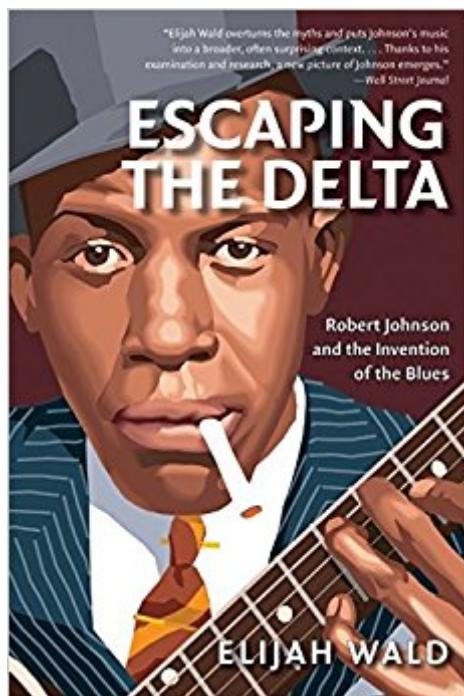


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# Escaping The Delta: Robert Johnson And The Invention Of The Blues



## **Synopsis**

The life of blues legend Robert Johnson becomes the centerpiece for this innovative look at what many consider to be America's deepest and most influential music genre. Pivotal are the questions surrounding why Johnson was ignored by the core black audience of his time yet now celebrated as the greatest figure in blues history. Trying to separate myth from reality, biographer Elijah Wald studies the blues from the inside -- not only examining recordings but also the recollections of the musicians themselves, the African-American press, as well as examining original research. What emerges is a new appreciation for the blues and the movement of its artists from the shadows of the 1930s Mississippi Delta to the mainstream venues frequented by today's loyal blues fans.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this combination history of blues music and biography of Robert Johnson, Wald, a blues musician himself (and author of *Narcorrido*), explores Johnson's rise from a little known guitarist who died in 1938 to one of the most influential artists in rock and roll. From the blues' meager beginning in the early 1900s to its '30s heyday and its 1960s revival, Wald gives a revisionist history of the music, which he feels, in many instances, has been mislabeled and misjudged. Though his writing sometimes reads like a textbook, and he occasionally gets bogged down in arcane musical references, Wald's academic precision aids him in his quest to re-analyze America's perception of the blues as well as in trying to decipher the music's murky true origins and history. Using a lengthy comparison of how white Americans and black Americans define the blues, Wald demonstrates how

Johnson fit into the gray area between the two. Wald combines a short bio of Johnson with detailed analysis of his songs and the mysterious tales that are associated with him, giving a thorough account of Johnson's life, music and legend. The chapter on how white guitarists like Eric Clapton and Keith Richards interpreted who Johnson was and what he played really shows why he is not one of the many forgotten early 20th-century bluesmen. Wald's theories will no doubt cause passionate discussions among true blues aficionados, but the technical and obscure nature of much of his writing will make the book more of a useful reference resource. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As far as aficionados are concerned, Johnson (1911?-38) is the central figure in blues history, whose recordings contributed "Cross Road Blues," "Rambling on My Mind," "Come on in My Kitchen," "Sweet Home Chicago," "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," "Stones in My Passway," "Hellhound on My Trail," and "Love in Vain" to the core blues repertoire. He was the man promoter John Hammond wanted to represent the blues in the epoch-making Carnegie Hall concert "From Spirituals to Swing" but too late, for a jealous husband had killed him (it was said). Subsequently dubbed "mysterious," he certainly had eluded publicity in his lifetime (that Hammond knew of him seems miraculous). Blues fan, scholar, and player Wald contends that Johnson's obscurity wasn't his fault. He wanted stardom and followed a well-blazed trail toward it, copying and borrowing from big hit-makers of the time, not all of them blues singers or black, by any means. He made little impression on the blues audience of his time, which was identical with the black pop-music audience, who considered blues, along with Armstrong and Ellington's jazz, Crosby's crooning, and Gene Autry's cowboy singing, everyday pop music. Wald doesn't treat Johnson directly until the middle of the book, when he invaluablely parses each of his recordings to disclose both borrowings and originalities. The first section describes the musical and social scenes Johnson inhabited, and the last charts how white enthusiasts seized on Johnson as the archetypal bluesman. Throughout, Wald writes better than anyone else ever has about the blues. If you read only one book about blues--maybe ever--read this one. Ray Olson Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sets the scene for Johnson as a musician and not some sort of mythical character who sold his soul to the devil. Paints a contemporary picture of the music at the time. Stunning book. A must for all blues fans. You are left with a sense of intrigue.

Excellent research and background into the Blues. Thank goodness for youtube, so you can have a listen to these artist that you probably never heard before. This is necessary so you can understand the differences between the blues singers. Elijah's love for the blues and the true history and not just the romantic view comes shining through and for that I applaud him. A must read for old school blues lovers and for ones who want to learn the real history of the music. Robert Johnson is only the tip of the iceberg and that's a good thing.

The known facts of Robert Johnson's life have been written up in books and magazines ad nauseum since his recordings were released on LP's by Columbia in the 60's and he was subsequently "rediscovered", but Mr. Wald's perspective is fresh and totally engrossing : placing Robert Johnson's music in perspective with his sources and the trends of that time and place. As a guitarist, I couldn't put it down, and often refer back to it in order to better understand his songs. Excellent in all respects.

There are lots of books on the Delta blues, both Mississippi and Arkansas, which many historians fail to recognize, although my home state has had its share of musical giants and the best blues scene for its time in 1940's West Memphis, with a radio station that boasted Howlin' Wolf and B.B. King, who DJ'd there for a while. This station was even more well known than Memphis, the big brother across the river. Wald has taken on a subject with a refreshing and brutally honest approach, no easy task since, as he points out, the mythology had taken such a hold concerning the old masters that the now predominately white male audience knows more of the tales rather than the accurate picture of the Delta blues era. Since Robert Johnson was the spark that re-ignited interest in the rural Delta blues, thanks to new interest by English bands like the Rolling Stones and later with Eric Clapton, it makes sense to use him as the focal point, although the book covers much more than just Johnson. In this respect, the Rolling Stones deserve more credit than I had previously been willing to give, as they were the first big band to really bring attention to the music they listened to and adored. The history of blues music is actually one that has several elements from New Orleans musicians to the slave era and sharecropper field hollers to vaudeville, where blues were treated like a joke for the most part. Others are fond of the W.C. Handy story of discovering an old man playing what we think was some of the first 12 bar style blues with a slide in 1910 at a railroad station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Actually it was much more than that. Nobody has done as good a job at presenting such a complete and objective view and impact of the music that literally spawned rock and roll and even country music. Without blues, popular music as we know it

simply would have taken on other forms. The blues artists of the days prior to WWII are relegated to the old ramshackle house out on a plantation at a fish fry, and maybe having sold their souls to the Devil in exchange for musical and sexual prowess, the story originating not with Robert Johnson, despite the myth, but with an earlier Johnson, Tommy. Wald's presentation is scholarly, full of love for the subject and raises so many new arguments and views it boggles the mind. He is usually spot on, but this reviewer will disagree that blues have become today's rap and hip hop. In my humble view, I seriously doubt any rapper or hip hop "artist" has the first clue about blues or jazz. The modern African American music has basically become formulaic "R & B", which means any black music where the vocalist actually sings, or rap and hip hop where singing isn't even worth considering, and the music is minimalist to put it nicely. Plus, although blues singers and players got into legal troubles of their own, most were more concerned with art, and trying to make a decent living within the law. Plus, they could play real instruments, some like Lonnie Johnson true virtuosos. Rappers and hip hop performers often glorify drugs, misogyny much worse than the blues days, violence, and unfortunately act on it with rampant gang associations and murders of rival "musicians". It is true Johnson was poisoned, but it was because of a jealous husband, not random gang violence. In order for blues to extend to today's young black audience, it would have to involve some class, musical talent and respect for some semblance of civil behavior. Otherwise, "Escaping the Delta" is the best book on blues I've read, and is an absolute masterpiece. No self proclaimed lover of blues, be they Delta style or Chicago should be without this book.

Elijah Wald goes way beyond the usual platitudes in this thoughtful and comprehensive look at the social, economic and musical environment that produced Robert Johnson and his contemporaries. An excellent read for anyone interested in historical or contemporary blues.

Wald's book will be of interest to any student of blues or American music history, even if you skip the detailed analysis of Robt. Johnson's recordings.

This book is relevant and it arrived on time. The book is in usable shape.

excellent bio, well written and informative, easy to read and engaging.

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