

# Arts & Culture

## The real king of Delta blues—Tommy Johnson

"He said the reason he knowed so much, said he sold hisself to the devil. I asked him how. He said, 'If you want to learn how to play anything you want to play and learn how to make songs yourself, you take your guitar and you go to where a road crosses that way, where a crossroad is. Get there, be sure to get there just a little 'for twelve o'clock that night so you'll know you'll be there. You have your guitar and be playing a piece sitting there by yourself. You have to go by yourself and be sitting there playing a piece. A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned how to play anything I want.' And he could. He used to play anything, don't care what it was. Church song. You could sing any kind of tangled up song you want to, and I'll bet you he would play it."—the Rev. LeDell

Johnson

By Strings

**CRYSTAL SPRINGS, Miss.**—So, you think you know your blues lore back and forth and heard the above story a thousand times. And, you've seen the Coen brothers film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" featuring Chris Thomas King as a wandering blues musician named Tommy Johnson who recites that same story. Of course, you can't help but guess this famous tale of a blues guitarist selling his soul to the devil is about the legendary Robert Johnson, belatedly called the "King of the Delta Blues." Well, if you guessed all that, you'd be wrong.

In fact, the above quote, taken from a brilliant and telling book by David Evans, is the Rev. LeDell Johnson talking about his brother Tommy Johnson. And, the character in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" really is modeled after Tommy Johnson—not Robert. In

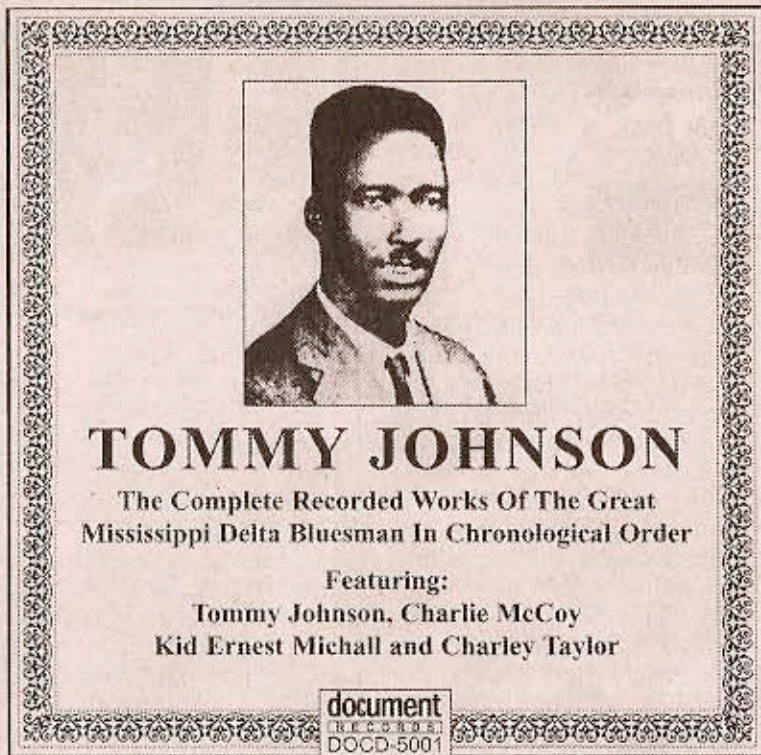
what many blues aficionados a huge miscarriage of historical injustice, the powers-that-be in the country's early recording industry appropriated Tommy Johnson's legacy and used it to market Robert Johnson for a number of reasons. But, people in the know, such as acclaimed blues musician Bonnie Raitt and members of the '60s boogie band Canned Heat, know the truth. Fortunately, a dedicated group of folks, including relatives of Tommy Johnson have made a concerted effort to set the record straight and tell others the truth.

Just a few facts:

First, Tommy Johnson, born in around 1896 in Terry, Miss., was definitely a forerunner of the other Johnson the history books seem to mention more. Tommy Johnson had finished his formal recording career nearly a decade before Robert stepped in front of microphone. Tommy Johnson made a series of beautiful and influential recordings for the Victor and Paramount labels from 1928 to 1929. One of the Victor recordings was "Canned Heat Blues," the said tale of the joys and dangers of drinking sterno, a staple of the poor during prohibition. And, yes, that's where the band got the name. By comparison, the other Johnson didn't record until 1936. (Tommy Johnson's complete "official" recordings are available as "Tommy Johnson: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order 1928-1929," Document Records DOCD-5001.)

Second, even a cursory listen will tell you that Tommy Johnson had perfected the haunting vocal style of mixing straight vocals with strategically placed wailing falsetto to produce a spine-tingling, emotional effect on listeners—again, long before the other Johnson thought about recording, although the latter often is cited for that innovation to the style.

Third, according to family sources and other musicians who survived late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century,



Tommy Johnson was part of a group of musicians who worked together and exchanged ideas. That group included Charlie Patton and Willie Brown—two men considered to be prototypes and mentors of Robert Johnson. Again, Tommy Johnson was there long before. In fact, it's more likely that he honed his skills playing with those two legends rather than having got them through some supernatural means. Tommy had met the men after running away from home and spending two years away in places such as Rolling Fork, Miss., and Boyle, Miss., before returning to Crystal Springs, Miss., where the family was living in 1914.

LeDell said Tommy taught him the style of music he had learned while away and eventually introduced him to Patton and Brown. It was then that he recognized his brother had learned a lot of his music from then as well as having developed an individual style of his own, which included some smooth, innovative guitar playing, with hints

of early jazz, that many consider more sophisticated than his more famous antecedent.

Four, a reading of Evan's well-researched book, which consists primarily of first hand accounts from family members, including brothers LeDell and Mager (pronounced "Major") Johnson, who both were incredibly fine players, and numerous musicians Tommy taught give credence to Evans' assertion that:

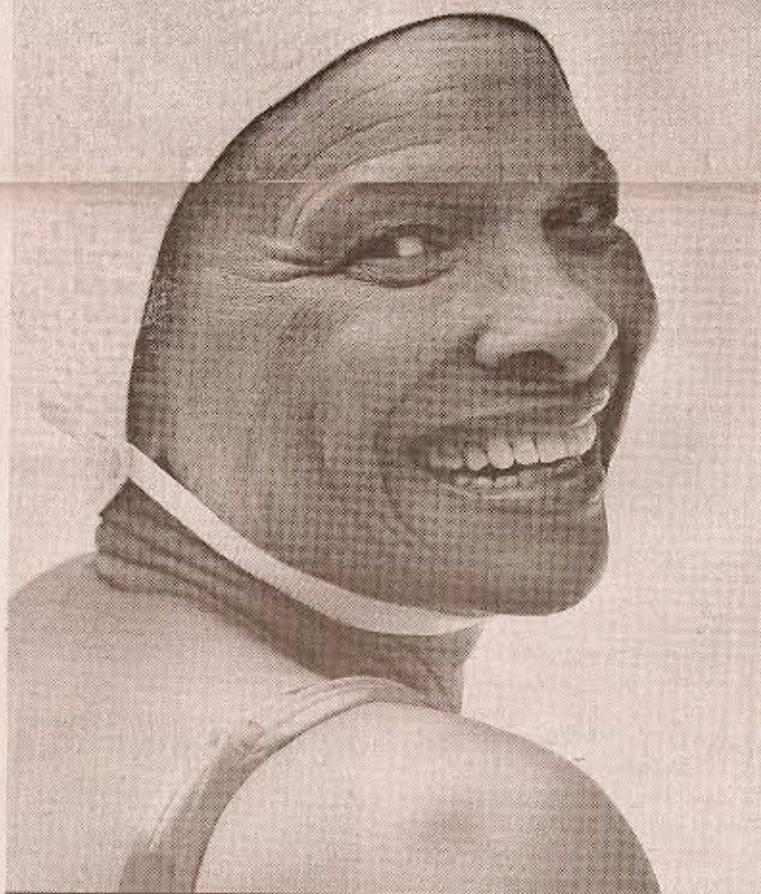
"For about thirty years Tommy Johnson was perhaps the most important and influential blues singer in the state of Mississippi. He was one of the few black musician to whom the epithet 'legendary' rightfully applies...."

Famed rock and blues musician the late Cub Koda of Brownsville Station and who later replaced the great Hound Dog Taylor in the seminal House Rockers, writing for All Music Guide put it this way:

"Next to Son House and Charley Patton, no one was more important to the development of pre-Robert (See "King of Delta blues," p. 7)

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Photo courtesy of Vera Johnson Collins

Vera Johnson (center), president and founder of the Tommy Johnson Blues Foundation and Rosie Taylor Martin, foundation treasurer (left), accept the Mississippi Hall of Fame Award in December 2008 from Peggy Brown, president of the Hall of Fame.



# Arts & Culture

## King of Delta blues

(Continued from page 6)  
*Johnson Delta blues than Tommy Johnson....*

So, why is it in this day and age that so much credit for Tommy Johnson's work has been given to others? Johnson's niece, Vera Johnson Collins, has a number of ideas. According to Collins, daughter of Tommy's brother Mager, money and politics had a lot to do with what happened to her uncle's legacy.

"I think what happened with Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson, is they got little pieces of the story and they didn't read that much about Tommy Johnson," said Collins.

Tommy's story about selling his soul to the devil and the truth of his traveling made a good story for marketing purposes. But, even though he officially stopped recording in 1929, Tommy, who didn't die until 1956, was still around, along with his relatives, where as Robert Johnson, who died in 1938, just two years after his recording debut, appeared to have no heirs (though one son Claude did surface later) and it was easier for record companies to push his music and exploit him after his death, explained Collins. And, she said, they used her Uncle Tommy's accomplishments and stories to market Robert Johnson's music.

"They took Tommy's story and knew that they could take that story and make Robert huge and they ran with it," she said. "And they had to keep on telling that lie because they had no one else to challenge them."

Fortunately, Tommy Johnson, had hundreds of family members and friends in Mississippi, who knew the truth, among them, Collins' dad Mager, who by all accounts was just as good, and maybe in some ways a stronger musician than his brother Tommy. She said her dad and her uncles LeDell and Clarence were all family men, so they weren't able to travel and roam like her Uncle Tommy to find work and fame as a full-time musician.

"My dad 'n' them was bad. They were so bad they were registered in the war (World War II) and white folks wouldn't let them go because that was their entertainment. If that had gone to the Army and played those guitars, they would have been famous all over the world," said Collins.

In fact, said Collins, the whole family was imbued with remarkable musical talent. Of the 13 children born to Idell and Mary Ella Johnson, sons Tommy, Mager, LeDell,

Clarence and George and daughters Idella, Pearl and Viola all played some. And, the family had a long musical pedigree. They were related to the famous bluesman Lonnie Johnson on their dad's side, but also to the famed Wilson family on their mother's side, which boasted 16 children, nearly all, except Mary Ella herself played.

Collins said those skills really went back to Africa.

"Granddaddy was a black French African off the northern coast of Africa. Grandma was a white African, Caucasian," said Collins. "If you listen to Uncle Tommy's music, you can hear it in the playing. You can hear it in the singing. You don't know anybody who could go from that howl to a low baritone. That comes from across the sea. My daddy could sing like that."

In 2005, Collins started the non-profit Tommy Johnson Blues Foundation in Crystal Springs to ensure that her uncle's legacy is not lost and that his story is spread throughout the world so that history can be corrected. The foundation already has undertaken a number of projects including organizing an annual blues festival in Tommy's honor and conducting a successful campaign to have his gravesite at a nearby church cemetery declared a historically significant site by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

In October of 2001 a headstone was provided for Tommy Johnson's grave by the Mount Zion Memorial Fund, thanks in part to contributions from musicians like Bonnie Raitt, a non-profit group that helps to restore the gravesites of Mississippi musicians. Unfortunately, a controversy over road access to the cemetery has prevented the Tommy Johnson Blues Foundation from placing the marker at the grave. The gravestone is kept at the Crystal Springs Public Library until access to the cemetery is reopened. Collins likened the problem to the general problem of getting Tommy Johnson's legacy restored to its rightful place.

"There's a lot of politicking in it, just like what they've done with the cemetery issue. It shouldn't be taking ten years to get the marker at the grave," said Collins.

Meanwhile, she said she's determined to spread the word about Tommy Johnson's impact on the music world.

"There's a lot of people that do know but he hasn't gotten is due. He should be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.... he should have gotten a Grammy because if it wasn't for

him there wouldn't be any blues. He hasn't gotten his due when it comes to our traditional country blues and blues as a whole," said Collins. "It's like they wanted to keep Tommy Johnson hid because they didn't want him exposed because he's been dead over 50 years."

"These people have tried to steal everything that my uncle had. They came to Crystal Springs and recorded Howlin' Wolf—Chester Burnett. But that sound that he got, they got from Uncle Tommy. My daddy said that sound that they got on that record, they got from Uncle Tommy. I went to the West Point [Mississippi] Howlin' Wolf Museum and talked to the man there. He said, 'Everybody knows your Uncle Tommy was a great influence on Chester Burnett.'"

Collins said others, such as John Lee Hooker, Bessie Smith, Little Milton, and Memphis Minnie were exposed to her uncle's music early on.

"All those people used to be in Crystal Springs," she said.

As for the character that models his life in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Collins said she was happy to see that—especially since the producers acknowledge that it is Tommy Johnson, not the other Johnson, who served as the character's model.

"I was delighted in that, because that let me know that some people are reading and some people are aware and that movie brought that out," she said. "Chris Thomas King did a wonderful job acting as Tommy Johnson. They couldn't



Mager Johnson, brother of Tommy Johnson and father of Vera Johnson Collins, founder of the Tommy Johnson Blues Foundation.

have picked a better person.

"I'm thinking about how he was at the crossroads and I'm thinking about how my dad said he almost got lynched by the KKK and I said, 'Dang they must have done some research.'"

For more information about

Tommy Johnson, try to find a copy of David Evans' excellent book "Tommy Johnson," pick up the Document Records recordings and visit The Tommy Johnson Blues Foundations' website at [www.tommyjohnsonblues.com](http://www.tommyjohnsonblues.com). Or call (601) 685-4751 or (601) 212-6088.



## Celebrate Diversity in the Arts at Fort Wayne's Global Village on Stage

Sunday, February 28, from 3 to 4:30 P.M.

University of Saint Francis North Campus Auditorium, 2702 Spring Street

Experience the many cultures embodied by Fort Wayne at this unique and entertaining event featuring the Fort Wayne Maennerchor and the Mon Community Dancers.

The Mon Dancers were founded in 1993 to restore, maintain and promote Mon traditional dances in Fort Wayne. Twelve types of Mon Dance will be performed by the group followed by a solo dance.

Dedicated to the preservation and cultivation of the German heritage of Fort Wayne as expressed in choral music, the Fort Wayne Maennerchor/Damenchor has been in existence for 139 years. The original members were German immigrants; now most members are second or third generation immigrants, or others just interested in participating in the German culture. Admission is free. Call 260-399-7700, ext. 8001 for more information.

This program is made possible in part by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne.

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Roosevelt Holtz, one of the many musicians Johnson taught and influenced.