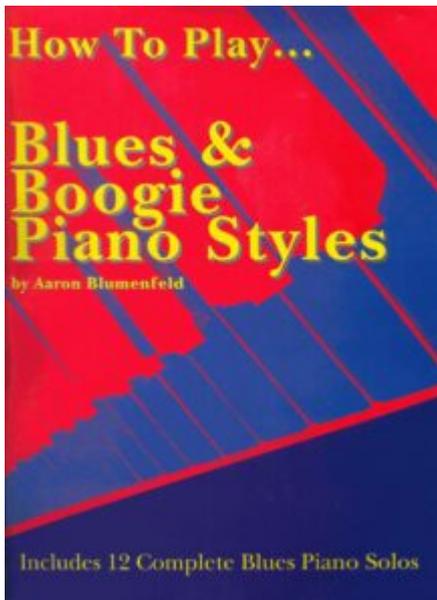
# **A History of the Blues – Robert Johnson – Sweet Home Chicago**

## **A History of the Blues – Robert Johnson – [Sweet Home Chicago](#)**

“Sweet Home Chicago” is a blues standard first recorded by Robert Johnson in 1936. Although he is often credited as the songwriter, several songs have been identified as precedents. The song has become a popular anthem for the city of Chicago, despite ambiguity in Johnson’s original lyrics. Numerous artists have interpreted the song in a variety of styles.

All five of Chicago’s sports teams have played the song at their games in one form or another.

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## Robert Johnson

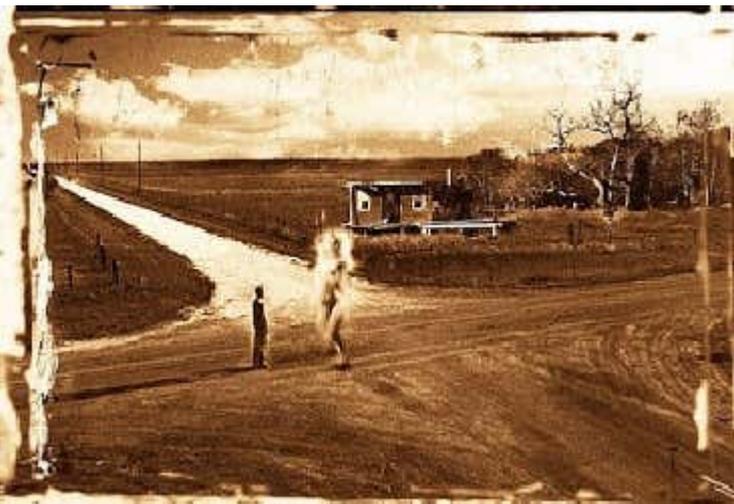
We remember the bluesman Robert Johnson as the Jimi Hendrix of the 1930s, a guitarist of staggering skill who died before age thirty. Both found mainstream success, but Johnson's came posthumously: in fact, his music and Hendrix's first music hit it big in the same decade, the 1960s. King of the Delta Blues Singers, an album of Johnson's songs released by Columbia Records in 1961, had a great influence on the likes of Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, Robert Plant, and Eric Clapton, who calls Johnson "the most important blues singer that ever lived." How did this poor young Mississippian come by his formidable abilities? Why, he sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads, of course.

Or at least that's what we all seem to have heard. And indeed, doesn't the legend make the opening line of "Cross Road Blues," King of the Delta Blues' opening number, that much more evocative? "I went down to the crossroads," he sings. "Fell down on my knees. Asked the Lord above for mercy, 'Take me, if you please.'" Well, it could've been the Lord, or it could have been the other one. But in fact we have precious little record of Johnson's life, and no direct references at all to his bargain with Beelzebub (animations of which we

previously featured here on Open Culture). Why has the legend stuck?

Johnson's wife was pregnant, but her and the baby died in childbirth. Understandable, Robert was distraught and did not know what to do. He decided to leave town for some time, and upon his return he was a changed man. He could play his guitar like a seasoned vet and his voice was silky smooth, a stark comparison to the terrible musician that the town locals remembered prior to his disappearance.

Many attributed his marked progress to meeting the devil during his travel and Johnson sold his soul in exchange for becoming a better musician. Some new speculation has emerged concerning Robert Johnson and the location of where he made his pact with the Devil.



Many fans go to the crossroads at Highway 61 and highway 49 in Clarksdale to pay their respect due to them, thinking this is the legendary location where the pact with the Devil was made. Some new evidence may suggest this may not be the correct location. Many of the 80 and 90-year-old southern bluesmen, along with many historians and blues music researchers, suggest that the location Robert was talking about is in Rosedale.

Although of course no one will TRULY know, but his song does mention in the lyrics the city: "Going up to Rosedale, got my

rider by my side". But Son House states that he knows for a fact where this deal was made. According to the legendary blues musician, he states it wasn't in Clarksdale. The claim is that it was where highway 8 intersects with highway 1.

The Devil marks his territory with an "X", the crossroads, According to voodoo claims and legends, the Devil has to hang close to the river, meaning the mark could never be made so far from the river as Clarksdale. Rosedale is located right by the river and this verifies the folklore. Only the Devil and Robert will only truly know which are the correct crossroads.

The truth is that Robert never went to the crossroads looking for the Devil, he was waiting for him as Johnson passed through from Beulah on his way to Helena. The Devil and his dog greeted Johnson here and the dog seized Robert and shook him violently; When he did, the strings in Johnson's guitar shook and vibrated and the blues emerged from those sounds.

The devil told Johnson, "...the dog is not for sale, but you can buy that sound." Robert wanted it so bad, the deal was made. From there, he was a master.

At the age of 27, Johnson died on August 16, 1938, some say that the devil came to collect his due, but others stated that he was poisoned by the jealous husband of a woman that Johnson flirted with.

While strychnine has been suggested as the poison that killed Johnson, at least one scholar has disputed the notion. Tom Graves, in his book *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson*, relies on expert testimony from toxicologists to argue that strychnine has such a distinctive odor and taste that it cannot be disguised, even in strong liquor. Graves also claims that a significant amount of strychnine would have to be consumed in one sitting to be fatal, and that death from the poison would occur within hours, not days.

Contemporary David "Honeyboy" Edwards similarly noted that the poison could not have been strychnine, since Johnson would have died much more rapidly, instead of suffering for three days. Who knows the truth, though? Science and logic says he got that good through diligent practice, and a natural ability. But the blues (and music in general) was never about Science, was it?