

Johnson, Robert

(1912–1938) Blues singer.

Robert Johnson was the most celebrated and legendary of the blues artists who emerged from the Mississippi Delta prior to World War II. He was born near Hazelhurst, Miss., in 1912 and raised at a sharecroppers' settlement called Commerce. While still a youngster, he was drawn to the blues he had heard around him, learning to play the music on a harmonica and then a guitar. While still in his teens, he left home to become an itinerant bluesman, traveling throughout the Delta and then up the Mississippi River to Helena, Ark., Saint Louis, Mo., and finally to Chicago, Ill. In the mid-1930s he also traveled to Dallas and San Antonio, Tex., where he made a series of 29 blues recordings that were his legacy to the blues.

Johnson's blues repertoire has proved to be one of the most provocative in the entire history of the music. He was not only a gifted musician, but also a visionary poet. His vision of Afro-American life in the Delta is a haunting one. Songs like "Hellhound on My Trail" and "Me and the Devil Blues" point to his fatalistic assessment of the human condition and the supernatural powers in control of that condition. He saw no way out for blues musicians like himself. Such a choice of vocations necessitated making a pact with the forces of darkness because blues was the Devil's music.

The themes that dominated the landscape of Robert Johnson's blues were erotic, unrequited love, the urge to constantly move and explore new places, and the omnipotent powers of the supernatural. "Love in Vain" was his masterpiece on unrequited love; it was a theme he was obsessed with, appearing in about one-third of his songs. Erotic love was his counterpoint to heartbreak, and in songs like "Traveling Riverside Blues" he portrayed it with graphic and savory delight. Among his best-known travel songs were "Dust My Broom," "Rambling on My Mind," and "Walkin' Blues." The recurring message in these pieces was epitomized in the line—"Travel on poor Bob, just can't turn you 'round."

Robert Johnson's restless spirit reflected the changing social consciousness of the times, especially among the rural black population living in the South. Paradoxically, he was always drawn back to the Delta region he was so obsessed with leaving until, as fate would have it, he was tragically poisoned to death in a Greenwood, Miss., juke joint in 1938. He was in his twenties when he died, and with his passing the legend of Robert Johnson was born. Today he is considered one of the most popular and mysterious bluesmen of the century.

See also ENVIRONMENT: / Delta

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Samuel Charters, *Robert Johnson* (1973); Alan Greenburg, *Love in Vain: The Life and Legend of Robert Johnson* (1983); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (1981); *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues*, vols. I (CL 1654) and II (C30034), Columbia Records.

Juneteenth

Juneteenth is the popular name among black people in Texas for their emancipation day, which they celebrate on 19 June. On that day in 1865 Major General Gordon Granger officially announced the freedom of slaves when he arrived at Galveston to command the District of Texas following the Civil War.

Three black folktales provide other explanations of the date. In one version Texas landowners refused to announce emancipation until the 1865 harvest had been gathered by the slaves. According to a second story, a black man journeyed by mule from Washington to Texas and arrived in June 1865 with word of the abolition of slavery. The other legend has the end of slavery declared as late as June because an earlier messenger was killed on the way to Texas.

The celebration of 19 June as emancipation day spread to the neighboring states of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, and later to California as black Texans migrated west. It has appeared occasionally in Alabama and Florida, also as a result of migration.

Large celebrations began in 1866 and continued to be held regularly into the early 20th century, although blacks in some Texas towns honored emancipation on 1 January or 4 July—days favored in some other states. Observations of Juneteenth declined in the 1940s during World War II but revived with 70,000 black people on the Texas State Fair grounds at Dallas during 1950. As school desegregation and the civil rights movement focused attention on the expansion of freedom in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Juneteenth celebrations declined again, although small towns still observed Texas's emancipation day. In the 1970s Juneteenth was revived in some communities, especially after two black members convinced the Texas Legislature to declare Juneteenth an unofficial "holiday of significance . . . particularly to the blacks of Texas."

Typical celebrations over the years included parades, picnics, baseball games or other competitive contests, speeches on freedom and future goals, and dances. Leaders in the black community normally organized the events, although occasionally in the 20th century a business or a black fraternal group assumed that role.

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Ebony (June 1951); Wendy Wattriss, *Southern Exposure* (No. 1, 1977); William Wiggins, "Free at Last!: A Study of Afro-American Emancipation Day Celebrations" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1974).

King, Martin Luther, Jr.

(1929–1968) Minister and civil rights leader.

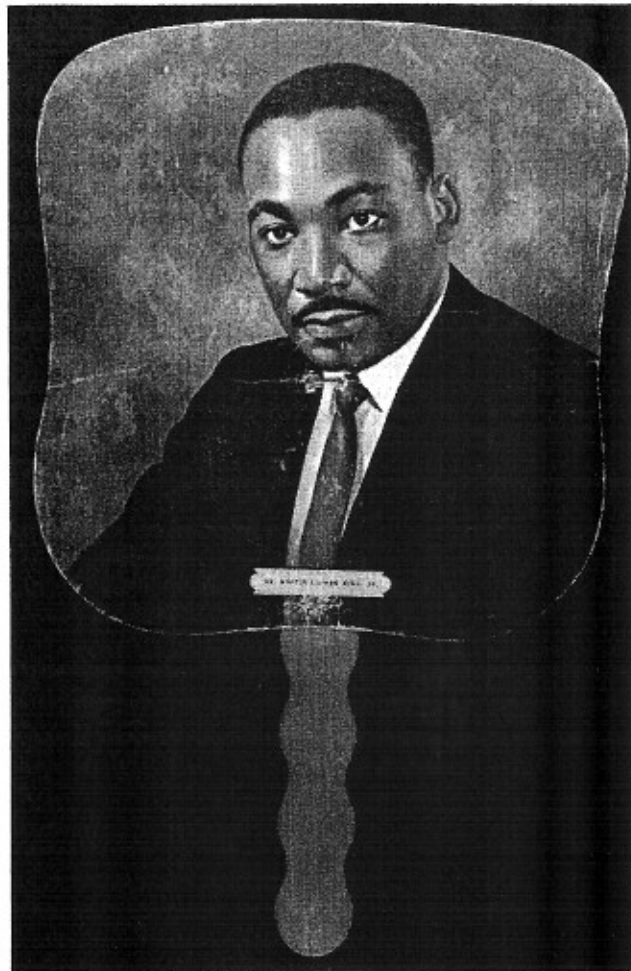
Born on 15 January 1929 in Atlanta, Ga., Martin Luther King, Jr., came to symbolize the black freedom struggle

that dominated the South from 1955 to 1968. He attended Morehouse College and graduated from Crozer Theological Seminary in June 1951. Emerging at the age of 27 as the principal leader of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott that initiated a new era of nonviolent protest against racial discrimination, King brought a strong family heritage in the Baptist church and excellent graduate training in philosophy and theology at Boston University to his role as spokesman for a movement that in little more than a decade transformed southern life.

In the early years of his public career King stressed two beliefs: that black southerners had to employ mass action as well as lawsuits if they were to win their constitutional rights as American citizens and that many white southerners would respond positively once they were shown that Christian morality supported the goals of the civil rights cause. The tactics of "direct action" led to protest efforts such as the "sit-ins" of 1960, the Freedom Ride of 1961, and the community-based demonstration campaigns that King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference mounted in Albany, Ga., Birmingham, Ala., St. Augustine, Fla., and Selma, Ala., in the years 1962-65. King's early optimism about the white South, and especially the white church, all but vanished as confrontation after confrontation demonstrated that few white southerners would stand up for racial justice.

King's 1963 "I Have A Dream" oration at the March on Washington and his 1964 receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize catapulted him to national and international fame at much the same time that civil rights protests were leading the federal government to enact the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Achievement of these milestones and realization of their limitations led King to focus increasingly on the serious problems of his country and world that had not been ameliorated by those racial reform statutes: poverty and economic powerlessness that oppressed many white as well as black Americans, North as well as South; militarism and materialism that led to international violence and economic imperialism. King's desire to attack the former set of problems led him to mount a largely unsuccessful attack upon economic injustice in Chicago's ghettos in 1966; his realization of the need to speak out against international violence and oppression led him in 1967 to denounce America's involvement in Vietnam.

Before his murder, King was articulating a vision far distant from that with which he had begun. America, and the South, required thoroughgoing economic and structural change, and not merely the elimination of racial discrimination, if real human justice were to be attained. That struggle for a more just society would have to employ coercive and disruptive tactics, not simply persuasive ones, for the preceding 12 years had shown that white America was far less interested in social justice than King had imagined in 1956. At the time of his assassination in Memphis on 4 April 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., believed that the road ahead was still far longer than the road he himself had traveled. As of 1986 the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, directed by Clayborne Carson at Stanford University, was well underway. The goal of the 15-year project is publication of 12 anno-



Martin Luther King, Jr., as portrayed on a paper fan produced by the Dillon Funeral Homes and Burial Association, Leland, Vicksburg, Greenville, Indianola, and Cleveland, Miss., 1968

tated volumes of selections from the broad range of King's writings, many of which will be available to the public for the first time. Plans are for the first volume to be available in 1990. In January 1986 King's birthday was declared a national holiday, the first such tribute to a black American.

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Gaynelle Evans, *Chronicle of Higher Education* [3 September 1986]; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (1986); Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (1970); Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1982); Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1974).