

Dark Was the Night: The Legacy of Blind Willie Johnson

We look back at the blind Texas bluesman's profound influence.

February 26, 2016 by [Ryan Pinkard](#)



If you really want to hear the blues, boiled down to its absolute essence, listen to Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground."

Sluggish, raw and covered in static, the 1927 recording opens with Blind Willie bending and plucking the strings on his self-taught bottleneck slide guitar. Then, based on the one known photograph of Johnson alone, you can picture the blind bluesman leaning back in his chair, not singing but rather moaning, groaning and humming in response to his instrument with painful intensity. Even without words, the three-minute track articulates a lifetime of suffering and sadness.

"Dark Was the Night" is a song that can move mountains, and has inspired nearly every blues and rock artist since. Jack White called it "the greatest example of slide guitar ever recorded." Ry Cooder described it as "the most soulful, transcendent piece in all American music."

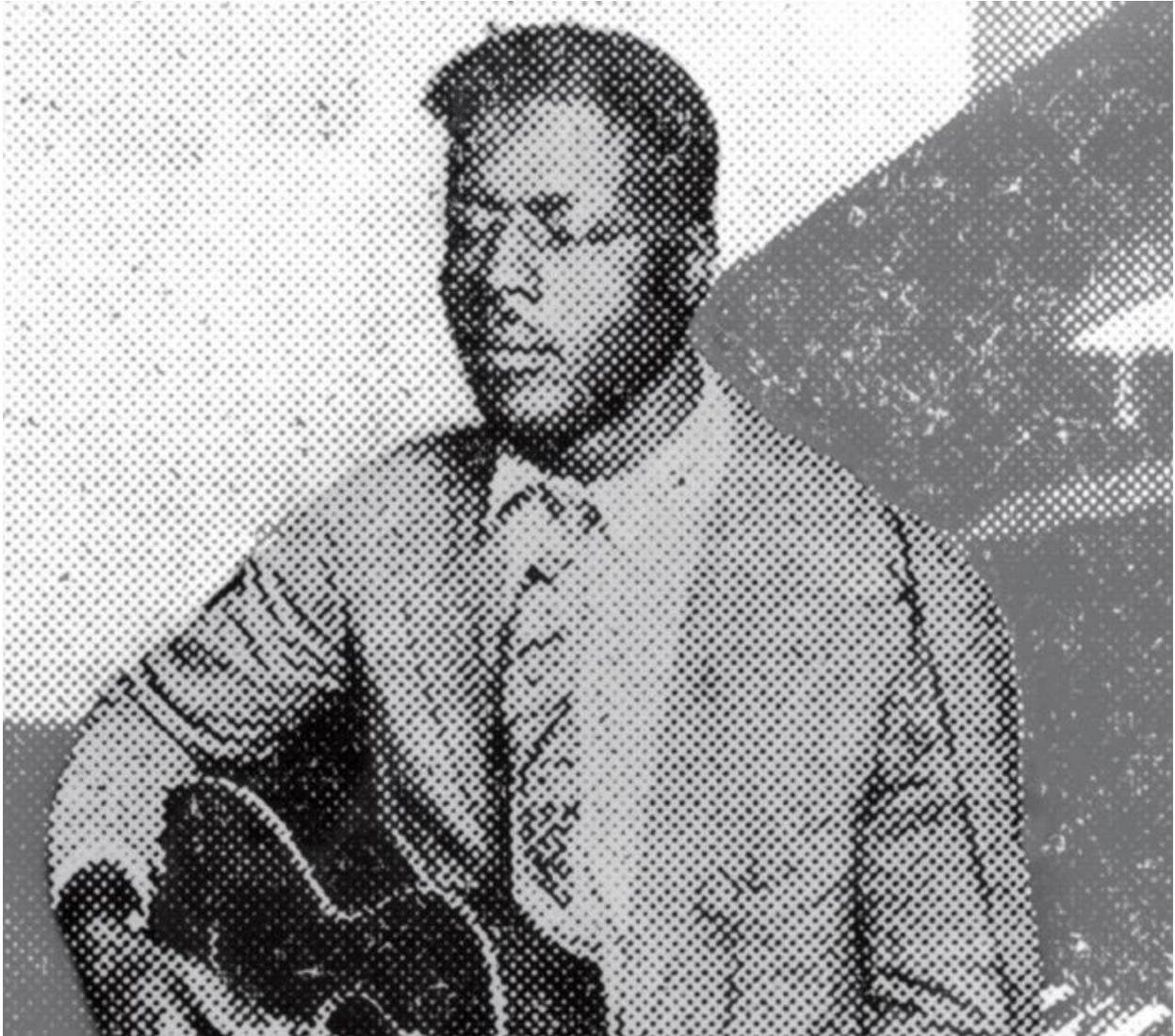
It's a morsel of music heritage so precious and momentous and true, it was even picked by Carl Sagan as one of 27 music samples included on the Voyager Golden Record, which NASA launched into space in 1977 to represent humanity on Earth. If some intelligent life form ever comes across that album, they too are going to understand the same truth embodied by the blues: that along with all the beauty and brightness of the human experience, there also exists a darkness as inescapable as the night.

Only so much is known about Blind Willie Johnson, but what is certain is that he *lived* the blues in every sense.

Born near Temple, Texas in 1897, young Willie Johnson decided to become a preacher at age 5, around the same time his mother died and he made his first guitar out of a cigar box. It is alleged that he was blinded at age 7, when his stepmother spitefully threw lye in his eyes after his father had beaten her for going out with another man, although this is unconfirmed.

As a lifelong musician and man of the cloth, Johnson was poor his entire life. Growing up his father would leave him on street corners to sing for money. He is known to have preached and played music in numerous towns and cities across the state of Texas, ultimately settling in Beaumont, where he operated a House of Prayer as Rev. W. J. Johnson.

In summer 1945 a fire burned his house to the ground. With nowhere to go, Johnson lived and slept in the ruins until he contracted malarial fever and died on September 18. His second wife Angeline said that the hospital refused to treat him because he was blind, while other sources say it was because he was black.



Blind Willie Johnson left behind a mere 29 songs to his name, recorded for Columbia over five sessions between 1927 and 1930, but he made them count.

Powerfully rooted in his faith, Johnson's blues music is deeply intertwined in the Gospel. The sparse, unpolished nature of his self-taught guitar style acts as bare rhythmic base for his spirited, gravelly voice to deliver allegorical and existential lyrics like:

*Well won't somebody tell me
Answer if you can
I want somebody to tell me
Just what is the soul of a man?*

Along with “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” just about all of his songs have been recorded or reinterpreted in the almost-90 years since, putting Blind Willie’s profound influence on par with that of Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton.

Songs like “Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed,” “It’s Nobody’s Fault but Mine,” “John the Revelator,” “You’ll Need Somebody on Your Bond,” “Motherless Children” and “Soul of a Man” have become keystone texts for the early evolution of blues, and the later development of rock and roll and all forms of American roots music.

The list of artists who have taken on Johnson’s repertoire is uncountably long, but includes Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, Nick Cave, Eric Clapton, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Ashely Cleveland, Incredible String Band, Captain Beefheart, Willie Nelson, John Fahey, the White Stripes, Andrew Bird and Gillian Welch – to name a few.

And the list keeps growing, most recently with the album, *God Don’t Ever Change: The Songs of Blind Willie Johnson*. The brand new tribute includes two songs each by Tom Waits and Lucinda Williams, as well as contributions from the likes of Sinead O’Connor, the Blind Boys of Alabama & Jason Isbell, Derek Trucks & Susan Tedeschi, Rickie Lee Jones, Maria McKee, Luther Dickenson and the Cowboy Junkies.