

Robert Johnson and spectral timbre: what we hear, what we construct

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Abstract

The myth of the deal with the devil at the crossroads frames the reception of Robert Johnson's corpus, particularly lyrics that directly or indirectly reference otherworldly forces. Setting aside the myth, I analyse the uncanny sonic qualities in his performances that evoke a spectral presence. A close examination of vocal and guitar timbre that considers harmonic resonance, chimera effect and other 'eerie' qualities of the music breaks down musical elements other than lyrics that evoke the myth of supernatural power. Humming, mumbling and talking, corner loading, falsetto, simultaneous rhythm and lead, among other acoustic effects, contribute to a complex soundscape with spectral resonances. Taking a lead from Johnson's mentor Ike Zimmerman and his fondness for practising in the cemetery, my analysis of timbral quality informed by Freud's concept of the uncanny seeks to explore what we hear, how it is produced and the origin that we construct for the sounds.

Robert Johnson's pact with the devil at the crossroads – exchanging his soul for mastery on the guitar – has reached such mythic proportions among blues fans and scholars that serious consideration is even accorded to locating the spot's geographical location (Gussow 2017, pp. 255–91).¹ As a measure of the legend's strength, Clarksdale, Mississippi invested in a marker at the intersection of present-day highways 61 and 49 to help fuel a revitalisation project aimed at economic recovery through blues tourism (Gussow 2017, pp. 291–303). These contemporary reflections of the myth are avatars of the lore fed to blues researchers beginning in the 1960s, stories from Johnny Shines, Eddie 'Son' House, David 'Honeyboy' Edwards and others claiming to have known and/or played with Johnson. Most famous among these tales comes from an article published by Son House in 1965 about an experience in a Delta juke with fellow bluesman Willie Brown:

And when we'd get a break and want to rest some, we'd set the guitars up in the corner and go out in the cool. Robert would watch and see which way we'd gone and he would pick one of

¹ On the history of the construction of the myth, see Pearson and McCulloch (2003) and Schroeder (2004), who stress the white origins of the myth and the financial motivations behind it. Gioia (2008, pp. 149–60) documents the history of 'research on Robert Johnson'.

them up. And such another racket you never heard! It'd make the people mad, you know. They'd come out and say, 'Why don't y'all go in there and get that guitar away from that boy! He's running people crazy with it'. (House 1965, p. 41)²

According to House, after a six-month absence from the Delta, Johnson returned – in some versions of the story with a seventh string on his guitar (Oakes 2019) – with a dramatic change in ability. They invited him to play again, 'So he sat down there and finally got started. And man! He was so good! When he finished, all our mouths were standing open' (House 1965, p. 42).³ Adding fuel to the myth are interpretations of some of Johnson's song titles, 'Me and the Devil Blues', 'Cross Road Blues', 'Hell Hound on My Trail' and numerous references to hoodoo⁴ in his lyrics that may have functioned as part of a self-conscious marketing strategy (Gussow 2017, p. 208; Conforth and Wardlow 2019, p. 216).⁵

More recent research on Johnson, including a memoir by his half-sister Annye Anderson published in 2020, complicates our picture of him. The book documents the considerable time Johnson spent in Memphis, in and around other musicians. As Elijah Wald writes in the forward to Anderson's book, 'Thinking of Johnson as a hip, urban musician spicing his music with Delta touches rather than a Delta musician picking up on the latest urban sounds doesn't make his records sound better or worse – but it adds another layer and changes the way I hear his musical choices' (Anderson with Lauterbach 2020, p. xv). Other work highlights Johnson's debt to Ike Zimmerman, his mentor and guitar teacher from the Hazlehurst, Mississippi area (Gussow 2017, pp. 209–11; Conforth 2008; Conforth and Wardlow 2019, pp. 96–104).⁶ In light of recent scholarship, the tale of the pact with the devil or of sudden *sui generis* prowess on the guitar shades into a more conventional story of teachers, practice and exposure to a wide variety of musical styles and forms. Zimmerman's habit of practicing in a cemetery among the 'haints' provides another possible source and context for the occult origin story for his talent (Conforth 2008; Gussow 2017, p. 209; Conforth and Wardlow 2019, pp. 104–5; Oakes 2019).

For better or worse, the pact with the devil is part of the reception history of Johnson's music that continues to shape listener perceptions. As told by House, the myth recounts the story of a familiar person revealing unfamiliar powers. In this respect, the Johnson myth of a Faustian bargain is consistent with Freud's understanding of the uncanny, in particular, the fact that one of its meanings relates to its antonym: 'The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, "the unhomely") is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, "the homely")' (Freud 2003, p. 134).⁷ In Freud's analysis, what was once familiar is rendered unfamiliar when 'what is concealed and

² Slightly different versions of the story are in Welding (1966, p. 75), Wald (2004, p. 110), Guralnick (1989, pp. 15–17) and Gioia (2008, pp. 159–60). Welding (1966, p. 7) claims that Son House said that he had, 'sold his soul to the devil in exchange for learning to play like that'.

³ Wald (2004, p. 111) and Guralnick (1989, pp. 15–7) reproduce slightly different versions of the story.

⁴ In an indulgent reading, Evans asserts that Johnson references sorcery or belief in supernatural forces in two-thirds of his recorded songs (1996c, p. 13); see also Evans (1996a–c) for readings of all possible mentions of satanic beliefs.

⁵ Various scholars note the similarity to a story told by Ledell Johnson about his brother, the blues artist Tommy Johnson (Evans 1971, p. 22; Guralnick 1989, p. 18; Pearson and McCulloch 2003, pp. 92–3; Wald 2004, pp. 271–2).

⁶ Spelled Zimmerman in Pearson and McCulloch (2003, pp. 7, 94) and Freeland (2000, p. 47), Zinorman in Gioia (2008, pp. 154, 171, 408), and Zinneman in Palmer (1981, p. 113).

⁷ *Das Unheimliche* was first published in 1908 in *Neue Revue* 1, no. 10.

kept hidden' (Freud 2003, p. 132) is revealed. The revelation of the hidden often evokes feelings of horror or fright intensified by associations with night-time and darkness (Freud 2003, pp. 131–2). In the myth of Robert Johnson, the familiar bad guitar player suddenly reveals a hidden talent, rendering both him and his talent foreign or mysterious (Freud 2003 p. 133). The explanation that a supernatural force intervened to transform the mediocre guitarist into an outstanding one includes, in one of House's versions, the tell-tale sign of the supernatural presence: the seventh string added to his guitar.

The following essay seeks to re-examine the willingness to believe in supernatural origins for Johnson's talent by providing a close analysis of details in his recordings. Johnson's deft manipulation of guitar and vocal technique produce a sense of an unnatural performance for his contemporary listeners and, especially, for white guitarists beginning in the 1960s. Both Johnson's contemporaries and later audiences grapple, albeit in different ways, with a complex constellation of sounds, prompting, if not feelings of horror or fright, a sense of awe and wonder.

In the end, the uncanny is a matter of perception. Distancing himself from the experience and, writing in the third person, Freud asserts, 'It is a long time since he [the present writer] experienced or became acquainted with anything that conveyed the impression of the uncanny. He must first put himself in the proper state of feeling and so put himself in the way of experiencing a sense of the uncanny' (Freud 2003, p. 124).⁸ African Americans listening to Johnson's music either in the Jim Crow South or in diaspora would have less difficulty than Freud in being receptive to the uncanny. The pervasive belief in spirits and otherworldly presences evidenced in the widespread practice of hoodoo among rural and urban African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries attests to a worldview that deploys supernatural forces to attempt to control the here and now. As I argue in *Time in the Blues*, belief in hoodoo and the occult 'functions to assert control and agency in the face of random events and the contingency of daily life', whether that involves countering the terrestrial evils of back-breaking labour, poverty and acts of terrorist violence, or supernatural forces (Simon 2017, p. 48). References to 'hot foot powder', 'mojo', 'spooks' or the desire to 'dust my broom' in Johnson's corpus, and to black cat bones, John de Conquer root and other hoodoo practices in the lyrics of other blues artists, signal the ubiquity of conjuring and the occult to assert control over malign entities. These specific beliefs in the Black community, rooted in the trials and horrors of daily life, are consistent with Freud's analysis insofar as an animistic view of the universe influences perceptions of the uncanny. For Freud, animistic beliefs are manifestations of efforts at repression, where the uncanny functions as the return of the repressed (Freud 2003, p. 147). In the context of the Jim Crow South, and particularly during the Depression era of Johnson's recordings, the horrors of quotidian reality would have required nearly superhuman psychological

⁸ Freud equates the uncanny with 'intellectual uncertainty' (2003, p. 125), something with which he did not wish to identify. Compare Dolan and Patteson's (2018, pp. 15–16) discussion of the "'disenchantment' typical of modernity" in relation to the average listener's lack of understanding of electronics: 'electronics remain for most people as inscrutable as any complex phenomenon ... but [are met with] an assumption that all things are *in principle* explicable in terms of natural laws. In short, we don't know what's happening in the box, but we default to the belief in a natural, as opposed to supernatural, explanation. We are left suspended between prosaic causal understanding and poetic associations induced by sounds that seem to come from another world'.

powers to repress. In this socio-economic, racialised context, efforts to control demons, spirits and other human evils with powders and charms function to stave off a reckoning with death. Music, as well, functions to provide respite from the threats and horrors of daily life. In African American folk culture, associations between the uncanny and death are bound tightly together because of lived reality, explaining the regular references to revenants, spirits and ghosts.⁹

Among his contemporaries – friends, family, fellow musicians – there are differing opinions about the Satanic pact story, divided between believers and non-believers. According to blues researcher Robert Burton ‘Mack’ McCormick, the family of his young wife, Virginia Travis, held Johnson responsible for her death in child birth, blaming his having been away performing the ‘devil’s music’ (Hunt 1992; Conforth and Wardlow 2019, pp. 83–5). Willie Mae Powell and ‘Queen’ Elizabeth, former girlfriends, both believe that he sold his soul to the devil, the latter claiming that being a blues musician requires it (Hunt 1992). However, other contemporaries, like Willie Coffee, ‘never did think he was serious’, because Johnson ‘always come here with a lot of jive and you know jokin’, crackin’ a lot of jokes like that’ (Mugge 2000). Shines more emphatically states that ‘he never told me that lie. He would have, I would have called him a liar right to his face. I know it’s a lie’ (Meyer 1997). These camps mirror the rough division among rural Black folk between those who identify with the Church and condemn the blues as the devil’s music and those who partake of blues culture.

Whether or not his contemporaries believed the myth of the pact with the devil, his playing clearly stood out. As Shines remarks, ‘It was a sound that you had to stop and listen to’ (Meyer 1997). Shines singles out Johnson’s slide playing in particular with language that affirms his uniqueness, while also hinting at magical abilities: ‘His guitar seemed to talk – repeat and say words with him like no one else in the world could. I said he had a talking guitar, and many a person agreed with me’ (Shines 1970, p. 32). Shines is unequivocal about Johnson’s effect on audiences, ‘One time in St. Louis we were playing one of the songs that Robert would like to play with someone once in a great while, *Come On in My Kitchen*. He was playing very slow and passionately, and when we had quit, I noticed no one was saying anything. Then I realized they were crying – both women and men’ (Shines, 1970, p. 32).¹⁰ David ‘Honeyboy’ Edwards attributes Johnson’s hold over audiences to his having ‘his own style’: ‘All of the rest of them like Rube Lacy and Tommy Johnson, all of them, had that booky-book Delta style. Robert Johnson come out with a classic blues style, with mostly a lot of minor chords. He had a lot of seventh chords in his blues and it sounded better than just playing straight. And that took with the people, because he had a different sound’ (Edwards 1997, p. 102).

⁹ On death and the uncanny, see Freud (2003, p.148). Evans reads the final lines of ‘Me and the Devil Blues’ as Johnson’s belief that he would become a ghost (1996c, p. 13): ‘You may bury my body down by the highway side/Spoken: Babe, I don’t care where you buy my body when I’m dead and gone/You may bury my body, oooh, down by the highway side/So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride’.

¹⁰ The power of his performances to move his contemporary listeners dovetails with Eric Clapton’s reported first response to hearing his recordings, “I was definitely overwhelmed, but I was also a bit repelled by the intensity of it,” he tells NPR’s Bob Edwards. “I kind of got hooked on it because it was so much more powerful than anything else I had heard or was listening to. Amongst all of his peers I felt he was the one that was talking from his soul without really compromising for anybody” (Clapton 2004).

Later, predominantly white, audiences accepted a racialised romanticised view of Johnson's music, following the path laid by Rudi Blesh's fanciful description of 'Hellhound on My Trail' as 'full of evil, surcharged with the terror of one alone among the moving, unseen shapes of the night. Wildly and terribly, the notes paint a dark wasteland, starless, ululant with bitter wind, swept by the chill rain. Over a hilltop trudges a lonely, ragged, bedeviled figure, bent to the wind, with his easy rider held by one arm as it swings from its cord around his neck' (Blesh 1946, p. 122). If white researchers and fans tend to believe the myth of the crossroads, it is because of a romanticised conception of Black folk culture, as well as a desire to construct an image of Johnson as a genius with unnatural *sui generis* talent.

My analysis of the uncanny in Johnson's music sheds light on the reception of Johnson's music by both the audience for whom the music was performed live and recorded in the 1930s as well as later listeners. In focusing on the pole of reception, I suggest that Freud provides a way of thinking about responses to the uncanny in his music in relation to timbre. As Cornelia Fales points out, timbre is 'preattentive both in processing and in the qualities that result from that processing' (Fales 2002, p. 59). In this respect, timbre aligns well with Freud's assertions about openness to the uncanny: both operate on a subconscious level. Moreover, Fales argues that a 'paradox emerges with the observation that while timbre is a dimension of central importance to identifying sources, it is also the dimension that is most divergent from the sound in the physical world' (Fales 2002, p. 58). Or, as Jonathan De Souza glosses the paradox in relation to synthesisers, 'timbre is linked both to source identification and its breakdown' (De Souza 2018, p. 21). Timbre is a result of our processing of sounds and exists 'only in the mind of the listener' (Fales 2002, p. 62).¹¹ Attention to timbre in Johnson's music provides a way of accounting for how listeners in a variety of historical and cultural contexts – whether they know about the crossroads myth or not – perceive an 'intangible quality'¹² in the performances and construct an uncanny origin for them. Thus, my focus on timbre will shift the emphasis away from Johnson's lyrics (logos) and toward the 'echos, the physical sound ...; [and] topos, the site of vocal emission in the body (or the imagined site when nobody is physically evident)' (Rings 2015, p. 667). In Johnson's recordings, attention to both vocal and guitar timbre reveals aspects of the performances that give rise to a feeling of the uncanny in his music.

Timbre and the uncanny

When we listen, we process sounds and posit their probable origins based on our experience of the acoustic world. For sounds that are familiar, i.e. those that we have heard before and recognise, we fairly unproblematically assign an origin: a voice, a guitar, a footfall, a train, etc. We not only process pitch, duration and intensity (Villegas-Vélez 2018, p. 3), but also timbral indicators of the origin of the sound,

¹¹ Fales writes, 'Since the perceived timbre of a steady-state tone is determined largely by the relative amplitudes of its constituent frequencies, there is no single property or component of an acoustic signal that corresponds to that sensation; thus, perceived timbre exists in a very real sense only in the mind of the listener, not in the objective world. It is here that the paradox of timbre begins to show itself' (2002, p. 62).

¹² Pearson and McCulloch credit white folks for creating the myth (2003, p. 3).

such as onset, attack, decay and harmonics, to make identifications. For sounds that are unfamiliar, assigning an origin may be more difficult. Specifically in the realm of recorded music, as Thomas Turino documents, production techniques run the spectrum from high fidelity to studio art. For music conceived as studio art, creating sounds that cannot be generated in a natural acoustic environment is highly valued (Turino 2008, p. 69). These unnatural sounds, for example recordings played backwards or synthesised sounds, seem unfamiliar and difficult to localise in terms of origin. We may experience uncertainty, confusion or even a sense of the uncanny because of the timbre of these sounds.¹³

In the case of Johnson's corpus, the recordings made in 1936 and 1937 by the American Recording Corporation do not present characteristics normally associated with studio art. For the most part, they correspond to the documentary end of the spectrum, seeking to faithfully preserve live performance (Turino 2008, pp. 70–71).¹⁴ This is due in part to the limitations of recording technology in the 1930s, although as Elijah Wald notes, the sound quality of Johnson's recordings is high (2004, p. 143). Yet despite the effort to record 'natural' sound faithfully, the very fact of recording creates an artificial product, and, in the case of Johnson, an enduring and repeatable performance that differs significantly from the sound that would have been heard in a Delta juke or on a street corner.¹⁵ Microphone placement and the ability to capture fairly broad frequency and dynamic ranges create an intimacy that would not be available to listeners in a typical live situation, where lack of electricity, the loud sounds of patrons talking and dancing, and other noises would obscure the details.¹⁶ Spoken asides, foot taps, the click of the slide on the guitar's neck,¹⁷ vocal nuances and other sounds would be lost for most of the juke or street audience. In addition, the exact repeatability of sound recordings also renders them distinctly different from the experience of live performance, although in the case of Johnson, as his alternate takes reveal, he was remarkably consistent performing songs.¹⁸ In these respects, the recordings already present elements that may have been perceived as uncanny for his contemporary audience: Johnson seems present, close and controllable in the recordings in an intimate way that he never could

¹³ See Villegas-Vélez's analysis of Fatima Al Qadiri's use of a synthesised voice choir: 'Much of the critical power of Al Qadiri's music comes from the timbral ambiguity of this sound. We hear it at once as uncannily inhuman, and also hopelessly dated as a synthesizer patch' (2018, p. 2).

¹⁴ Minton highlights aspects of early recordings that helped southern audiences understand listening to 78 rpm records as social occasions similar to live performance (2008, pp. 136–7). Debates are ongoing over whether or not Johnson's recordings were sped up, see Roessner (2020, pp. 32–3).

¹⁵ Turino argues that no recording is 'authentic' in the sense of being absolutely faithful. Even field recordings require microphone placement and editing that shape sound (2008, pp. 70–71).

¹⁶ See Schaeffer (1966, pp. 80–81) and Frith (1996, pp. 187–8) on the 'close-up' that microphones provide.

¹⁷ In this context, live performance parallels later recording techniques; see De Souza (2018, p. 15) on 'undesirable noise' eliminated in the synthesiser aesthetic and Chion (2016, p. 63) on the 'culture of listening' that enables listeners familiar with a particular musical tradition to 'not hear' certain noises emanating from performances on acoustic guitar.

¹⁸ Many Delta players never played the same song in the same way twice. Johnson's performances of songs were remarkably consistent – including spoken asides – as evidenced especially in takes from the Dallas sessions. As Gioia notes, many later fans were disappointed with this evidence of craftsmanship, preferring to believe in a romanticised notion of spontaneous, improvised performance (2008, p.170). Citing remarks from St. Louis bluesman Henry Townsend, Conforth and Wardlow argue that Johnson had a more stable and consistent conception of a song than other contemporary artists (2019, p. 162). Edwards corroborates Johnson's consistency (1997, discography). See also, Rothenbuhler (2007, pp. 73–7).

have at a live performance venue.¹⁹ Moreover, as Eric Rothenbuhler (2007, pp. 66, 78) has argued, Johnson deploys a ‘for-the-record aesthetic’, a self-conscious style developed in part by listening to recordings. For Johnson’s contemporary audience, while his live performances exuded a powerful charismatic force, the recordings capture sound in a way that complicates reception.

Beyond the artefacts produced by technology, Johnson’s recordings exhibit timbral qualities that may be perceived as uncanny. Although some doubt has been cast on the famous story of Johnson recording facing a corner of the room in the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio during the sessions in 1936, timbral elements suggest a highly reverberant environment.²⁰ In comparison with the recordings produced seven months later in a large warehouse-like space in Dallas, the recordings from the first session have greater high- and low-frequency response, as well as significant reverb.²¹ These qualities enable the intensification of one of the ‘uncanny’ elements of Johnson’s performances: the sense of listening to two guitarists rather than one. Rolling Stones’ guitarist Keith Richards’s reaction upon first listening to *King of the Delta Blues* at Brian Jones’s apartment underscores the doppelgänger effect: ‘When I first heard it, I said to Brian, “Who’s that?” “Robert Johnson”. I said, “Yeah, but who’s the other guy playing with him?” Because I was hearing two guitars, and it took me a long time to realise he was actually doing it all by himself’ (Anderle 2013).²² While perhaps not frightening to Richards, the effect nonetheless creates a disturbing cognitive dissonance, even among accomplished guitar players, fueling the sense of the uncanny.

In ‘32-20 Blues’, the simultaneity of a riff with high-register plucked and held half-chords and the thumping rhythm in the bass or, in ‘Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)’, the rapid-fire rhythm part accented by leaps to the higher register, make the tracks sound as if there are two guitar players. The likely enhancement of reverb from corner-loading enables longer sustain, especially in the open-tunings. In songs like ‘Ramblin’ on My Mind’ and ‘Come On in My Kitchen’, Johnson is able to sound a high note with significant volume and long decay and then move down the fretboard to execute the rhythm part against this backdrop. The resonant effect in the open tunings also helps to produce the sense that the rhythm parts are continuous,

¹⁹ Chion highlights the effect of ‘acoustic decoupling’, when sound is detached from its site of origin (2016, p. 144). The fixed sound provokes a paradoxical listening practice that Chion, echoing Schaeffer, highlights: ‘In fact, the acousmatic situation cuts both ways: sometimes it helps us attend to the sound itself; and sometimes, on the contrary, it results in the idea of the cause taking hold of us, haunting us, and monopolizing our attention’ (2016, p. 134).

²⁰ Roessner defends the corner-loading story (2020, pp. 30–31), while Conforth and Wardlow deny that Johnson recorded facing the corner (2019, p. 158). Pearson and McCulloch document Don Law’s (the A&R man) reputation for permissiveness with musicians in the studio ‘in the name of getting as much material as possible out of each session’, lending credence to the story of Johnson moving the microphone to a corner (2003, p. 12).

²¹ Guralnick describes drapes in the room in the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio (1989, pp. 38–9). The room in Dallas is described by Conforth and Wardlow as an open storage unit on the third floor of the Vitagraph/Warner Brothers Exchange Building with probably some ‘heavy burlap’ hung to dampen sound (2019, pp. 204–5). The mids are stronger in the Dallas recordings than in the ones made in San Antonio. Despite the small room and the presence of drapes, I believe that the intensity of the high-end of the EQ spectrum as well as in the reverb in the San Antonio recordings suggests corner-loading.

²² Freud specifically discusses the doppelgänger as eliciting a threatening sense of the uncanny (2003, pp. 141–3).

even though at times Johnson departs from them to play lead. Our brains, aided by the acoustic environment, create the illusion of continuous rhythm in a ‘chimeric sound’ (Fales 2002, p. 69), often of his signature ‘boogie-woogie’ or ‘walking bass’, behind the lead,²³ such as in ‘When You Got a Good Friend’. The ladder bracing in his guitar also adds a significant amount of resonance and sustain, particularly in the upper register, which is probably enhanced by the reverb of the corner.²⁴ When capoed, as in the performance of ‘Malted Milk’, the ladder bracing and taut strings produce a bell-like resonant quality with significant sustain that sounds unlike other guitars recorded in the period.²⁵ All of these elements combine to give the listener the feeling that too many sounds are being produced to have originated from one human being, causing them to conjure another presence. The lyrics of the final verse of ‘Malted Milk’ goad these imaginings: ‘My doorknob keeps on turning, there must be spooks around my bed [2×]/I have a warm old feeling and the hair’s rising on my head’. In the remainder of the essay, I will detail more of what I am calling ‘spectral timbre’: effects that evoke an eerie sense of the unfamiliar or unnatural, challenging listeners to imagine how the sounds were produced.²⁶ These uncanny sounds feed into the myth of the pact with the devil, both for his contemporary African American listeners and for white audiences since the 1960s,²⁷ by exhibiting an inexplicable strangeness in Johnson’s singing and particularly in his guitar playing that reinforces a feeling of the unfamiliar.

Vocal timbre

To begin with measurable qualities in Johnson’s singing, Johnny Shines noted that, while not having a particularly loud or strong voice like Charley Patton or Son House, he nonetheless had a voice that carried, even in the juke or street environment (Wald 2004, p. 117). This may have been because he had a wider and generally higher range than many of his Delta contemporaries, able to sing with his head and chest

²³ On Johnson’s development of a bassline on guitar inspired by piano, see Komara (2007, pp. 36–40). Pearson and McCulloch (2003, pp. 50–51) and Conforth and Wardlow (2019, pp. 168, 191) cite Robert ‘Junior’ Lockwood as a source on the influence of piano. Anderson (with Lauterbach 2020, p. 169) asserts that her half-brother did not play piano, but may have been influenced by piano lines. Israel Clark, a childhood friend from the Robinsonville area in the Delta, claims he did play piano (Freeland 2000, p. 45).

²⁴ According to Johnny Shines in the documentary *Can’t You Hear the Wind Howl?* (Meyer, 1997), Johnson preferred Kalamazoo and Stella guitars. David ‘Honeyboy’ Edwards (1997, discography) reports in an interview from 1967 that he was playing a Stella when he knew him in Itta Bena. In the famous photograph of him made at Hooks Brothers Photography in Memphis (Anderson with Lauterbach 2020, p. 111), he is holding a Gibson LG1. Kalamazoo was an inexpensive line of guitars manufactured by Gibson (Mitchell, 2017). All of these inexpensive guitars had ladder as opposed to X-bracing, giving them a less harmonically complex sound, but more sustain (Fjestad, 2009). Many believe that Johnson recorded on a Kalamazoo KG-14 (Price, 2017).

²⁵ Johnson exploits the resonance of the guitar body for the harmonic ‘bell ringing’ in ‘Last Fair Deal Gone Down’.

²⁶ I prefer ‘spectral’ to ‘ethereal’, used by Dolan and Patteson (2018, p. 1), because of its associations with ghosts, haunting and evil spirits rather than benign or positive (super)natural presences.

²⁷ Pearson and McCulloch point out that the song selection for the 1961 release, *King of the Delta Blues*, opening with ‘Cross Road Blues’ and ending with ‘Hell Hound on My Trail’, added fuel to the legend (2003, p. 28).

voices, and use falsetto.²⁸ In the make-shift recording studios in front of a microphone, he deploys a broad range of techniques to further vary his singing voice, at times in ways that would have been imperceptible in live performance.

Although not known for using the characteristic vocal noise of the Delta blues – growl, rasp, etc. – he nonetheless produces the sound on occasion for effect in two songs in House's style, 'Walking Blues' and 'If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day'.²⁹ In 'They're Red Hot', he displays the ability to create what sounds like three distinct voices.³⁰ Against a syncopated, strummed part reminiscent of vaudeville, Johnson creates stage-like voices for distinct characters. He opens with a pinched, nasalised timbre with palatal vibration in the A line of the first verse and moves quickly to a head voice with less nasal resonance, slightly lower tones and more vibrato in the A' line. In the following line in stop time, he returns to the nasalised, constricted timbre for the first half, only to finish the line with spoken words. In the second verse, he opens with more power and vibrato in the strongest part of his range and moves to a descending, weaker spoken chest voice. The constant vocal movement against the simple musical backdrop creates the interest of the song, but also seems to defy production by one human being. Instances of vocal 'fry' or 'creak' appear,³¹ most prominently in the third verse, as well as three distinct vocal timbres in one line in verse four.

In 'Hell Hound on My Trail', against an E minor open tuning, Johnson begins at the high end of his range with significant nasal resonance and vibrato, especially on the long held 'n' sounds – as in 'movin''.³² The humming in some of the verses intensifies the timbral effect, creating a vibrating sensation in many parts of the track. He also deploys both a strained falsetto and an almost relaxed spoken/sung voice in the repetition of phrases like 'blues fallin' down like hail'. Like his performance in 'They're Red Hot', the timbral variety adds depth to the performance, here differentiating repetitions of the same words. Melisma, intensifying vibrato, and a general pattern of descent in the vocal range contribute to the complexity of the sonic environment, reinforcing the feeling of the uncanny evoked by the lyrics.

In the A' lines of 'Little Queen of Spades', Johnson takes full advantage of timbral variation to highlight changes in phrasing and accentuation. In the A line of the first verse, he uses a nasally resonant timbre in a high register and descends to deploy melisma and vibrato together, before accessing a voice closer to speech to rush the final words. In the A' iteration, he opens with a signature falsetto ooh-hoo, followed by a hum, moving back and forth between head and chest voices, spoken and sung words. Spoken asides, as in 'Come On in My Kitchen' create a sense of intimacy with the listener, while muttered and mumbled words, as in 'Terraplane Blues' and 'Phonograph Blues', lend a feeling of eavesdropping, particularly given the lyrical subject matter of sexual dissatisfaction and impotence in the latter two songs.

²⁸ Based on the recordings, Johnson's vocal range seems to cover from tenor to parts of baritone compared with the bass of most Delta singers. Wald believes that he copied the falsetto 'ooh, hoo' from Peetie Wheatstraw (Wald 2004, p. 267).

²⁹ Son House and Charley Patton employ 'pressed or tense phonation' and loose glottal closure to produce 'roughness, rasp, hoarseness, harshness, and growl' (Malawey, 2020, pp. 102–3; see also Heidemann 2016, paragraphs 3.3–3.5) on vocal fold vibration.

³⁰ Charley Patton achieves a similar effect in 'Highwater Everywhere', parts 1 and 2.

³¹ The effect is often associated with Britney Spears (Heidemann 2016, paragraph 3.9).

³² Wald describes the effect as 'unnatural' (2004, p. 172). Johnson also employs extended nasals in 'When You Got a Good Friend'.

From the vibrato moan of 'Sweet Home Chicago', to the rolled 'r' in the alternate take of 'Ramblin' on My Mind', to the breathless articulations of the exasperated lover in the final verse of 'Terraplane Blues', Johnson deploys a catalogue of vocal timbres, along with acrobatics of range and dynamics, to produce a prodigious variety of sounds that do not seem as though they could emanate from one person.

The uncanny guitar

In addition to the vocal variety, Johnson executes guitar parts that remain largely independent of the vocal lines. Changing rhythm patterns in the middle of the line, such as in 'Terraplane Blues', contrasting furious rhythm parts behind a deliberate vocal, as in 'Preaching Blues' and 'I Believe I'll Dust My Broom', or creating contrapuntal and even competing rhythmic feels in the vocal and guitar parts, as in 'Stop Breakin' Down Blues', contribute to the uncanny sense of more than one person playing. Indeed, vocal and guitar unison is fairly rare in his corpus, occurring notably for the riff in 'Come On in My Kitchen', in the refrain in 'Last Fair Deal Gone Down', and at times in 'Travelin' Riverside Blues'. More often, the busy guitar comprising both rhythm and lead functions independently of the vocal line. While many critics highlight the likely influence of blues piano players in Johnson's execution of bass rhythms on guitar, his mastery on the guitar goes well beyond this technique.³³

The complexity of the sonic environment produced is further enhanced by guitar parts that change constantly, particularly during the first sessions in San Antonio.³⁴ Rather than create a riff or longer rhythmic pattern that repeats, as most Delta players do, instead Johnson varies his guitar part. Eric Clapton cites this variability for his never having learned the songs 'note-for-note', and for his preference to perform Johnson's music with another guitarist: 'Robert's music is so asymmetrical, and there is always something new going on. I find it very difficult to play by myself' (Tolinsky and Steinblatt 2020). The mid-tempo 'Ramblin' on My Mind' in open tuning exhibits this startling variability. The song opens with a pick-up figure composed of a high-register half-step slide up to the fifth note of the scale. The hollow, ringing sound with long decay is due to the resonance of the open tuning, ladder-bracing and the likely corner loading. The opening figure is followed by the entrance of the steady pulse of the lower-register shuffle rhythm part, with a contrasting timbre.³⁵ The grace-noted figure and variants of it occur at different points in the song, sometimes before or after slide triplet fills, sometimes following shuffle rhythm fills. In the third verse about a train, Johnson sings, 'Runnin' down to the station, catch the first mail train I see', and then provides the spoken line, 'I think I hear her comin' now'. Immediately following, he performs a parallel grace-noted figure that ends with a half chord. This move, which echoes the opening and semi-recurring figure,

³³ 'Piano' effect occurs most often in fast tempos. On piano influence, see Pearson and McCulloch (2003, pp. 50–51), Conforth and Wardlow (2019, pp. 169, 191), Wald (2004, p. 137) and Komara (2007, pp. 36–40, 44–8).

³⁴ Wald notes less musical variation with fewer 'bridge verses and alternate accompaniments' in the songs recorded later in Dallas (2004, p. 173).

³⁵ I believe that Johnson is probably tuned to open E and capoed to F and not in the open F that Conforth and Wardlow propose (2019, p. 166). Komara notes Johnson's use of open E, open A and altered open A tunings (2007, pp. 45–8).

introduces a break in the rhythm featuring flamenco-like strumming that resolves with a chromatic bass walk-up leading back to the shuffle rhythm. After the complex rhythmic display, Johnson's vocal re-enters with the lyric repetition in the A' line against the shuffle backing.³⁶ Even with the break in rhythm and alternating rhythm and lead ornamentation, Johnson does not miss a beat. A similar, shorter bass walk-up occurs in the following verse after a triplet figure executed with the slide, creating 'rhyming' figures in the third and fourth verses.³⁷ The changes in the guitar part are dizzying, not to mention difficult to execute, let alone while singing an independent vocal line. Like the grace-noted figure, the shuffle pattern does not remain constant, as variations occur with different voicings and occasional rhythmic complications. In another alteration, the fill for the A line of the fourth verse adds two measures to the progression, creating another kind of break in the pattern. The final verse features dissonant-sounding partial tone movements in the triplets produced by the slide in the A line. The self-conscious repetition of figures and licks with subtle variation throughout the song creates a sense of purpose and craft in the performance.

In addition to the constant subtle variation in riffs and ornamentation in many songs, Johnson also deploys other techniques to create unusual timbral effects. 'Last Fair Deal Gone', in open A, begins with Johnson's standard descending chromatic signature frame to set up for a kind of halting rhythm part that shifts between high and low registers in the first verse. The rhythm part ultimately settles into a more regular thumping bass pulse, although part of the perception of 'regularity' is due to a 'chimeric' effect, aided by the accelerating tempo: Johnson continues to quit the rhythm periodically to play lead figures. In the fifth verse, he switches to a highly syncopated plucked half-chord rhythm part to accentuate the vocal. The final verse features harmonics to imitate the bell referenced in the lyrics in the A lines: 'And that thing don't keep ringin' so soon'. The changes and sonic variety created by timbral shifts complicate listener perception.

'Terraplane Blues' and songs in its pattern, like 'Stones in My Passway' and 'Milkcow's Calf Blues', feature a single note sounded with a slide in a pause in the middle of the B line, all the more remarkable because of a lack of other obvious contributions from the slide. More surprising, notes produced by a slide appear in the last seconds of 'Stop Breakin' Down Blues', which to this point features no slide. These touches may have been aided by Johnson's use of a thimble as reported by his half-sister, facilitating freer movement on the fretboard without the encumbrance of a larger slide (Anderson with Lauterbach 2020, p. 157). The technique enables timbral variety uncommon among Delta players, who would have probably deployed more standard slide-based fills throughout the songs (Wald 2004, p. 147; Simon 2019, p. 8). The single note sounds like an interruption to the sonic scape, changing timbre momentarily only to disappear.

What listeners hear

The changing up of guitar parts and the timbral variety in both vocal and guitar performances combine with the independence of the vocal and guitar lines to produce

³⁶ Wald hears a train imitation in the flamenco strumming (2004, p. 139).

³⁷ Harker uses the term 'musical rhyme' to describe some of Louis Armstrong's use of resemblance in tonal figures (2011, p. 43).

soundscapes of such complexity and nuance that they are difficult for listeners to process fully. Listening and re-listening, which recording affords, reveal new details and subtleties that further enhance the sense of the uncanny. The sounds lead to multiple questions. How does one person produce all these different sounds? How is it possible to constantly change guitar parts and singing voices, and each independently of the other? The more one listens, the more the sense of the inexplicable grows. The 'disrupt[ion] of the perceptual equilibrium' (Fales 2002, p. 77)³⁸ feeds the myth of the pact with the devil, as listeners attempt to construct a single source for the sounds. In a further collapse, the uncanniness of Johnson's performances attaches firmly to his persona: Robert Johnson is the inexplicably eerie.³⁹ Indeed, Johnson repeatedly points to himself as source of the sounds with his signature framing figures: a chromatic single-note descending line introduction and a syncopated, often cadenced, outro. Even in 'Drunken Hearted Blues', in which he cites a Lonnie Johnson ending as a kind of reference to the key stylistic influence for the song, he nonetheless ends with his own signature outro creating a double ending. The Lonnie Johnson ending is placed inside the frame of the Robert Johnson ending, asserting the latter as originator and source of the performance. Paradoxically, the variety on display in multiple ways signals the singularity of the individual who produced it. The sonic performance, and especially the timbral variety, inspire awe, inviting the explanation of supernatural intervention. The 'acoustic arena' that Robert Johnson creates, enables us to experience the uncanny without fear.

If, as Freud asserts, the uncanny represents the return of the repressed, for Johnson's African American audience in the Jim Crow South and urban North of the Depression, danger haunts daily life in multiple forms. Repression, aided by recourse to conjuring, charms, music, dance and other forms of social release, is probably fleeting. Ironically, Johnson's music, although it may evoke a return of the repressed through what I have been calling spectral timbre, also functions to alleviate, if only temporarily, the stress, anxiety, frustration, anger and fear that characterise the quotidian existence of its listeners. The singular performances inspire awe and wonder, a counterbalance to the terror of daily life. For white audiences, especially since the release of *King of the Delta Blues Singers* in 1961 and *The Complete Recordings* in 1990, the impact of Johnson's musical prowess may be even stronger. Imagining how a lone individual in front of one microphone in a make-shift studio, without modern-day editing, mixing and mastering techniques, produced the prodigious variety of sounds on display invites a belief in supernatural aid. Bolstered by a racialised romanticism framing the blues as representative of Black vernacular culture, the performances evoke a desire among later audiences to believe in the myth of the crossroads. Both familiar and oddly unfamiliar even after repeated listening, Johnson's music affords access to an experience of the uncanny that, while perceived as threatening because of Satanic intervention, ultimately serves to strengthen the sense of control and mastery in his dazzling display of virtuosity. Constructing Robert Johnson as a source of the sounds, listeners experience awe and reverence rather than fear, enabling them to believe in an uncanny human incarnation of singular talent.

³⁸ Fales uses the phrase in a slightly different context to describe the effect of timbral manipulations (2002, p. 77).

³⁹ Heidemann underscores the tendency to collapse vocal timbre and persona, citing Aretha Franklin (2016, paragraph 1.2).

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