

Trouble Will Soon Be Over

The Life of Blind Willie Johnson



The Soul Of A Man

Introduction

January 22, 1897 somewhere near Brenham, Texas an African-American boy was born, or was it January 25, 1897 in Pendleton, Texas₁? Much of the life of Blind Willie Johnson was not written down and there is some confusion of the facts that were recorded, such as his birth date and place. But even as a mystery man, Blind Willie Johnson recorded 30 unique and innovative tracks that paved the way for all of the musicians that followed after him.

The image shows two documents related to Blind Willie Johnson's military service. The left document is a 'REGISTRATION CARD' (Form 1 (14-2)) with the following handwritten entries: Serial No. 02-3-24, Registration No. 135, Name in full Willie Johnson, Address 912 Fuller St. Houston Texas, Date of birth January 25 1897, Place of birth Pendleton Texas USA, Father's birthplace Valley Mills Texas USA, Name of employer Unemployed, Name of nearest relative Dock Johnson Father Temple Texas. The right document is a 'REGISTRAR'S REPORT' (Form 2 (14-2)) with the following handwritten entries: Color of eyes Blind, Color of hair Black, Remarks He is blind. Notes were blind 13 years. The registrar's name is A. E. Schaffer and the date is 1918.

Blind Willie Johnson's Draft Card ₂

Mother's Children Have A Hard Time

Background



R. Crumb's Drawing of Johnson ₃

Blind Willie Johnson's mother died when he was very young. The pain of growing up without his mother must have led him to writing and singing "Nobody treats you like mother will when mother's dead" in his song "Mother's Children Have a Hard Time." As if to reaffirm his feeling, his step-mother threw lye in his eyes to get revenge at his father, or so the story goes. There are several stories of how Willie Johnson became blind, but regardless of the different stories, growing up without his mother contributed to who he became.

If It Had Not Been For Jesus

Growing Up

There is no historical mention of Blind Willie being trained in the slide guitar or in his unique singing style. However, we do know that Blind Willie Johnson grew up in a church congregation. An Arizona periodical reported that at a very young age, Blind Willie Johnson told his father that he wanted to be a preacher, “and then made himself a cigar box guitar.”⁴ His early interest in playing the guitar and wanting to be a preacher explains his style of singing where he sings as though he is giving a sermon to a congregation.



New Aged Cigar Box Guitar₅

Go With Me To The Land

Music Style

The blues and gospel music are two very closely related genre's of music. While they are very close, a musician either plays the blues or they play gospel music, not both. Blind Willie Johnson was an exception to this rule. While he is best described as a guitar evangelist, playing his music to draw people to church, he was also a bluesman in style. In fact, all but one of his songs are either biblical stories or sermons in lyrics that have a blues sound to the guitar playing and singing.



Three of Blind Willie Johnson's Record Labels 6

I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole

The Gospel Man

All but one of Blind Willie Johnson's songs were related to his religion. He sang about biblical stories and how, "Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right." His message was clear, Blind Willie Johnson was telling his listeners to "Get right with God" before it's too late.⁷ His music even took on a preacher-congregation relationship. Johnson would sing a couple verses, like a preacher speaking, then finish the verses with his guitar, like a congregation responding to their preacher.



Blind Willie Johnson

If I Had My Way I'd Tear The Building Down

The Blues Man

While most blues musicians fit into one sub-category of the blues and sometimes transition over to another, Blind Willie Johnson fit into two categories, the Mississippi Delta blues and Texas blues, merging them unintentionally and naturally in his music. Blind Willie played a mean slide guitar. He had that twang in his playing. In the words of the Austin, Texas slide guitarist Steve James, Blind Willie Johnson is “the very best.”⁸ In fact, his innovative slide guitar technique,



A Slide Guitarist With Metal or Glass On Their Finger ¹⁰

characteristic of the Texas blues, set a standard for future slide guitarists to aspire to. Blind Willie’s music also sounded a lot like the Delta blues. In his book “The History of the Blues” Francis Davis mentions that Blind Willie was “another Texan who might be mistaken for a Mississippian, and not merely because he slurred and croaked his lyrics.”⁹

The Rain Don't Fall On Me

Guitar Playing Style

Blind Willie played a peerless slide guitar, often playing in an open D tuning. Even without knowing who may have trained or inspired Blind Willie, J.D. Considine writes that “it’s obvious that Blind Willie Johnson is an original.”¹¹ J.D. Considine is probably correct since there is no bottleneck or knife slide guitarist recorded before Blind Willie that has his distinct sound. Yet there were many after him that mimicked and followed his innovative style. An accomplished slide guitarist, Steve James, sat up one night with a friend, listening to one of Blind Willie’s recordings. They “slowed down the turntable, played it over and over,” and determined that Blind Willie “got twelve separate pitches by striking the string once, all inside one measure.”¹² Many slide guitarists spend their life trying to figure out how to fit more separate pitches into a single strike, James himself claims that he can only get seven or eight, and that is after 25 years of playing.

John The Revelator

Singing Style



Blind Willie Johnson has two characteristic voices in his music. There is his deep and mellow natural voice and then there is his deeper, scratchy, “false vibrato,” masked voice. This “masking” gave Blind Willie’s music a very other worldly sound. “Masking” is a style that came from traditional African tribesmen. The tribesmen would put on a mask, changing their appearance, then they would use either a special mouthpiece or “simply resort to ‘deep chest growls, false bass tones, strangulated shrieks, and other deliberately bizarre effects”¹³ to change their voice along with their appearance. Blind Willie’s masking gives his music an unforgettable sound.

Tribal Mask Worn During Ceremonies ¹⁴

Take Your Stand

Symbolism and Meaning

The majority of Blind Willie Johnson's songs were biblical, with the themes of sermons or biblical stories. However, he did record a single, non-religious but politically oriented song. "When The War Was On," was Blind Willie's response to World War I. In this song he takes a jab at president Wilson, mentions the common ill will towards Uncle Sam for rationing, and approaches racial inequality. Lawrence Cohn points out that "social commentary this pointed remained rare in the blues,"¹⁵ in his book *Nothing But the Blues*. Which begs the question of where this completely different Willie Johnson came from.



Let Your Light Shine On Me

New Technologies



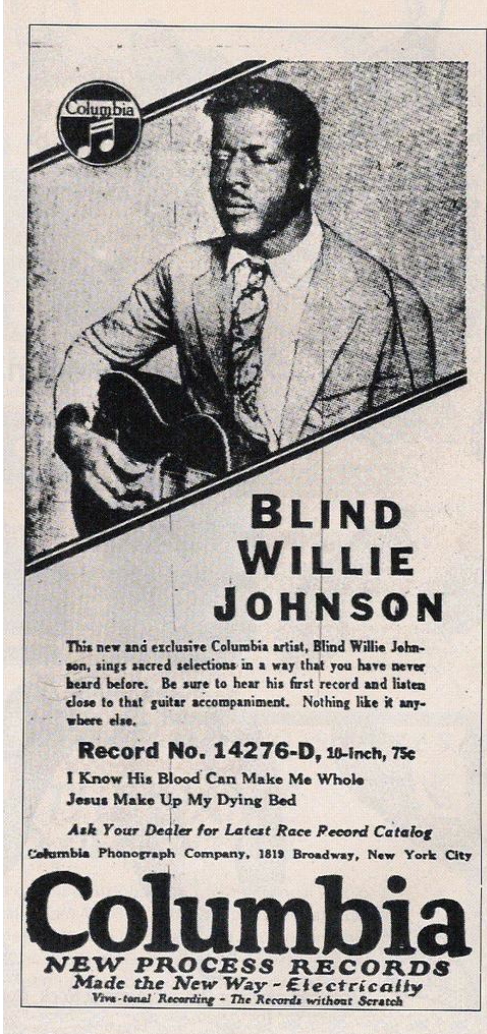
A Continental Microphone ¹⁸

Blind Willie Johnson's entire recording career was between 1927 and 1930. During this time he recorded 30 tracks for the Columbia Recording company on their 14000D "race records" series.¹⁷ During this time record companies were replacing older recording techniques with the electrical recording process that used an electric microphone to capture the musicians voice and playing. With this being the new technology, Blind Willie Johnson had the privilege of being one of the pioneering musicians to record his music in this new way.

Take Your Burden To The Lord

Trials and Tribulations

Blind Willie Johnson may have been a sensation as a musician, but this did not make his life any easier. Johnson's blindness restricted him to playing his music on street corners and in shops so that he could provide for himself and his family. Matters got even more difficult after his last recordings in the 1930's, as the Great Depression made life more challenging even for those who could see. After those last recordings Blind Willie disappeared from public sight. Some people say he traveled and played his music, others say he preached.



A vintage Columbia record advertisement for Blind Willie Johnson. The top half features a black and white photograph of Johnson, a Black man with a beard, wearing a suit and tie, playing an acoustic guitar. In the upper left corner of the photo is the Columbia logo, which includes a musical note and the word "Columbia". Below the photograph, the name "BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON" is printed in large, bold, black capital letters. Underneath the name is a short promotional blurb: "This new and exclusive Columbia artist, Blind Willie Johnson, sings sacred selections in a way that you have never heard before. Be sure to hear his first record and listen close to that guitar accompaniment. Nothing like it anywhere else." This is followed by the record information: "Record No. 14276-D, 10-Inch, 75c" and the titles of the two songs: "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole" and "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed". Below the titles, it says "Ask Your Dealer for Latest Race Record Catalog" and "Columbia Phonograph Company, 1819 Broadway, New York City". At the bottom of the advertisement, the word "Columbia" is written in a large, stylized font, with "NEW PROCESS RECORDS" underneath it. Below that, it says "Made the New Way - Electrically" and "Viva-tonal Recording - The Records without Scratch".

BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

This new and exclusive Columbia artist, Blind Willie Johnson, sings sacred selections in a way that you have never heard before. Be sure to hear his first record and listen close to that guitar accompaniment. Nothing like it anywhere else.

Record No. 14276-D, 10-Inch, 75c
I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole
Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed

Ask Your Dealer for Latest Race Record Catalog
Columbia Phonograph Company, 1819 Broadway, New York City

Columbia
NEW PROCESS RECORDS
Made the New Way - Electrically
Viva-tonal Recording - The Records without Scratch

Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed

The End of Johnson



Angeline Johnson, 1955 ²⁰

In 1945 Blind Willie Johnson's house burned down. After the fire had been put out Johnson slept on his wet bed in a wet nightgown and got sick. His death certificate, which is on the next page, claims that he caught malaria. However, Angeline, Blind Willie Johnson's second wife, claimed that he caught pneumonia, which would make more sense for Beaumont, Texas during this time period. Either way, Blind Willie Johnson departed from this world on September 18, 1945, leaving many questions and a great legacy.

STATE OF TEXAS
CERTIFICATION OF VITAL RECORD

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

1. PLACE OF DEATH STATE OF TEXAS		TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		40295
COUNTY OF <u>Jefferson</u>		CITY OR RESIDENCE NO. <u>1440 Forest</u>		
2. FULL NAME OF DECEASED <u>Willie Johnson Sr</u>		GIVE STREET AND NUMBER OR NAME OF INSTITUTION		
LENGTH OF RESIDENCE WHERE DEATH OCCURRED <u>30</u> YEARS MONTHS DAYS (SOCIAL SECURITY NO. <u>none</u>)				
RESIDENCE OF THE DECEASED AND NO. <u>1440 Forest</u> CITY <u>Beaumont</u> COUNTY <u>Jefferson</u> STATE <u>Tx</u>				
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS		MEDICAL PARTICULARS		
3. SEX <u>male</u>	4. COLOR OR RACE <u>negro</u>	17. DATE OF DEATH <u>Sept 18 1945</u>		
5. SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (WRITE THE WORD) <u>married</u>	6. DATE OF BIRTH <u>Jan 22 1897</u>	18. I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT I ATTENDED THE DECEASED FROM <u>Sept 18 1945</u> TO <u>Sept 18 1945</u> I LAST SAW HIM ALIVE ON <u>Sept 18 1945</u> THE DEATH OCCURRED ON THE DATE STATED ABOVE AT <u>4:10 A.M.</u>		
7. AGE <u>48</u> YEARS MONTHS <u>7</u> DAYS <u>26</u> IF LESS THAN 1 DAY HOURS MIN.	8A. TRADE, PROFESSION OR KIND OF WORK DONE <u>minister</u>	THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF DEATH WAS: <u>Malarial fever</u> DURATION <u>3 weeks</u>		
8B. INDUSTRY OR BUSINESS IN WHICH ENGAGED	9. BIRTHPLACE (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Independence, Texas</u>	CONTRIBUTORY CAUSES WERE: <u>Sepsis</u> <u>Dont</u> <u>Acid Blindness</u> <u>17 mos</u>		
10. NAME OF FATHER <u>Willie Johnson Sr</u>	11. BIRTHPLACE (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Mississippi</u>	IF NOT DUE TO DISEASE, SPECIFY WHETHER ACCIDENT, SUICIDE, OR HOMICIDE		
12. MAIDEN NAME <u>Mary Fields</u>	13. BIRTHPLACE (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Moody Texas</u>	DATE OF OCCURRENCE		
14. SIGNATURE <u>Angilena Johnson</u>	15. PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>Sloneville Cemetery</u> TEXAS	PLACE OF OCCURRENCE		
16. SIGNATURE <u>L. H. Glenn</u>	17. DATE <u>Sept 20 1945</u>	MANNER OR MEANS IF RELATED TO OCCUPATION OF DECEASED, SPECIFY		
18. ADDRESS <u>1081 Brady St Beaumont</u> TEXAS	19. SIGNATURE OF LOCAL REGISTRAR <u>R. C. Bunkagen</u>	SIGNATURE <u>Robert</u> M.D. COR		
20. FILE NUMBER <u>557</u>	21. FILE DATE <u>Sept 21 1945</u>	POSTOFFICE ADDRESS <u>Beaumont</u> TEXAS		

NOTE THE INFORMATION CALLED FOR ON THE REVERSE SIDE

K253794



This is a true and correct reproduction of the original record as recorded in this office. Issued under authority of Section 191.051, Health and Safety Code.

ISSUED MAY 20 2009

Debra F. Owens
 DEBRA F. OWENS
 STATE REGISTRAR



Bye And Bye I'm Goin' To See The King

Legacy

In 2003 Jack White of The White Stripes is quoted telling a sold-out audience, “It’s good to be in Texas, the home of Blind Willie Johnson.”²¹

Blind Willie’s influence reached Jack, it also reached Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, Ralph Stanley, Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead, and Beck to name a few of the newer musicians. In fact, Blind Willie Johnson’s “Dark Was The Night, (Cold Was The Ground)” struck such a chord with Carl Sagan that he had it put on the record along-side Beethoven and Bach on the “Golden Record” that was launched on with the Voyager I probe on September 5, 1977.

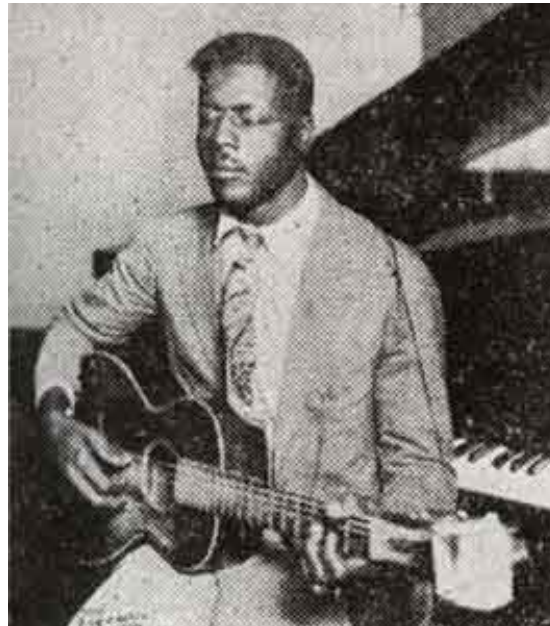


The Sounds of Earth was placed on the Voyager 1²²

Praise God I'm Satisfied

Closure

Blind Willie Johnson's life may have become a mystery, shrouded by confusion, left as a missing piece of history, but he left behind an awe-inspiring legacy. His unique and innovative style led the way for future musicians to follow. Through his music he showed how blues and gospel fit together and compliment each other. Although he may have passed from this world, we can rest assured that his legacy will carry on, somewhere out there with the Voyager I spacecraft.



Hutchison, 2011-2020

Extras

Song recording Discography

Lyrics to the Song that got me into Blind Willie Johnson

Bibliography

Blind Willie Johnson Recording History ²³

Song	Date	Label
I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole	12/3/27	14276D
Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed	12/3/27	14276D
It's Nobody's Fault But Mine	12/3/27	14303D
Dark Was The Night (Cold Was The Ground)	12/3/27	14303D
If I Had My Way I'd Tear The Building Down	12/3/27	14343D
Mother's Children Have A Hard Time	12/3/27	14343D
Jesus Is Coming Soon	12/5/28	14391D
I'm Gonna Run To The City Of Refuge	12/5/28	14391D
Lord I Just Can't Keep From Crying	12/5/28	14425D
Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning	12/5/28	14425D
Let Your Light Shine On Me	12/10/29	14490D
God Don't Never Change	12/10/29	14490D
Bye And Bye I'm Goin To See The King	12/10/29	14504D
You'll Need Somebody On Your Bond	12/11/29	14504D
God Moves On The Water	12/11/29	14520D

Song	Date	Label
Take Your Burden To The Lord	12/11/29	14520D
You're Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond	4/20/30	14530D
John The Revelator	4/20/30	14530D
My Trouble Will Soon Be Over	4/20/30	14537D
The Rain Don't Fall On Me	4/20/30	14537D
Praise God I'm Satisfied	12/11/29	14545D
When The War Was On	12/11/29	14545D
Can't Nobody Hide From God	4/20/30	14556D
If It Had Not Been For Jesus	4/20/30	14556D
I'm Fully Saved Today	4/20/30	14582D
The Soul Of A Man	4/20/30	14582D
Go With Me To The Land	4/20/30	14597D
Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right	4/20/30	14597D
Sweeter As The Years Roll By	12/10/29	14624D
Take Your Stand	12/11/29	14624D

Trouble Will Soon Be Over
By: Blind Willie Johnson

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

Well Christ is my burden bearer,
He's my only friend,
Tell me the end of my sorrow,
And tell me to lean on him,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

God is my strong protection,
He's my bosom friend,
(If) trouble rose all around me,
I know who'll take me in,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

He proved a friend to David,
And hid him in a cave,
That same God that David,
Would give me rest some day,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

Ahhh - Though my burden may be heavy,
I wont let it crush me down,
Some day I'll rest with Jesus,
And wear a starry crown,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

I'll take this yoke upon me,
And live a Christian life,
Take Jesus for my savior,
My burden will be light,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end,

He proved a friend to David,
And hid him in a cave,
That same God that David (.....),
Would give me rest some day,

Oh, trouble will soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end,
Trouble will soon be over,
OH, Sorrow will have an end.

(Transcribed by Richard Hutchison, 2011)

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Why Blind Willie Johnson

I find myself drawn to subtle gems, things that most would overlook. Robert Johnson, Big Mama Thornton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, these are names you might be more familiar with. However, the brief bit about Blind Willie Johnson in Nothing but the Blues by Lawrence Cohn caught my attention.

Pairing this fascination with the overlooked, unknown, and or underdog with my love for double entendres and multiple meanings through satire or other means and Blind Willie Johnson is a perfect match. How could such a humble, struggling man play God's music (gospel) and make it still sound like the Devil's music (blues)? How could he sing songs that hit both religiously and politically?

Our world loves the sensational, loves those who sell themselves or are fortunate enough to be marketed and sold by others, and often times the true talent is overlooked. However, history has a way of coming back around and reminding us of the true geniuses of their day. The thing that frustrates me the most is that they don't get to appreciate that during their life. Nikola Tesla, Blind Willie Johnson, Hedy Lamarr, these are just 3 such heroes who spent their life struggling only to be appreciated posthumously.

So, remember these people with me and heed the words of Johnson:

Everybody Ought To Teach A Stranger Right

After: A Work in Progress

Repairing history will Always be a work in progress, but we can do our best. This “Children’s Book” was written by Richard Stephen Hutchison for Music 7E History of the Blues with Janis Stevenson and Mike Sult on 2011/03/25.

This book and bibliography are a work in progress.

If a graphic in here is your property, please contact me at rich@blindwilliejohnson.org if you would like it removed or if you would like to say hi.

Blind Willie Johnson, like many of the African American blues and gospel singers of the day, was taken advantage of by the recording companies and paid a measly sum for songs that have become his legacy. The LEAST we can do is honor him and fix history.

The views expressed in here are my own. I am no expert in the history of the Blues or Gospel, but I hope that my effort brings more attention to a Great historical figure. There are other books about Blind Willie Johnson, but I feel that he still does not have the credit and attention deserved, he was a humble genius.