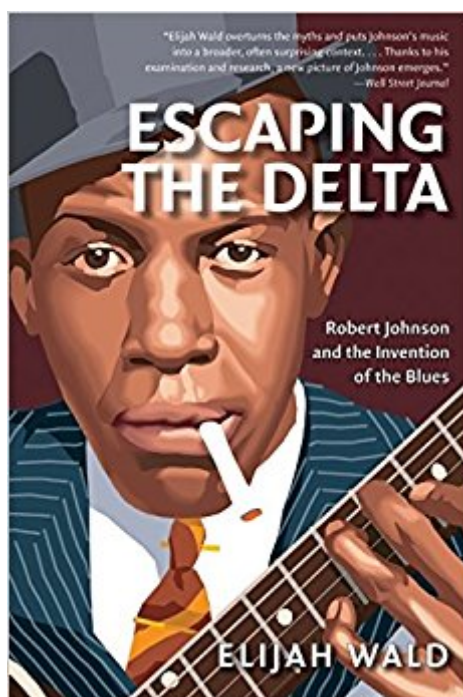


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Escaping The Delta: Robert Johnson And The Invention Of The Blues



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

Many Americans have shown a great interest in "roots" music as part of a highly commendable effort to understand our country's life and culture. Much of this interest has, over the years, focused on the blues of the Mississippi Delta and, in particular, on the recordings of singer and guitarist Robert Johnson (1911 -1938). Johnson was an obscure figure in his day and his life and music remain the stuff of legend. He had two recording dates in 1936 and 1937. His music was rediscovered in the 1960s and since that time the sales of his collected recordings have numbered in the millions. In "Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues" (2004), Elijah Wald offers a compelling study of the blues and of blues historiography focusing on Robert Johnson. Wald tries to correct what he deems to be the prevailing myths about Johnson: that he

was a primitive folk artist caught in the Mississippi Delta who recorded and perfected a local traditional form of blues. Wald finds Johnson an ambitious young singer who had studied the blues forms popular in his day. Johnson, Wald argues, wanted to escape the Mississippi Delta and pattern himself on the urban blues singers, in particular Leroy Carr, emanating from the midwest and Chicago. Wald finds that Johnson displayed a variety of blues styles in his recordings and that he was largely ignored by black music listeners of his day because Johnson's early efforts to capture an urban blues style were basically copies of more successful singers and because his songs in the Delta blues style lacked appeal to the urban and sophisticated black audience of the time. Johnson's music only became well-known, Wald argues, with the rise of English rock, and with his rediscovery by a largely white audience.

This is a fascinating study of the history of blues music, as distilled through the life of Robert Johnson. As the book progresses, Wald gives us a much clearer understanding of the man and the music on their own terms, and expertly deconstructs the myths and stereotypes that have been propagated by recent revivalists. Modern white fans have a much different view of Robert Johnson and his contemporaries than they had of themselves. The blues was once mainstream pop music among black audiences in the first half of the 20th century, constantly evolving and striving for sales and popularity, rather than the static and mythologized roots music envisioned by today's purists. Wald provides convincing evidence that Robert Johnson was far from the troubled loner and brooding genius who single-handedly revolutionized western music in miserable backwoods locations, as current fandom mythology would tell you. Instead, Johnson was a professional entertainer who dreamed of being that era's equivalent of a rock star, as did most other blues musicians of the time. Johnson's music, while certainly compelling, wasn't even that unique or original when seen in the context of its time, as Wald finds evidence that he often simply updated the works of his major influences like Leroy Carr, Son House, or Kokomo Arnold. The blues musicians of the time were also adept at many different pop and mainstream styles, and Johnson was no exception, as Wald shows us through Johnson's decidedly non-Delta songs like "They're Red Hot" or "From Four Till Late." Interestingly, Johnson wasn't even very successful or influential in his own time (the 1930's), and was mostly unknown even in the blues community until he was rediscovered by white revivalists in the 60's.

Much of what you think you know about the blues (and popular music in general) isn't true. But as is usually the case, the truth is more interesting than the myths. Some blues singers continued a

tradition that went back to field hollers, but most didn't. And most sang every kind of music, not just blues: show tunes; country; (which also had a lot of African influence); folk; jazz; whatever their audiences wanted. It was first the record companies who started classifying music, and tagging Black singers as "blues" and white singers as "country." It was done for marketing reasons, an aid to them selling more records. It wasn't about the artists' deep attachment to a particular type of music; most of them wanted to make it big singing whatever kind of music would pay. Some of them were forgotten about for years until the blues revival of the 1960s, which Wald also discusses at length. Let me say here that I got a cloth edition of this book from the library; it didn't come with a CD. If you want to follow the chapters of the book that cover Robert Johnson's recordings, you will want to have Robert Johnson's complete recordings (The Centennial Collection). If you have Prime, you have free access to it. I don't read a lot about music, but I read a lot of history, and music is part of history. Some of the books relating to music history that I've liked are: two wonderful books by Ned Sublette (

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