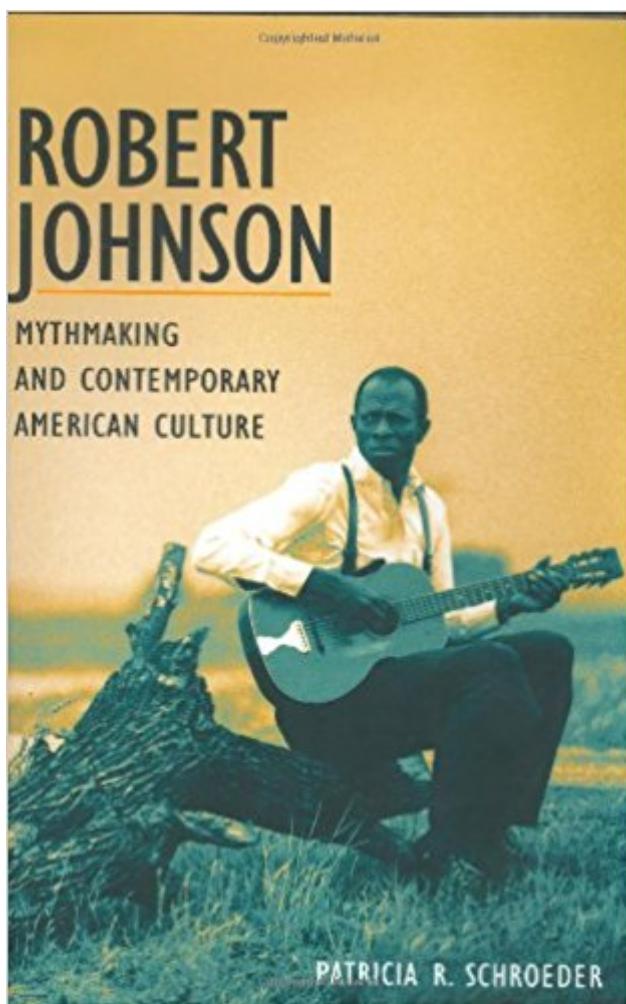


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Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, And Contemporary American Culture (Music In American Life)



Synopsis

An examination of the culture of myth making by looking at the myths surrounding Robert Johnson and how they were used by various writers and artists. Suddenly Robert Johnson is everywhere. Though the Mississippi bluesman died young and recorded only twenty-nine songs, the legacy, legend, and lore surrounding him continue to grow. Focusing on these developments, Patricia R. Schroeder's *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* breaks new ground in Johnson scholarship, going beyond simple or speculative biography to explore him in his larger role as a contemporary cultural icon. *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* shows the Robert Johnson of today to be less a two-dimensional character fixed by the few known facts of his life than a dynamic and contested set of ideas. Represented in novels, in plays, and even on a postage stamp, he provides inspiration for highbrow cultural artifacts--such as poems--as well as Hollywood movies and T-shirts. Schroeder's detailed and scholarly analysis directly engages key images and stories about Johnson (such as the Faustian crossroads exchange of his soul for guitar virtuosity), navigating the many competing interpretations that swirl around him to reveal the cultural purposes these stories and their tellers serve. examination of the relationships among Johnson's life, its subsequent portrayals, and the cultural forces that drove these representations. With penetrating insights into both Johnson and the society that perpetuates him, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* is essential reading for cultural critics and blues fans alike.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Ms. Schroeders's book is aimed at and is important for students of social evolution, societal history, and the creation of myths ... "--VJM's Jazz and Blues Mart, Issue 137 Spring 2005

Robert Johnson (1911? -- 1938) recorded only 29 songs during his brief life and was little-known when he died. In the 1960s, a release of his songs attracted great attention from British rockers and from young Americans, and a subsequent release of "The Complete Robert Johnson," including alternate takes, went platinum. With his haunting voice and astonishing guitar technique, and with the legends that have come to surround his life, the memory of Robert Johnson has evolved from early Delta blues singer to cultural icon. Johnson's photo appeared upon a commemorative United States postage stamp in 1994, with, notoriously, the cigarette dangling from his lip in the original photograph removed. Patricia Schroeder's book "Robert Johnson: Mythmaking and Contemporary American Culture" (2004) explores the mystique that surrounds Robert Johnson and shows the widely divergent interpretations his life and music continue to evoke. Patricia Schroeder is professor of English at Ursinus College where she teaches courses in the blues in American literature, African American literature, and American literature and drama. Her book is part of an outstanding series of scholarly studies title "Music in American life" which explore a wide range of musical forms and figures, from blues to classical and much else, and their impact in the United States. The great virtue of Professor Schroeder's work is that it shows how much there is to be learned from serious study of the blues in general and Robert Johnson in particular. Her work is informed, and teaches a great deal about, postmodern critical theory. She shows how a figure such as Johnson has been transformed in American culture from a Delta bluesman -- a living person -- to a symbol and, finally, to an icon or myth separate from and bearing little resemblance to the original flesh and blood man. The ways in which Robert Johnson has been mythologized reflect the preoccupations of the mythmakers who turn to Johnson more than they help in the understanding of Johnson himself. Thus, in the 1960s, Johnson was discovered as a romantic, authentic figure who spurned commercialism, and wandered through the Delta and elsewhere in pursuit of himself and of his art. Later visions of Johnson have seen him as reflecting the spirit of American pluralism and diversity, as the symbol of an inclusive American community, as exemplifying the spirit of the blues, as a victim of the racial injustice pervading the deep South in the 1930s, as the voice of individualism, and as much else. Thus, after a brief chapter in which she gives a biographical summary of the

Johnson's life, emphasizing competing versions and contradictory accounts at key points, Professor Schroeder offers in successive chapters, accounts of how Robert Johnson has been portrayed in contemporary novels, dramas, film documentaries, and poetry. It is an impressive account of a body of literature, most of which had been unknown to me, and it shows well how Johnson's life has been used in the service of a wide variety of viewpoints on American culture. Professor Schroeder discusses this literature fully, ably and well. I was most impressed, of all the material she discusses, with a 1996 poem by Susan Noguere titled "Whirling Round the Sun" in which the poet discusses eloquently her response to Johnson's music. Professor Schroeder quotes the poem in full (p.161) and expounds it nicely. Professor Schroeder also discusses how Johnson has fared in cyberspace with an exploration of the many threads devoted to Johnson and an analysis of the comments that his music and life inspire over the Web. I found that there was too much emphasis in the book on postmodernistic theory. Professor Schroeder shows that this theory can be put to good use in understanding Johnson, or any important cultural figure, but she overdoes it. The book is jargon-filled, and the relativism and skepticism to which postmodernism leads seems to me unnecessary to her discussion of Johnson and the myths he has inspired. In addition, there is too little focus in the book on Johnson's music and lyrics themselves. Johnson's music will always be the strongest reasons for his appeal -- as is the case with any musician or performer. There are times, particularly when she discusses Johnson on the Internet, that Professor Schroeder gets bogged down in jargon and in a second or third-level realm of analysis and almost forgets explaining her subject -- Robert Johnson in contemporary American culture. Those interested in this book will also enjoy a recent scholarly study by Elijah Wald, "Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues." (2004) Wald is also aware of the mythmaking surrounding this great blues artist, but he is not as enamored with postmodernistic theory as is Professor Schroeder. Wald thinks we can form some reasonably accurate ideas about Robert Johnson the man and what he hoped to do with his music. I found his account for the most part convincing. Wald also offers more in the way of musical and literary analysis of Johnson's songs than does Professor Schroeder. I am pleased that Johnson's music and the blues are receiving sustained and insightful critical attention in Professor Schroeder's book, in Wald's book, and elsewhere. Readers with a serious interest in Robert Johnson and the blues will enjoy Professor Schroeder's study. Robin Friedman

In a book designed to discuss the mythology surrounding [Robert] Johnson, it seems odd to begin with an information-dump polemicizing against the revisionist practices of the post office.

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