The Road to Fame

Early Life and Influences
Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Copiah County, Mississippi on May 8, 1911, to Julia Dodds and Noah Johnson. Around 1918 they landed in the cotton-growing community of Robinsonville, Mississippi, about thirty miles south of Memphis.

As a teenager, Johnson became interested in music and began playing the harmonica. Later he sought out older musicians who could teach him the rudiments of guitar. Against his family’s wishes, he followed local musicians Willie Brown, Son House and Charley Patton to parties, fish fries, and juke joints around Robinsonville.

Brown, House, and Patton would often belittle Johnson’s inferior musical skills. More importantly, Johnson’s musical abilities blossomed under Zimermon’s tutelage, and he incorporated much of Ike’s music and style into his own. When Johnson returned to Robinsonville, Son House and Willie Brown were astounded at the artistic development of his music.

Over the next several years, as he performed at juke joints throughout the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, Johnson’s popularity spread to western Tennessee and southern Mississippi.

Increased Popularity
In the early 1930s, Johnson left Robinsonville to return to Hazlehurst, where he met Ike Zimermon, who became his musical coach and mentor.

Recording Sessions
In November 1936, the American Record Company took Johnson to San Antonio, Texas, to record some of his songs. This session produced his most famous song, “Terraplane Blues.” The next June he was called back to Texas where he recorded the masterpiece “Hell Hound On My Trail.” A total of twenty-nine compositions were recorded in five sessions. The Vocalion label released twelve of Johnson’s songs. Below are those compositions in the order they were recorded:

- Shrimp Cross Road Blues
- Cross Road Blues
- Milky Way Blues
- Meat Ball Blues
- Ancestor Blues
- Breakin’ Blues
- See That My Baby Learns
- I’m Crying Blues
- Cross Road Blues
- Milk Cow’s Calf Blues
- Company Man
- High Tail It

In July 1938, Johnson arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi, to perform at a juke joint at the intersection of Highways 82 and 49C. The juke joint was referred to by locals as “Three Forks.” Johnson’s ongoing affair with the wife of the man who ran the juke joint proved to be his undoing. It is alleged that Johnson accepted a drink that was sent to him, and he soon became ill and was no longer able to perform.

Early the next morning he was transported to his room in the Baptist Town section of Greenwood. There Johnson lingered for a number of weeks before being moved to a tenant’s home on the Star of the West Plantation. Johnson succumbed on Tuesday, August 16, 1938. He was twenty-seven years old.

Three Gravesites
Over the years, three gravesites have been identified for the bluesman. The most likely one, supported by an eye-witness account, is the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery about two miles north of Greenwood. According to witness Rose Eskridge, Johnson was buried in a simple pine box provided by LeFlore County Historian Stephen LaVeere erected a marker there in 2002.

A Date with Destiny

Originally located in 1973, Mount Zion M.B. Church Cemetery near Morgan City is the site of the second effort to honor Robert Johnson. A one-ton obelisk was placed here in 1991 by Columbia Records.

Payne Chapel M.B. Church at Quitie is Johnson’s first grave marker, placed in 1990 by an Atlanta rock band.

After years of uncertainty, Robert Johnson’s final resting place at Little Zion M.B. Church in Leflore County was determined by interviews with burial eyewitness Rose Eskridge.

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Robert Johnson entered a small room or "crib" off Young Street in Baptist Town in the summers of 1937 and 1938. Baptist Town was a safe haven for bluesmen and was named after the large wooden McKinney M.B. Church that still stands today.

Bluesman Tommy McClellan's Home was the hub of activity for local musicians during the summers of 1937 and 1938. The circle of friends included Robert Johnson, Honeyboy Edwards, Howlin' Dog Taylor and Robert Petway. The original house is gone. Having been replaced by a newer structure.

Dixie Theater opened around 1910. It originally seated 800 patrons, and its new name, the Dixie Theater, came from that of a blackface minstrel show charity benefit in 1910. The building still has the sloped floor and bolts from the original cinema seating. Johnson and his lady friend attended movies at this segregated theater in 1938.

Baptist Town was a safe haven for bluesmen and was named after the large wooden McKinney M.B. Church in the summers of 1937 and 1938. It was here that Johnson first composed some of his blues songs.

"A little past noontime, a 'jake-leg' preacher said some words over his body and we committed his soul to the earth."

– Rose Eskridge on the burial of Robert Johnson