

Hades, the Crossroads, and the King of the Mississippi Delta Blues

(PLAY HADESTOWN "ROAD TO HELL") (SLIDE 2)

It's an old song!

It's an old tale from way back when

It's an old song!

And we're gonna sing it again

It's a sad song!

It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy"

On April 17th, 2019, at the Walter Kerr Theatre located on West 48th St. New York City, the legendary Andre Robin DeShields emphatically spoke these words while opening the Broadway production of Hadestown. With lyrics and music written by Analis Mitchell, coupled with direction by Rachel Chavkin the production reimagines the ages old Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It does so with a mesmerizing set resembling a Deep South Depression Era jazz club and an emphatic score that brings together all the soul snatching sounds of blues, gospel, jazz, and folk musical genres. The ability for this show to tie these qualities together is truly a triumph of musical theatre, creating an ambiance that transports the audience into a mythical world foreign to our minds, but not very different from our own experiences.

To complete his epic *Georgics*, the ancient poet Virgil first introduced the classic version of the tale surrounding the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, and their struggles with Hades, the King of the Underworld. Likely published in 29 BCE, it was this myth that first introduced the Greek tragic conclusion. The legend has been retold, rewritten, and reimagined for centuries, but each version surrounds its story with the themes of love, power, and doing anything imaginable for what you covet most. (SLIDE 3)

In Mitchell and Chavkin's version, the production begins inside a macabre jazz club that sits at the head of a railroad line. The world in which this story takes place is one filled with impossible

living conditions of harsh weather and famine. It is a world full of climate-change induced poverty that is a result of the broken marriage between Hades and Persephone, the Goddess of Spring. The once star-crossed lovers have drifted apart. In his pain Hades has begun to disallow Persephone to spend any considerably amount of time up above and with her comes the seasons, Spring, and thus the harvest. Rather, she is now a prisoner of the underworld, or more appropriately called Hadestown.

Hermes, the Herald of the Gods, is our narrator of this tale. The god is played by DeShields, and it was a role that won him the Tony for Best Actor in a Musical. Hermes is also the ward of Orpheus, a young lyre and a son of a muse who had been abandoned to be left in Hermes' care. Orpheus is an emotionally in tune young man who is filled with hope and believes that he can bring an eternal spring to the world, one day, by an epic song. Enter Eurydice, who one day waltzes into the club, emotionally beaten and battered from the tough living conditions that are required of this harsh landscape.

Upon laying his eyes on this rose of winter and being one not to hide his emotions; Orpheus quickly asks for her hand in marriage. She scoffs, believing their impoverished lives is not the environment in which a love can thrive. Then, Orpheus sings an excerpt from the epic song he is writing. The song is so powerful, the young lyre is able to manifest a striking red flower in the palm of his hand. It is a bright spot contrasting the dim and drab world surrounding them. Orpheus' tune is enough to encapsulate Eurydice, thus marking the beginning of their shared love.

In Hadestown, the underworld has the resemblance of more like an Industrial Revolution Era factory in which Hades' workers endure a never-ending labor that produces pollutants destroying the environment above. In his paranoia Hades continues to "build the wall" to keep out the impoverished scum from outside his factory's walls. As previously mentioned, he does not allow Persephone to return to the surface as agreed upon. This causes the two formerly deeply in love gods to argue constantly with no hope of saving their marriage. Infuriated, Hades travels to the railroad head to find someone who will truly appreciate the "comforts" of his underworld.

Meanwhile, on the surface the cold surges on. A desperate Eurydice sets off to find food leaving Orpheus to finish writing his epic. During her journey, on the verge of death, a weak and frail Eurydice meets Hades. He tantalizes her with the "comforts" of the underworld and with her last breath she sells her soul signing a contract to work in the god's factory in return for ever-lasting life. He rewards her with a one-way rail ticket to Hadestown.

Upon hearing of his love's fate, a devastated Orpheus sets off for the underworld at the direction of Hermes. He uses his inspiration to travel there like no man before him, not by train or by death, but by the power of song. After finding Eurydice on the factory floor, Orpheus, is confronted by Hades. He begs for her freedom, but the King of the Underworld will not rescind the contract and threatens to kill Orpheus. In a moment of compassion, Persephone convinces her husband to let the boy attempt to sway him by song. Orpheus begins to sing, his epic tune that will bring eternal spring, and with every note he begins to stir emotions within Hades. He is reminded of the love he used to have as a younger man and soon he finds Persephone in his arms as they dance to Orpheus' ballad.

Conflicted, Hades is willed to let them go. On one hand he knows that if he kills them for attempting to break his eternal contract they will become martyrs to the other workers, but if he lets them go, he will lose control of his captives who will soon revolt for their freedom. In his devilish ways, he decides to give them a chance to leave, but only if Orpheus may prevail in the trial he proposes.

They may leave on one condition. Orpheus must lead them out of Hadestown, but while on his journey back to the surface he cannot turn around to confirm Eurydice is following him. If he does, she will be banished to the underworld for eternity. Orpheus must show a steadfast faith in their love and exhibit the confidence that she will follow him unconditionally. Reluctantly, they accept Hades' deal. Through the grueling journey Orpheus cannot hear or feel Eurydice behind him, and his head begins to fill with doubt. At the moment right before the journey's end, he breaks and turns to see if she is there. As he sets his eyes upon his love, who has followed his every step, she is sent back to Hadestown, a tragedy.

At the 73rd Annual Tony Awards *Hadestown* was nominated for a leading total of fourteen awards, winning eight, including Best Musical and Best Original Score. It also won the Grammy for Best Musical Theatre Album. A few weeks ago, my family and I were fortunate enough to see a national touring production of the musical at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. After the curtain call, I left buzzed reflecting on what I had witnessed. It was an intense tale full of intellectually nuanced well laid out themes that will make you think for few days after the music stops ringing in your ears. I think I was most impressed of the unique way in which the production boldly reimagined an ages old myth. A story that explores the themes of doing anything for what you love most, even if it requires great sacrifices, either noble or in exchange for your integrity. It challenged me to think of other myths, legends, or folktales that portrayed these themes. Due to the southern influences of this musical, I began to think of American folk tales, and at that moment an Athenaeum paper topic buried itself into my thoughts. I was consumed unable to think of anything else worth sharing with you this evening.

In the Fulham Observer, Fabiola Arias wrote, “*Hadestown* tells a story of love, loss, power, and sacrifice. However, behind all the music it’s a story of absence, devotion, and doubt. Analyzing the complicated dynamics of power is a never-ending task. Power hangs over you, shapes you, and controls you.” Those words stuck with me when I began researching the topic of this evenings’ paper. I thought to myself, what would you do for power? If you’re willing to sell your soul, it will shape you, it will hang over you, it will control you..... because we all know the devil gets his due.

To be honest, tonight I will tell you a story that I am not sure how much of it is rooted in truth or is a complete tall tale. My research has led me through meticulous lines of conspiracy theories and facts half universally agreed upon by historians. However, what I do know is that this story is an “old song”, it is a tragedy, and whatever the truth may be it changed the course of musical history forever. Fellow Presenter, Secretary/Treasurer, esteemed Athenaeum members tonight I present to you a Deep South tragedy the story of “*Hades, the Crossroads, and the King of the Mississippi Delta Blues*”.

(SLIDE 4) (SLIDE 5)

It's an old song!
It's an old tale from way back when
It's an old song!
And we're gonna sing it again

On a prominent wall on in Tel Aviv, Israel, a prominent street artist by the name of John Kiss painted a graffiti mural depicting seven members of the fabled "27 Club." This group is named after influential musicians and artists who passed away at the age of twenty-seven, often as a result of drug overdoses, violence, or suicide. Several deaths of 27-year-old artists during the late 60's and early 70's led to the belief that well-known musicians were cursed and more inclined to die at this age. Although music historians and journalists argue whether there is a statistical significance to this idea, the theory has taken hold of the imaginations of fans all over the world.

Kriss' piece includes some of the most prominent members of the 27-Club. Although all these artists do not need any introduction, I will quickly note them. On the far left is Brian Jones, the original founder of the Rolling Stones who drowned in his pool at his home in East Sussex in 1969. Continuing left to right is Jimi Hendrix, legendary guitarist, and singer of the Jimmi Hendrix Experience. A virtuoso guitar talent who played a right-handed guitar upside down and left-handed. I would be remised if I did not mention he was stationed at Ft. Campbell from 1961-1962 and was known to play in neighboring Clarksville. He died of barbiturate-induced asphyxia in 1970. Next, is Janis Joplin, an American singer known for her raspy voice and energetic stage performances. Her rendition of Kris Kristopherson's "Me and Bobby McGee" will go down as one of the greatest American rock performances of all time. She passed from a heroin overdose in 1970, taking a piece of her fans' hearts with her.

Right of Joplin is Jim Morrison the enigmatic lead vocalist of the Doors. He is highly regarded as one of the most influential front men of all-time and his cause of death in 1971 is disputed to this day. The next is Jean-Michael Basquiat, who is less known as a musician, but more as a painter. He

passed from a heroin overdose in 1988. His artwork focused on social commentary regarding power structure and racism. In 2017 his piece named "Untitled" sold for \$110 Million. Second to last in this street art, is the lead singer and songwriter for Nirvana, Kurt Cobain. Cobain is widely regarded as the most influential musician in the history of alternative rock and was the voice of Generation X. He died from a self-inflicted shotgun wound at his home in Seattle in 1994. Lastly, the most recent to join this heart-breaking group is Amy Winehouse. The British soul singer was best known for her growling powerful voice that could stand tall in front of any R&B or jazz ensemble. Unfortunately, she passed from alcohol poisoning in 2011.

It is extraordinarily sad to recount these legendary artists and their impact on western culture. Without their contributions, the landscape of music would be very different today, and by coupling their irrefutable talent with their tragic deaths at a young age their legacies begin to reach of mythical proportions. It is undeniable the influence these musicians have, but what if I told you neither of these individuals were the first to join the 27-Club, and that without the original member they may not have ever performed the music they are glorified for. The first member of the 27-Club created the blueprint of the blues, which led to the creation of rock & roll, and thus influenced every musician on this list. An artist who's mysterious, or maybe even sinister, circumstances surrounding how he acquired his obscene talent has seen him rise to pure mystical status in the history of southern folklore. I am talking about the legendary Robert Johnson, the King of the Mississippi Delta Blues. (SLIDE 6)

It's a sad song!

It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy"

To be honest, it was very difficult to conduct the research around Robert Johnson's mysterious life. There only exist three photos of the blues artist along with only twenty-nine studio recordings recorded between two sessions in 1936 and 1937. Most of the facts about his life were compiled by biographers Gayle Dean Wardlow and Bruce Conforth in there 2019 award-winning biography titled "*Up Jumped the Devil.*" Most of their work was drafted through oral recounts among his

contemporaries, such as Delta Blues singers Son House and Johnny Shines, as well as producers of the era like the famous Don Law.

My research has included drafting tedious notes of conflicting accounts presented in articles, documentaries, and podcasts that not only center around the history of music, but also conspiracy theories regarding the supernatural. At this point I have concluded Robert Johnson's influential, but tragic story, is rooted in fact, half-truths, and sometimes downright mythological retellings. However, in the words of the great William Turner, tonight I will not let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

Robert Leroy Johnson was most likely born on May 8th, 1911, in Hazlehurst, Mississippi to Julia Major Dodds and Noah Johnson. Julia was married to a successful local carpenter by the name of Charles Dodds, who she eventually had ten children with, but shortly before Robert's birth, Charles fled Hazlehurst to Memphis after escaping a lynch mob of white landowners who had become jealous of his financial acumen. In his exile Julia became pregnant with Robert, and shortly after his birth sent him to Tennessee to be with her estranged husband who had now changed his name to Charles Spencer and would soon decide to raise Robert as his own.

In Memphis, Robert Johnson was enrolled at Carnes Avenue Colored School where he learned arithmetic, reading, language, and music. He was enamored with the vibrant music scene of Memphis which inspired him to want to become a traveling blues man. His urban and educated upbringing set him apart from most of his impoverished uneducated peers of his day. For reasons unknown, Robert left Memphis in 1919 to rejoin his mother across the Mississippi River in Commerce near Tunica and Robinsville. She had remarried to a poor illiterate sharecropper by the name of Will "Dusty" Willis. They settled on the Abbay & Leatherman plantation, but Robert did not subscribe to this new environment.

Will Willis complained that his stepson was one of the laziest and worthless workers on the plantation. Robert was more interested in playing the harmonica, jaw harp, and guitar, entertaining the farmhands over dinners and what little downtime they may have had. He exclaimed that he was

not going to ruin his hands working in the fields, as his unnaturally long fingers were created not to pick cotton, but rather to play the guitar. Soon, Robert left the plantation and in 1927 set off for a life as an itinerant, or walking, musician. (SLIDE 7)

The Delta Blues is one of the earliest known variants of the blues musical style. It was developed in the Mississippi Delta, a term given to the geography surrounding the Mississippi River stretching from Memphis, TN to Vicksburg, MS (SLIDE 8). The genre is known for heavily featuring the harmonica and guitar licks played with a slide. The singing style is both soulful and passionate, and the lyrics are known to center around tragic themes concerning heartbreak and a rambling transient lifestyle. Often the artist would align the blues as doing the work of the devil himself. (SLIDE 9) (PLAY SON HOUSE, "DEATH LETTER BLUES") (BRITISH SKIFFLE / MUDDY WATERS MUSIC ANECDOTE)

Delta Blues artists would generally travel a circuit of communities within the region playing on street corners for a few pennies, until they were recruited to the local juke joints. (SLIDE 10) These establishments usually were located at the crossroads on the outskirts of town close to the rural plantations that poor black sharecroppers worked and lived. Due to the abhorrent laws of the Jim Crowe South, black patrons were not allowed in white establishments, but they needed a place to unwind during the infrequent times they were not working. Juke joints served as places where these sharecroppers could drink, dance, and gamble their worries away. With the liquor and good times flowing they were a perfect site for blues musicians to earn dollars left and right. However, they developed an ungodly reputation within the communities.

Because the men were spending all hours of the night dancing their worries away it was not very often that the husbands would not be at church early Sunday morning. Some of us in this room may agree a hangover in church may be one of the most self-loathing feelings a person can have. Since these men were rarely in attendance, pastors noticed the weekly tithes were lacking. The women attended religiously but had little money to give. The sharecroppers may have not made much

of a living, but the pastors were making even less. This soon led to preachers denouncing the sinful juke joints from the pulpit as the devil's den, and the blues was his method of leading the men of the community to temptation. (SLIDE 11)

After not gaining traction during his early travels Robert met and married sixteen-year-old Virginia Travis in 1929. She quickly became with child and Johnson promised that he would quit his rambling ways to become a husband, father, and sharecropper. Shortly before childbirth, Virginia traveled out of state to visit family. Robert took this moment to hop on a train and travel the blues circuit for one last ride before fatherhood. However, life on the road sucked him in and he returned two months after his bride's previously scheduled return. Upon Johnson's arrival back to the plantation, he was devastated to find that his wife and newborn had both died during childbirth. Virginia's father, a strict religious man, shamed Robert. He proclaimed that since Robert had shied away from domestication to play the blues again, he had given into the work of the devil. In fact, it was Robert Johnson who had brought this tragedy upon the family. He soon was banished to the road where he stayed from 1932 to his death.

*It's a sad song!
It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy"*

For a few years, Robert Johnson struggled traveling around the Delta trying to pick up gigs and learn his craft. The truth is, at the time Robert Johnson was not a talented musician. Legendary blues artist Son House recounted that he was one of the most awful guitar players he had ever encountered. The elder statesmen dubbed him "Little Robert" mostly shooing him off the stage when he would grab one of his guitars and punish crowd's ears in between House's sets. Robert would quickly disappear from the circuit, and this is when things get very interesting.

After about a year of absence, one evening the Son House noticed Robert Johnson walk into a juke joint with a guitar on his back. House and his band of fellow blues musicians laughed as "Little

Robert” asked to have a shot on the stage. After a little badgering they begrudgingly gave him permission to play a few tunes. Then Johnson walked through the smokey jostling room stepped on the stage and started playing a blues lick that silenced the room.

People began to whisper befuddled at the sounds entering their ears. House was puzzled, stating that he was hearing things he had never witnessed a guitar player pick before. “Little Robert Johnson” the worst blues player in the Delta was playing the greatest set he had ever heard. Something was amiss! How could you explain this? He had been gone for a year, but now is playing with the technique and confidence of the greatest blues player of all time? It would be impossible to become that talented, so fast. Unless something nefarious was afoot. To the people in that room, it meant only one thing. “Little Robert Johnson” must have gone to the crossroads! (SLIDE 12)

As legend has it, one evening a struggling distressed Johnson made his way to the outskirts of town to the crossroads. Son House says it was near Dockery Plantation. Some claim it was in Clarkdale, MS or maybe Memphis. The residents of Rosendale, MS claim it was right on the edge of town where Highways 1 and 8 intersect. Wherever it may be the story is still the same. At the crossroads Johnson met the devil himself, disguised as a large black man. He handed him his guitar. The devil tuned it and played a few tunes, handing the guitar back to Robert. With a few strums of the guitar Robert Johnson realized that he now encompassed the talent to be the greatest blues musician of all time. However, it was to come for a price, his soul. (SLIDE 12 CLICK) (PLAY ROBERT JOHNSON, “DOWN AT THE CROSSROADS”)

*“Once upon a time there was a railroad line
Don't ask where, brother, don't ask when*

*It was the road to Hell, it was hard times
It was a world of gods... and men!*

It's an old song!

It's an old tale from way back when

*It's an old song!
And we're gonna sing it again*

The legend of how Robert Johnson acquired his immense talent is rooted in common themes of traditional folklore that spans many cultures throughout the world. In the lyrics of blues songs this was mostly thought to be centered around the Christian version of Satan. However, this particular crossroads Faustian folktale was most likely a fusion of Judeo-Christian and African stories. Folklorist Harry M. Hyatt wrote that for most African Americans born in the 19th and early 20th century the phrase "selling your soul at the crossroads" meant something a little different. It was a nod to the African trickster god, Legba, whose religious lessons surrounded the idea of "making a deal" and often included the metaphorical crossroads. If we reflect back to the story of Hades and Orpheus, we also will see this same theme of giving away your humanity to have what you covet most. This may be sacrificing for someone you love or in Robert Johnson's case it may be for fame and fortune.

Robert was willing to take the mantle of the man who sold his soul at the crossroads. He even leaned into this persona with his songs "Crossroad Blues" and a "Hellhound on My Trail." Holding the unoccupied attention of a crowd, the money, being the king of the juke joint, and the women was what he had wanted for so long, and the farther this legend traveled the more widely known he became. However, while miraculous, the true story of how Robert Johnson learned to strum the guitar is not nearly as exciting, and at this moment we will let facts get in the way of a good story.

During Robert's year-long disappearance from the juke joints he stationed himself in an area around Martinsville where he met an older, but not widely known guitar player by the name of Isiah "Ike" Zimmerman. Ike practiced Hoodoo, a mocking artform common among blues players that is closely related to Voodoo, but only one I can gather as mostly practiced in jest versus true religious beliefs. One of the tenets of Hoodoo was that to become a great musician you must practice at night in graveyards because the only beings there didn't care if you were good. Zimmerman and Johnson practiced for a year, mostly in graveyards, but probably only because they wouldn't annoy anyone

there. The truth behind Robert Johnson's rapid acquirement of talent had nothing to do with the devil, deals, or the crossroads. He attained his skills through hard work under the tutelage of an elder Delta Blues statesmen who was willing to impart his knowledge. It is also true that Robert possessed the innate talent to take these tunes, licks, and singing styles to the next level. (SLIDE 13)

After reaching popularity within the Delta Blues scene Johnson continued to travel a circuit between the cities of Memphis and Helena, and the smaller towns around the Delta region in Mississippi and Arkansas. Blues musician Johnny Shines stated that he accompanied him to Chicago, New York, Canada, Indiana, and Kentucky. Now, I'll take this moment to spout another famous William Turner saying, every story has a Hopkinsville connection. If I was a betting man, I'd almost say for sure that Robert Johnson played in a joint somewhere close to where we are sitting here tonight. Hopkinsville was a known staple on the Chitlin Circuit, which some musical historians say the hit its height of popularity in the 1930's. If that is the case, and you told me Robert Johnson never traveled from Memphis to here, I'd call you a liar. Hey, let's not let facts get in the way of a good story.

Musicians who knew Johnson noted that "He was a nice guy and fairly average, except for of course, for his musical talent, his weakness for whiskey & women, and his commitment to the road." In 1936 in Jackson, MS he sought out H.C. Spier who ran a general store and acted as a talent scout. Through acquaintances, Spier was able to get him in touch with famed producer Don Law, known for working with Bob Wills, Left Frizzell, Johnny Cash, and Marty Robbins among others. They recorded two sessions together that amounted for Robert Johnson's entire recorded catalog. Once in 1936 in San Antonio at the Gunter Hotel and the other in 1937 in Dallas at the Vitagraph, better known as the Warner Bros. building. The sessions produced 29 songs which were released as 78's singles from 1937-1938. From these recordings "I'll Believe I'll Dust My Broom", "Sweet Home Chicago", and "Crossroad Blues" would become blues staples. The first single "Terraplane Blues" would go onto sell 10,000 copies. However, most of his music did not reach widespread popularity until Columbia's 1961 release of the "King of the Delta Blues" which features most of his catalog.

Robert Johnson is credited for creating the first tunes that featured a driving bass, but on a plectrum instrument instead of a piano. According to blues historian Edward Komara, this guitar technique is regarded as his greatest contribution. The method is often called a “boogie base pattern” or a “boogie shuffle”. For your musical theory buffs in the audience, it is described as a fifth-sixth oscillation above the root chord. Chuck Berry went onto adopt this boogie pattern for his hits “Roll Over Beethoven” and “Johnny B. Goode.” According to author Dave Rubin “Berry’s utilization of the bass-string cut-boogie patterns popularized by Robert Johnson on songs like “Sweet Home Chicago” ... subtly altered the swing feel of the boogie blues into a more driving, straight 4/4 meter while still maintaining a limber lilt that is often missing in the countless imitations that followed.” The lick became a staple of what defined rock and roll music going forward. (PLAY CHUCK BERRY “JOHNNY B. GOODE” AND ROBERT JOHNSON “SWET HOME CHICAGO”)

Keith Richards’s noted that the most impressive skill that Robert Johnson possessed was his ability to make his instrument sound like two guitars playing at once. When Richards was first introduced to Robert Johnson by fellow bandmate and 27-Club member Brian Jones, he asked “Who is the other guy playing with him?” Further adding to the legend this was only achieved because of the supernatural talent imparted in Johnson by the Devil. Even Eric Clapton, widely thought as one of the greatest guitar players of all time and who has recorded an album of Robert’s covers titled “Me and Mr. Johnson” claimed that he couldn’t recreate the originals, but only the emotion he experienced from listening to Johnson’s music. He was an exceptional guitar player in not only the blues format, but in other popular genres of the time including jazz and ragtime. His single “Red Hot” effectively shows his range. To be “the man” in the juke joints you had to be able to do it all so the ladies could dance. (PLAY ROBERT JOHNSON “RED HOT”)

“The most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice,” Clapton once stated about the blue singer’s vocal style. This was attributed to Johnson’s microtonality that helped him realize many inflections of pitches in a small number of lyrical lines. We still associate those changes

in pitch in blues sounds today. Additionally, to add to the legend of Johnson's talent his bluesy pain-filled falsetto is also attributed to his deal with the Devil. During recording sessions, it was said he turned to the wall to sing. This may have been to gain better acoustics in the makeshift studios, or it could have been, according to the producers who were present, that his eyes went black when he sang and out came the voice of the devil himself. Hey, let's not let the facts get in the way of a good story. (SLIDE 14)

Despite slight recording success, Robert Johnson continued to struggle to gain popularity outside of the Mississippi Delta until he got his first national big break. Famed producer, John Hammond booked him to play at Carnegie Hall on December 23rd, 1938. John Hammond has been credited with finding artists such as Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen to name a few. The historic concert titled "From Spirituals to Swing" was supposed to be a historical narrative featuring African American performers and would depict black music from its origins in Africa leading to gospel, blues, dixieland, and big swing band numbers. Because it featured integrated performers, Hammond had difficulty finding sponsors for the show, however interestingly enough, *The New Masses*, or better known as the journal of the American Communist Party agreed to sponsor the show. The concert was such a hit that the beginnings of the boogie woogie craze of the late 1930's and 1940's dated back to this historic event. Robert Johnson had been recruited to play a pivotal role in the evening's festivities, however on the night of the show's producer was made aware that the blues singer had passed away three months earlier. Hammond haunted to the crowd by playing two of Johnson's recordings from the stage. They attendees were shook. (SLIDE 15)

Robert Johnson was pronounced dead on August 16, 1938, near Greenwood, MS. His death certificate does not list a cause of death, however according to oral tradition the devil finally got his due. Three days prior Robert had been playing at a country dance about fifteen miles from Greenwood. Always one with ladies, during his stay Robert had caught the eye of a local girl and had become coozied up flirting during the evening. Unfortunately for Robert, he did not know this lady was the wife of the

owner and barkeep. After a set, the bartender sent him a drink on the house. According to singer Sonny Boy Williamson, he knocked the bottle out of his hand telling him "You never accept a drink from a bottle you had not opened!" Robert angrily replied, "don't you ever knock a bottle out of my hand!" and took a swig.

Later that evening Robert became very ill, and Sonny took him to a local plantation where they had been staying. It is thought he was poisoned by dissolved cotton balls a common way of poisoning people in the old rural south. It is rarely fatal, but other health conditions may have caused him to hemorrhage. His condition continued to worsen as he experienced severe abdominal pain, vomiting, and bleeding from the mouth. Sonny Boy Williamson claims that as he laid on his death bed, Robert gathered the strength to tell Sonny, that he had devoted his life to the blues, but now he knows it's the Devil's music, and would he please take his guitar away and hang it on the wall. In that moment the greatest blues player of all time denounced his life's work, the thing he coveted most. After a two-day fight, Hades got his due as the blues man passed in agony. There are three sites in Mississippi where they claim he his is buried, but due to poverty and lack of transportation Robert Johnson, the King of the Delta Blues, was most likely buried in a pauper grave close to where he died. (SLIDE 16)

*It's an old song
It's an old tale from way back when
It's an old song
And that is how it ends
That's how it goes*

*Don't ask why, brother, don't ask how
He could have come so close*

*The song was written long ago
And that is how it goes*

*It's a sad song
It's a sad tale
It's a tragedy
It's a sad song
But we sing it anyway*

Presented by Cody Noffsinger, December 2022