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ESSAY

The Ancestors of Pop

By ERIC WEISBARD

The image of the bluesman Robert Johnson standing at a crossroads in the Mississippi Delta, selling his soul to play guitar as though he had invented the instrument, has long epitomized the romance of American music. In some accounts, this is the magic moment that gave rock its roots, as the blues traveled north to Chicago, went electric, then reached England, where the Rolling Stones would cover Johnson's "Love in Vain."

Johnson's recordings sound as great as ever. But blues mythologists may need to calm down. In the past few years, with the recovery of vintage recordings and an explosion in scholarship, a less starry-eyed picture has begun to emerge. A new wave of historians are rejecting the narrow sanctity of traditional popular music categories and following threads of sound and style wherever they lead, over decades if not centuries.

Elijah Wald's ESCAPING THE DELTA: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues (Amistad, $24.95) is a gentle wake-up call, and by far the best of the three books on the Johnson myth published this year. The author, a longtime folk guitarist and journalist, grew up on the myth, but couldn't help noticing when he went to the South that few African-Americans actually knew who Johnson was. The performers remembered from the 1920's and 1930's were the ones who'd been on radio, including the blues queens and such hitmakers as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson. For that matter, Robert Johnson himself, when Wald analyzed his recordings, was at least as concerned to quote and rework the jukebox hits of his day as to up the ante on weirder characters like Skip James.

So Wald tells the blues story a different way. In his narrative, blues emerges as a variant of show business: performers worked different circuits, from vaudeville to tent shows, stealing moves and sounds to make sure that audiences got what they wanted to hear. Urban professional and rural folk sounds fed on each other in ways that can never be fully parsed. It was a tradition of mimicry that owed everything to blackface minstrelsy, the stage custom in which whites (and ultimately blacks too) "tarred up" to become somebody else. Blackface inculcated horrific racial attitudes. But it also made African-American music, outrageous style and a deep interest in the unfamiliar pivotal to popular culture in the United States.

Robert Johnson recorded in the late 1930's, just as a coterie of white jazz critics, record collectors, folk fans and eventually Beats began re-examining the blues tradition. In doing so, Wald says, they favored obscure musicians over popular ones: "The more records an artist had sold in 1928, the less he or she was valued in 1958." Johnson's records were reissued in 1961, on an album called "King of the Delta Blues Singers." The goal was admirable: to give black culture a chance to be taken seriously. Yet the project was nostalgic, backward-looking and disconnected from black communal taste. It was a museum version, and the folkies and their rock inheritors were perpetuating a mythology almost as dysfunctional, in different ways, as minstrelsy had been.

But what if the mythical originator of American popular music was a different Johnson, from a much

earlier time? George Washington Johnson was born into slavery around 1846, moved to New York in the 1870's and became a street performer. His songs "The Whistling Coon" and "The Laughing Song," both essentially minstrel pieces, were the biggest hits of the 1890's record industry. Technology didn't allow for duplicating Edison cylinders at that point, so Johnson, with a pianist backing him, would ultimately sing each of his songs thousands and thousands of times, at about 20 cents a shot: an estimated 25,000 copies were in print by 1894 alone. "I heard some people say / Here comes the dandy darkey, here he comes this way," go Johnson's lyrics to "The Laughing Song." "And when I heard them say it, why I'd laugh until I'd cry." And laugh he does. Listening to George Washington Johnson laugh is far scarier to contemplate than hearing Robert Johnson sing about hellhounds on his trail.

Tim Brooks tells Johnson's story in full for the first time in his mammoth LOST SOUNDS: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919 (University of Illinois Press, $65), which recounts in an act of cultural reclamation the careers of 35 African-American performers with extant or at least verifiable commercial recordings before 1919. Many of the musicians have stories as surreal as Johnson's: Polk Miller, a white plantation owner's son and defender of slavery, who nonetheless risked censure to record with a black quartet; Charley Case, said after his death to have been passing for white all along, whose song "A Warning to Boys" was later recorded by the Weavers; Wilbur Sweatman, a jazz pioneer but also a vaudevillean known for playing three clarinets at once.

Included as well are the great lost heroes of black performance. James Reese Europe led a big band that might have become jazz's first had he not been stabbed to death in 1919. Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion, left behind little-known recordings that describe his fights and that apparently reveal a persona far different from the menacing figure bestowed upon him by the white media. Above all, there is Bert Williams, the comedian-singer originally in the team Williams and Walker, whose popularity sustained the early Columbia Records label.

That figures of such historic importance require excavation is mind-boggling. Yet it was only this summer that a three-volume collection of Williams's work was finally completed -- and it was released not by Columbia but by a tiny Illinois label, Archeophone Records, staffed by two people. (Archeophone also has the only available recordings of George Washington Johnson.) As for James Reese Europe, Brooks writes: "Symptomatic of the uncertainty surrounding these recordings," the two reissued CD's "sound quite different because the producers made wildly different assumptions about the correct speed at which the original discs should be played!"

As the sifting through the past continues, we'll also need to recognize that the story of "roots" music, in all its diasporic glory, truly spans multiple continents. For Ned Sublette, the author of CUBA AND ITS MUSIC: From the First Drums to the Mambo (Chicago Review Press, $36), the Robert Johnson figure might be Ziryab, a lutist and poet who is said to have traveled from Baghdad to Cordoba, Spain, in A.D. 822, revolutionizing music everywhere in between. He reportedly added a fifth string to the lute, popularized new dress and hair styles and had a prodigious affection for wine. In other words, he was the first guitar hero.

Sublette travels back this far so he can make the case for Cuban music as the "other great tradition" in the New World. Translating numerous Spanish-language accounts to synthesize a still embryonic field, he's in many ways a mythmaker of the old school, but the stories he recounts have newness, and he tells them with a rocker's sense of what matters -- even when his topic is zarabanda, a 16th-century pop sensation. He describes, too, the ways in which New Orleans is modeled on Havana, itself modeled on Seville; the satiric songs called guarachas that were Cuba's version of minstrelsy; the "tango age" that preceded the jazz age; Afro-Cuban jazz and the mambos that coexisted with early rhythm and blues. And always, of the renegade status of the drum, banned by slave owners and bureaucrats, including Desi Arnaz Jr.'s father, until well into the 20th century, then launched into global consciousness with the conga craze. It was Cuba that turned the beat around, and thanks to Sublette any serious music fan will now know why.

So many new streams to incorporate into one river of song: the mind starts to reel. Rock 'n' roll wasn't necessarily the earthquake so many thought; more the resumption of a centuries-old process of entertainers and the entertained muddying every attempt to codify behavior or sound. And the way to tell this story isn't to isolate genres or to look for moments of purity. It's to recognize that the hybrids, the mergers of the corrupt and the sublime, are the story. This may be a harder tale to teach in schools: all three of these books were produced by enthusiasts rather than traditional academics. Robert Johnson's photo will continue to hang on dorm room walls. But as the best musicians have always insisted, the key is to listen beyond categories.

Eric Weisbard is the editor of ''This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project.''

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