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The Significance of Cars in the Delta: Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues" (Vocalion 03416, 1937)

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**The Significance of Cars in the Delta: Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues," (Vocalion, 03416, 1937)**

Abstract:

Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues" was a modest hit for the newly recorded bluesman. Notable musically for its elaborate intertwining rhythms and disjointed sections, interpretations of the song have revolved around its lyrical double entendres that equate a woman to a car to discuss her infidelity and the narrator's resultant inability to arouse or satisfy his partner sexually. Although the car in the title has been identified as a Hudson model, scant attention has been paid to the socio-cultural significance of cars in the Delta in the late 1930s.

Cars represent a charged locus of convergence of meanings in the Mississippi Delta: a commodity that condenses not only racialized, socio-economic relations, but also the forces of modernization. Ambiguously identified as both means of mobility and significant investments, cars symbolize both escape and entrapment by the economic system. Recontextualizing the central symbol in "Terraplane Blues" with the aid of Federal Writers Project interviews and sociological studies of the Delta complicates our understanding of the meaning of the song. The affective shifts associated with sexual betrayal and frustration, as well as the musical leaps and gaps, map onto the contested meanings of automobiles among an impoverished and largely immobilized African American population during the Depression.

Keywords:

Johnson, Robert, 1911-1938

Blues musicians -- Mississippi

Blues (Music) -- Mississippi

Guitar music (Blues)

Automobiles -- Social aspects -- United States -- History -- 20th century

**The Significance of Cars in the Delta: Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues," (Vocalion, 03416, 1937)**

"I had a 4,000 dollar car and 3,900 dollars in my pocket. I'm the onliest one drove out of the South like a gentleman." Chester Arthur Burnett (Howlin' Wolf)<sup>1</sup>

In November 1936, Robert Johnson was invited to record some sides with American Record Corporation (ARC) in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>2</sup> On the first day, Monday the 23<sup>rd</sup>, he recorded a song that became a modest hit by contemporary blues standards, "Terraplane Blues" (Wald 131, 145).<sup>3</sup> The extended metaphor comparing a woman to a model of Hudson car creates a more sophisticated version of the kind of double-entendres often heard in hokum compositions.<sup>4</sup> The musical setting is striking for its intricate, slightly syncopated rhythmic figures set in a duple meter, percussive taps of the guitar body, use of stops, held vibrated notes created with the slide contrasting with picked triplet fills, and a fourth verse distinguished by a shuffle rhythm played in a simpler style for the first four bars.<sup>5</sup> The vocal delivery features falsetto, mumbled talking asides, and the characteristic feeling of disjointedness between Johnson's vocal and guitar work. Overall, the virtuosic performance highlights several kinds of dexterity and artistry: in verbal play or signifying, in singing, and especially in guitar technique.

Critics most often focus on the sexual innuendo of the extended metaphor. Likening the song to a tradition that employs metaphors to reference body parts—lemons, peaches, cabbages, jelly rolls, etc.—they overlook the socio-cultural meanings set into motion by the comparison. Reading backwards, Robert Palmer sees "Terraplane Blues" as a founding "car song," reading it as ancestor of "Rocket 88" and overlooking the profound ambivalence it voices (222).<sup>6</sup> In effect, by focusing on the relation created between the woman's and car's bodies and stopping there,

they fail to question what the car means in the socio-historical context of the creation and reception of the song. The use of the extended car metaphor creates a particularly charged semantic field that is not anodyne in the context of the Jim Crow South. So what do cars mean in the segregated world of the rural South of the early twentieth century?

The area of Mississippi most associated with the blues and in which Johnson traveled and performed was developed comparatively late. The Delta, described by sociologist Lewis W. Jones as “the area between Memphis and Vicksburg along the Mississippi . . . approximately 8,000 square miles of level, low-lying land . . . [giving the effect of] a vast oval about one hundred and eighty miles long and roughly seventy-five miles wide. . . . is almost exclusively agricultural, yielding one of the richest cotton crops in the United States” (Gordon and Nemerov 31). In order for this area to be exploitable for cotton production as a “super plantation region” (Woods 45), the land had to be cleared, levees built, and transportation systems secured. According to historian Robert L. Brandfon, “in 1860 less than one-tenth [of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta] was cleared for cultivation” (40). The mono-crop producing Delta was a product of the postbellum period, with levees constructed during the 60 years following the war (Jones 36). In 1900, about 30% of the land was ready for cultivation (Cobb 100). Railroads and, most significantly for my purposes, roads were much later developments. Sociologist Jones’s designations for generations of African Americans in the Delta by their mode of transportation is instructive here: “The River (roughly 1860–1890), The Railroad (1890–1920), and The Highway (1920–1940)” (Gordon and Nemerov 29). Robert Johnson, and indeed all the early Delta blues musicians, fall into the railroad and highway generations, more mobile than earlier generations because of the advent of railroads and highways.

Paved roads came to this area of Mississippi late. In researching the myth of the crossroads in Robert Johnson lore, Adam Gussow characterizes the Mississippi highway system as “lagging” in 1929 (273, Lesseig 67-8).<sup>7</sup> As Gussow remarks in reference to Johnson’s car song: “he was thinking of a late-model Hudson with a terminal velocity of eighty miles per hour, a speed that would have been inconceivable on the dusty gravel of old Highway 61, where thirty miles per hour was the limit. . .” (270). Highway 61, which now intersects with Highway 49 outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi with a sculpture proclaiming its significance as “the crossroads” for gullible tourists, was only completed in July 1935 (Gussow 278). Throughout the early twentieth century, travel through the Delta was slow and difficult due to the paucity of paved roads, not to mention automobiles.<sup>8</sup>

When Johnson’s 78 was released in early 1937, paved roads were relatively new, as were cars. Although comparatively low-priced, listing at \$595 in 1937 (figure 1), a new Terraplane was well out of reach for those who made up the audience for Johnson’s songs: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and wage laborers in the Delta.<sup>9</sup> According to the U.S. Census, beginning in the nineteen teens, the vast majority of farmers in the region were tenants—92% in 1913, 95% of whom were African American (Brandfon 135). The Depression did nothing to improve these numbers and, in fact, increased the numbers of wage laborers.<sup>10</sup>

The sharecropping system that dominated labor organization in the Delta evolved in response to multiple economic factors and pressures: scarcity of capital, the desire for planters to keep laborers for a year-long production cycle, and practices of racialized gang labor with careful oversight dating back to slavery (Jaynes 158-68, Woodman 298-313). The typical sharecropping contract paid laborers a share of the crop—1/3 for croppers and 1/2 for tenants who provided their own tools—minus repayment of “the furnish,” the name given to expenses plus

interest incurred from purchases for subsistence during crop production. As sociologists Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid explain, prices and credit rates on items purchased could be exorbitant, creating perpetual indebtedness for workers:

In arranging “the furnish,” the landlord or merchant takes a lien on the tenant’s crop for the debt thus incurred. The usual carrying charge is a flat 10 per cent. But most of the food and clothing are advanced to the tenant after March; the debt is paid when the cotton is sold in September. “Ten per cent interest” on money for three and a half months is an interest rate of 35 per cent per annum. The “credit price,” usually charged on goods consumed in the spring, commonly raises the total annual interest to 50 per cent or more, and so the tenant family’s two-hundred-dollar income is actually worth much less than that in cash (22).<sup>11</sup>

Predatory lending combined with crooked accounting practices at settlement time ensured that laborers most often ended the year in debt or just breaking even. Few had money to spend at the end of the year. As Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch explain in their volume of Federal Writers Project (FWP) interviews,

It takes a considerable leap of imagination to transport ourselves to the rural South of the 1930s, where two of every three Southerners lived, where almost one in two Southerners earned their too-often meager living from farming, where more than half of those farmers (1,831,475 in 1935) worked other people’s land, where sharecroppers earned an average of \$312 a year, and hired farm labor \$180. And tenantry had increased steadily during the first three decades of the twentieth century: “I aimed when I started out to own me a farm, but it didn’t turn out that way.” (Terrill and Hirsch 41)<sup>12</sup>

From the landlord's perspective, the sharecropping contract had the advantage of binding labor to the land for a period of a year, reducing the risk of default, particularly at crucial times in production, such as harvest (Jaynes 85, Wright 172).<sup>13</sup> Sharing in the crop was conceived of by planters as an inducement for laborers to work harder because of the stake in the outcome that shares theoretically represented.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, sharecropping and tenancy represented forms of control over workers, ways of making them stay in one place, working throughout an entire crop cycle and beyond.

As if these economic forms of control and coercion were insufficient, Raper and Reid also describe the practice by landlords of discouraging croppers and tenants from accruing savings. They write, "To continue the profits from furnishings, many plantation owners encourage their tenants to "run through" with whatever surplus cash they may have at settlement time. They may virtually enforce the practice: first, by retaining ownership of the land . . . ; second, by giving preference to dependent tenants, on the assumption that a man without food or credit will be a more regular and obedient worker; and third, by encouraging and assisting the tenant to spend any cash he has at the end of the year for non-productive goods, such as a cooking range, a phonograph, or an old automobile" (39). While most whites, in the words of southern historian Jack T. Kirby "never ceased to complain that the poor foolishly purchased cars in good years instead of farming equipment and land" (257), nonetheless, landlords encouraged the purchase of material goods as a bulwark against social mobility through land acquisition.

The appearance of a used car at the end of Raper and Reid's list is significant for the ambivalent attitudes it represents. If landlords were interested in binding labor to the land, allowing or encouraging the purchase of a means of transportation—a mode of escape—would

seem undesirable. And yet, savings could lead to a more problematic purchase from the white landlords' perspective: land. As a white landlord expressed to a FWP interviewer, "A nigger and a automobile is one of the dangerousest combinations in this country today; the road ain't safe long as he operates a automobile. Still, in another way it's the best for the white man to let the nigger spend his money for a car instead o' land. We're bound to keep the nigger down; it's all that saves us" (Terrill and Hirsch 264). Faced with the alternative of African American land ownership, most white landowners preferred that their workers purchase cars.

But what do cars represent for the African American laborer in the Jim Crow South? The sociologist Arthur Raper, while acknowledging the economic trap that a car represents, defended the purchase of an automobile on psychological grounds: "The feel of power, even in an old automobile, is most satisfying to a man who owns nothing, directs nothing, and while producing a crop literally begs food from his landlord" (174). Raper's defense calls to mind the powerful symbolism of the automobile: freedom and independence expressed through mobility. These are precisely the attributes and privileges of white, male citizenship that African Americans and white women were denied in the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, as Paul Gilroy points out, cars were initially marketed to white consumers only, "Some companies expressly stipulated that their machines should not be sold to those few blacks who could afford them." Gilroy continues,

For African-American populations seeking ways out of the lingering shadows of slavery, owning and using automobiles supplied one significant means to measure the distance travelled toward political freedoms and public respect. Employed in this spirit, cars seem to have conferred or rather suggested dimensions of citizenship and status that were blocked by formal politics and violently inhibited by informal codes. (93-4).



Cars offered participation in what cultural historian Cotten Seiler terms automobility, “a practice that fused self-determination and self-representation, mobility, consumption, and social encounter” (106).<sup>15</sup> As a special kind of highly visible property, Gilroy has suggested that cars confer status in a way that is especially appealing to a population deprived of property and material possessions (84). The Terraplane, as a symbol, evokes participation in American society on a number of levels that lie outside the grasp of Robert Johnson’s audience.

But the automobile is not a wholly positive symbol. Owning a car represents a significant on-going financial burden for gasoline and repairs, as well as a risk for further property loss. A story told by African American sharecroppers in a FWP interview illustrates:

Another time when we wanted a car, he [Mr. Anderson, the landlord] bought us one over in Weldon [North Carolina], but made us put up the two mules we owned den against de car. De boys was in a wreck and damaged de car right smart. Mr. Anderson come and took the mules and de car too. After he had it fixed up, we tried to get him to sell it back to us. He wouldn’t, but went and sold it to another man. So we was lackin’ a car and mules too. (*These Are Our Lives* 21-2)

The landlord seizes not only the mules by means of a lien for the car, but also property in the car itself, selling it out from under the tenants after repairs. The tenants are left without one of the most significant tools necessary for farming—mules—but also, effectively pushed down the socio-economic ladder from tenant to sharecropper.

Moreover, having an automobile required adherence to new sets of rules governing the road and driving. Although ostensibly the rules of the road applied to everyone equally—aligning with the American value of equality before the law—driving in the Jim Crow South presented challenges to this form of equality. Citing Mamie Garvin Fields’s memoir of growing

up in Charleston, South Carolina, Mark S. Foster notes that “Even in terms of observing driving etiquette, blacks had to be careful. As one historian noted, in the Delta region, “custom forbade black drivers to overtake vehicles driven by whites on unpaved roads.” The reason was that they might stir up dust which would get on whites” (Foster 143).<sup>16</sup>

Johnson’s “Terraplane Blues” uses the car as a metaphor to voice ambivalent attitudes toward the emotional context of labor dependency and enforced immobility in the Delta. To begin with the song’s title, the name of this particular model of Hudson, a *terra-plane*, could be understood to reference the automobile’s land-hugging locomotion. Purchasing this particular car is out of reach not only because of its price, but seemingly for the kind of mobility over land that its name invokes. African American sharecroppers are doubly barred from this experience. They are tied to the land and effectively immobilized through predatory labor contracts. And those who do manage to scrape together enough savings to buy a car are encouraged to do so because it prevents the purchase of land. The invocation of land and movement in the name of the car condenses a contested field of racialized relations aimed at curtailing both geographic and socio-economic mobility.<sup>17</sup>

The frustrations arising out of economic exploitation and enforced immobility converging in the symbolism of the car are associated with sexual frustrations by the central metaphor of the song. Using the car to invoke a woman’s infidelity and the narrator’s resultant inability to arouse or satisfy his partner sexually, establishes a connection between similar feelings—anger, frustration, pain, hurt—occasioned by both socio-economic exploitation and amorous betrayal. The opening couplet: “I feel so lonesome, you hear me when I moan (2) / Who been drivin’ my terraplane for you since I been gone?” establishes the emotional context spurred by suspicions of infidelity and expressed as an interrogative accusation. While the protagonist/narrator feels pain

and isolation, voiced in the *moans*, he is nonetheless determined to locate the cause of the woman's lack of response recast as automotive trouble. References to car parts and his interaction with them communicate a sense of agency in spite of frustration: "I said I flashed your lights, mama" "I'm 'on' heist your hood... I'm bound to check your oil." The humorous use of the car metaphor employs suggestive language, particularly in relation to the electrical system, to contribute to the feeling of agency: "Got a short in this connection hoo-well, babe, it's way down below," and "I'm gonna get deep down in this connection, keep on tanglin' with your wires." The language indirectly conjures graphic images of a woman's body and the protagonist's engagement with it. The intimacy and eroticism of the language, reinforced by its seductive playfulness, highlight the protagonist's/narrator's active role. But at the same time, the lack of results, also expressed through the car metaphor, signal his failure to achieve his desired end: "your horn won't even blow," "Now, you know the coils ain't even buzzin, little generator won't get the spark." No matter what he tries, he cannot elicit a sexual response. He's doing all the right things and nonetheless he cannot get any results.

His rising frustration parallels the anger and resentment of tenants and croppers who played by the rules—they worked hard and tried to save—but whose efforts were thwarted by a system designed to keep them in check. Tied to the land by a form of debt peonage, they were powerless to assert agency to effect change—to be auto-mobile. The constraints on their movements and actions are extreme, reaching all the way down to the crops they plant and the food they eat. As one sharecropper told a FWP interviewer, "De landlord wouldn't give us no land foh a garden, er no wire to fence it, ef we could of got some land. He ain't like Mistuh Brewer down de road. Mistuh Brewer give his 'croppers land foh a garden, en if dey use it he doan' charge 'em no rent, but ef dey doan' use it he makes 'em pay rent on it, eight dollars an

acre—but we had to plant cotton right up to de do” (Terrill and Hirsch 55). The protagonist’s impotence (although not sexual), like the tenants’, is the result of forces beyond his control. Try as he might to “start the car,” his woman-car will not respond. As the verses unfold, the sense of his unwillingness to relinquish his claim on her intensifies.

The frustration and determination, although expressed playfully, are also matched by pain and hurt. The vocal delivery, while seemingly insouciant at times, also gives voice to painful emotion at other times. From the elongated pronunciation of *feel* in the opening verse referencing *moans*, to the half-lines sung in falsetto: “But I’m cryin please, please don’t do me wrong,” the vocal performance oscillates between high-spirited forms of recounting and emotional outbursts in the form of pleas.

The ambiguous form of address used in the song reinforces the sense of oscillation between mocking use of the extended metaphor and pain at betrayal.<sup>18</sup> The first-person discourse of the song uses the car metaphor to describe attempts to arouse the lover or diagnose a problem in language that is presumably addressed to her, “you gotta have these batteries charged.” Other lines seem to be beseechingly expressed to her, “But I’m cryin please, please don’t do me wrong / Who been drivin my terraplane now for you-hoo since I’ve been gone?” But the ostensible direct discourse addressed to her also hints at another destinee.<sup>19</sup> The mastery of technical vocabulary on display (“coils,” “generator,” “batteries,” “sparkplug”) suggests that the tale is being recounted to someone who can appreciate the narrator’s knowledge and skill, most likely not the unfaithful lover, but an audience of listeners. Some Delta sharecroppers may have had familiarity with gasoline engines from tractors, but detailed knowledge of the workings of a car engine represented something both exotic and tantalizing, outside their realm of experience.<sup>20</sup> An audience of rural workers would likely be impressed with

the specialized knowledge and verbal mastery offering a counterbalance to the narrator's lack of sexual skill.

The agency represented in the verbal dexterity in both the technical lexicon and signifying is matched by the musical mastery on display in a veritable lesson in guitar technique.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the sense of control and mastery in the lyrics, vocal delivery, and especially guitar work answer the sense of loss of control or impotence represented by the lover's tepid response to his supposedly expert actions. The seductiveness of the language and the guitar virtuosity, clearly addressed not to the woman but an audience of listeners, works against the lack of agency expressed in her lack of response and the presumed betrayal.

Mastery is evident in the guitar part that works quasi-independently from the vocal, at times creating new rhythms and phrases in the middle of the articulation of a word or an alternate rhythm to that of the vocal phrasing. The sparing use of held vibrato notes created with the slide reminds the listener that Johnson executes the plucked triplet fills with a slide on his finger, reserving this technique for maximum effect rather than providing slide fills to the vocal, as other Delta guitarists might (Wald 147). Most surprising in the performance is the stripped-down, single-note, ascending pattern of the opening bars of the fourth verse that breaks rhythm and calls attention to itself. In the most technical section of the lyrics, Johnson interrupts the AA'B pattern to sing a diagnostic list of problems with the "car." The simplified musical backing enables the lyrics to be clearly understood, while it simultaneously calls attention to them. While the section momentarily breaks time, it demonstrates further mastery both on guitar and in lyrical creation by neatly and effortlessly returning back to the triplet pattern of the earlier verses. The verse culminates with the falsetto delivery of the plaintive call to the unfaithful lover, "please, don't do me wrong." The highly dexterous movement back and forth—between rhythmic

patterns and vocal styles—signals both mastery and lack of control: while the bluesman controls the forms of his musical delivery, emotion also seemingly breaks through.

Parallel to the displacement of agency from the sexual to the artistic realm, mobility is also displaced in the song. While the woman-car will not start—symbolizing immobility—the music enacts significant movement. The dense triplet fills with varied rhythms, and particularly the change in rhythm to an almost shifting-gears feel in the fourth verse, enact the movement denied by socio-economic conditions. The vocal dexterity with controlled use of falsetto contributes to the display of tremendous musical movement in contrast to the stationary woman-automobile.

The fifth verse that follows the rhythmic change introduces a significant break in the mode of address and signals a turning point in the song. The protagonist/narrator addresses a third party directly: “Mr. Highwayman, please don’t block the road / Puh hee hee, ple-hease don’t block the road / ’Cause she's re’ist’ri’ a cold one hundred and I’m booked I gotta go.” Employing the same plaintive tone and falsetto used to address the cheating lover, the lines are addressed to a mysterious highwayman. The menace associated with the highwayman—an armed robber stopping travelers on roads to rob and/or murder them—is amplified by racial overtones.<sup>22</sup> Ku Klux Klan members used road blocks to threaten, intimidate, and enact violence to exercise power and control over African Americans. Just as easily as cars, wagons pulled by mules could fall victim to highwaymen or robed Klansmen, enforcing immobility through extralegal means. The lyrics would resonate with an audience of listeners attuned to the dangers of the open road.

The invocation of the highwayman serves as a reminder of the ambivalence surrounding the kind of freedom, independence, and mobility symbolized by the car. For white, male

subjects these values may be largely, if not wholly positive, but for black subjects living under Jim Crow, a car was, forgive the expression, loaded with baggage. Even the seeming equality afforded by the rules of the road was thwarted by local customs that enforced idiosyncratic, racialized forms of interaction that differed from place to place, exacerbating danger.<sup>23</sup> The invocation of the highwayman in the song reinforces the negative associations built up through the extended metaphor comparing the unfaithful lover to a car. While having a faithful woman or a functioning car might be a desirable thing, for most of Johnson's audience, the extended metaphor of the Terraplane warns against the dangers of acquiring a material possession that condenses so many cultural meanings. Trying to assert agency by purchasing a car in order to experience mobility, freedom, independence, and equality, might just lead to frustration, anger, danger, and a feeling of powerlessness.

The B line of the highwayman verse asserts a strange causal relation between not wanting to be stopped and the need to move: "Cause she's re'ist'rin' a cold one hundred and I'm booked and I gotta go."<sup>24</sup> The *she* referenced in the first half of the line seemingly refers to both the car and the woman, reaching top speed, "a cold one hundred," without overheating. The line may indicate that she is threatening to leave, perhaps in a cold-hearted, dispassionate manner, untouched by his pleas. The speed reference is coupled with an assertion concerning the protagonist's/narrator's own mobility as a traveling musician. Like the mention of the "a woman that I'm lovin, way down in Arkansas" in the third verse, the reference to the rambling lifestyle of the bluesman serves a braggadocio function in highlighting his own need to move. In this respect, the B line of the verse counters the menace of the highwayman with a kind of insistent mobility linked both to the woman through the car metaphor and the life of a musician, suggesting a lack of emotional ties that would hinder movement.

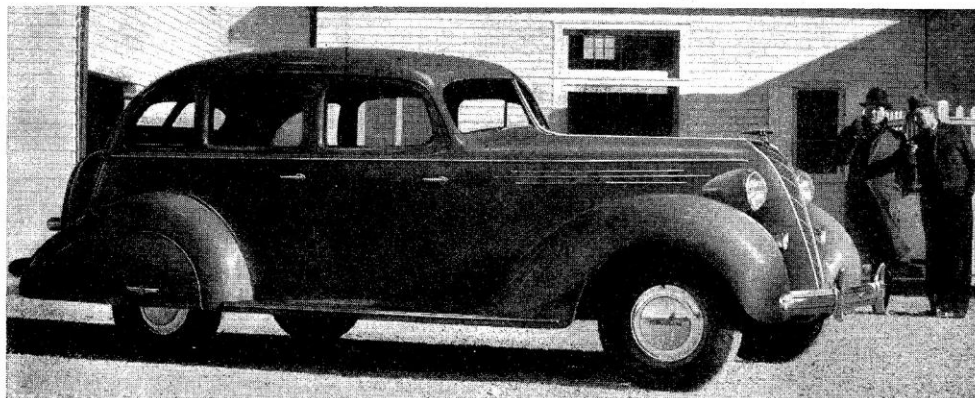
The verse that follows opens with humming and moaning in the A and A' lines, enacting and repeating the assertion "you hear me weep and moan" from the opening. Given the complex set of emotions set in play by the extended metaphor and its socio-cultural associations evoked to this point in the performance, inarticulate vocalizations reflect overwhelming emotion and the difficulty of putting feelings into words. Directly following the oblique assertion of lack of emotional attachment in the preceding verse, the inarticulate outburst is even more powerful for the lack of control that it represents. Against Jon Michael Spencer's argument that moans and hums are deeply spiritual forms of expression in the blues (39), I would argue that the absence of semantic content here connotes the inability of language to capture the complexity of human emotions in a profoundly material and secular way. The extended metaphor of the car has linked multiple forms of frustration, anger, fear, and pain that subtend daily existence for African Americans in the Delta in the 1930s. These feelings are likely most often repressed by individuals in order for life to go on. The invocation of the repressed emotional subtext of quotidian existence that suffuses all relationships with fraught and contradictory feelings leads to an overwhelming of the subject who is reduced to vocalizations that communicate raw emotion. For an audience all too painfully familiar with the experience, the inarticulate vocalizations enable connection and possibly catharsis.

After the emotional outburst of the penultimate verse, the song ends on a playful note of optimism. Johnson returns to the erotic scene to express his determination to succeed: "I'm 'on' get deep down in this connection, hoo-well, keep on tanglin with these wires / And when I mash down on your little starter, then your spark plug will give me a fire." Imagining igniting the flames of passion and starting the car, highlighted by the signature held slide note in the pause after *starter*, he returns to the playful braggadocio of imagined sexual prowess. The fantasies of



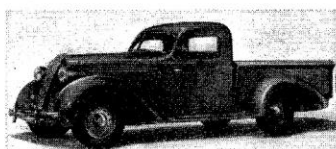
starting the car and pleasuring the lover both represent forms of agency and control: the ability to move and to please sexually. The fulfillment of such fantasies displaced onto the musical performance asserts the autonomy and independence of the blues singer, against the odds. The song ends with a descending line with a cadence created by a slight rhythmic hesitation, putting a light-hearted finishing touch on a powerful display of mastery expressed through a metaphor for its lack. Despite the dangers, he seems to suggest, there is joy in focused and determined action that sometimes leads to pleasures in spite of roadblocks of various kinds standing in the way of fulfillment.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mark A. Humphrey, "Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Blues," *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1993): 151-203, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch write, "according to most accounts, he [Johnson] traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, to audition for H. C. Speir," a music storeowner who functioned as a local talent scout. "Speir put Johnson in touch with Ernie Oertle, a salesman and scout for the American Record Corporation (ARC), and Oertle twice took (or sent) Johnson to Texas to record," (8). The Speir story may originate with Robert Palmer, who provides no source (124) or Mack McCormick who never published his work on Johnson or, most likely, from Gayle Dean Wardlow's interviews with Speir from the 1960s. Peter Guralnick, relying on McCormick, recounts a similar version of the story of an audition (32-3). Peter Graves embellishes the story of an audition with Speir to include a recorded demo (32). On Speir, see also Jeff Todd Titon (212-3) and David Evans (41). Neither Titon nor Evans links Johnson to Speir, although the connection is highly probable given Johnson's stay in Hazlehurst and its proximity to Jackson, (Komara 56).

<sup>3</sup> "Terraplane Blues" likely sold about 5,000 copies (Guralnick 37, Graves 57). In email correspondence with Komara, he confirmed that the number, included in Frank Driggs' liner notes for Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues Singers* (Columbia 1961) is based on 4 factors: "1. Ross Russell, owner of Dial Records in 1946-1953, told me that 1000 copies was necessary to earn back the costs in producing and pressing a 2-sided disc. Dials were \$1 a disc. For a lower-cost label like the ARC labels, at least 2000 would have had to be sold. 2. Simply the fact that ARC invited Johnson back for a second set of sessions. 3. Several of the 1937 performances use the melody and much of the accompaniment of the "Terraplane," as if in an effort to replicate the fall 1936 sales success. 4. Older collectors of blues 78s (like Wardlow) have said anecdotally that among surviving copies of Johnson 78s, there are many more copies of "Terraplane" than there are of his other releases" (email correspondence with Komara 23 Jan. 2018). ARC also distributed the song on two of its other labels: 900 copies on Perfect and 75 on Oriole (Wirz). Johnson recorded 8 songs on that day and 8 more on the Thursday and Friday of that week. He recorded 13 more sides the following year in Dallas over two days.

<sup>4</sup> Wald likens the Johnson recording to hokum songs by Bo Carter and others (146), but the crudity of the average hokum track does not rise to the level of signifying in "Terraplane Blues." More typical of the hokum genre is the break-out "It's Tight Like That" of Tampa Red and Georgia Tom. Stephen C. LaVere explains that "*The Terraplane was a low-priced, conservatively modern sedan offered by the Hudson Motor Co. from 1933 to 1938,*" (30). More typically, the pre-war blues feature Cadillacs and Fords used primarily in metaphors and analogies concerning sex and social status.

<sup>5</sup> Komara traces possible musical sources for many of the features of "Terraplane Blues," including Charlie Patton as a possible inspiration for the "bare single note, plucked just before the fourth beat of the first measure of the dominant V phrase." He also argues quite persuasively that the fills represent a transposition of harmonica technique to the guitar (16, 57).

<sup>6</sup> The reference is to Ike Turner's Rhythm King's recording attributed to Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats, "Rocket 88." Virginia Liston's "Rolls Royce Papa" and Blind Lemon Jefferson's "D B Blues" both employ an extended car metaphor for sexual relations and may have been source material for Johnson.

<sup>7</sup> The federal government did not begin investing in highways until the 1930s (Rose and Mohl 2).

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census data from 1920 indicate that rates of automobile ownership were lowest in the Cotton Belt (Vance 6).

<sup>9</sup> Rose and Mohl note that while Southerners are generally more "culturally conservative" than Northerners, they nonetheless began purchasing cars at significant rates in the 1920s (3). Of course, this trend reflects the consumer habits of white Southerners. For statistics on automobile purchases by Mississippians in the early twentieth century, see Lesseig (2-3).

<sup>10</sup> At the bottom of the economic ladder, wage laborers struggled to survive. The Agricultural Adjustment Act and other New Deal policies enabled planters to evict tenants and force them into greater precarity (Mertz 10-1).

<sup>11</sup> On the exorbitant credit rates, see Mandle (48-9). There was a two-price (cash or credit) system that also inflated prices, *These Are Our Lives* (49, 115).

<sup>12</sup> Internal quotation from an unpublished history.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Roback points out that sharecropping reduces the planters' risk of default (41).

<sup>14</sup> W.E.B. Dubois argues that freedpeople were quite industrious when it came to labor and that the perception of laziness was due to race prejudice (588).

<sup>15</sup> Seiler notes with respect to travel guides written for African Americans that “Racial attitudes and policies shifted during these guidebooks’ years of publication, 1936 to 1957, as World War II and the cold war made the national doctrine of white supremacy a global political liability. It was in this historical context that African Americans’ desire and fitness for citizenship were tethered to and divined in their participation in automobility, a practice that fused self-determination and self-representation, mobility, consumption, and social encounter” (106).

<sup>16</sup> Internal citation to Fields (181-2).

<sup>17</sup> Most pre-war blues songs that mention cars (and they are in the minority) reference Fords and Cadillacs, and most often in sexual metaphors or as emblems of status. Johnson’s own “They’re Red Hot,” recorded later in the same week in November 1936, mentions a V-Eight Ford. Memphis Minnie’s “Garage Fire Blues” provides a rare example of a mention of a Hudson along with a Cadillac.

<sup>18</sup> Pearson and McCulloch claim that 27 of the 29 songs Johnson recorded “were addressed to women,” (106). While second-person forms of address to women exist in the songs, there are also third-person addresses to women, as well as indications of communication to a broader audience.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of modes of address in relation to narrative in the blues, see Simon (2013). On the distinction between protagonist, narrator, and singer, see Simon (2017: 101-7, 113-5).

<sup>20</sup> Kirby documents 805 tractors among the Delta plantations in 1930 (34). Other songs that reference automobile parts, such as Virginia Liston’s “Rolls Royce Papa,” do not contain this kind of technical lexicon.

<sup>21</sup> Even Eric Clapton remarks about the song after a recorded performance with Doyle Bramhall, III, “it’s tough on the fingers that one,” specifically referencing the plucked triplet fill pattern. On *Sessions for Robert J...* (Reprise/Wea 2004). Komara speculates that this plucked style of inverted chord fill is derived from harmonica playing (57).

<sup>22</sup> The OED lists Mark Twain’s use of the word in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), “We are highwaymen. We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill people and take their watches and money.” The term is related to the expression “highway robbery.” I disagree with Komara’s interpretation of the “highway man” referenced in the song as an early state trooper (55). The Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol, “a statewide police force,” was not created until 1938 (Lesseig 23).

<sup>23</sup> Citing examples from Raper and Kirby, Seiler argues that “There was some truth to automobility’s promise for African Americans. Despite the violence and intimidation directed toward black drivers, the road even in its earlier iteration had to some degree provided a space where the everyday discrimination and coercion African Americans faced in other public spaces—in stores, theaters, public buildings, and restaurants, for example, or on sidewalks and public transportation—could be blunted, circumvented, and even avenged,” (125). He does also assert that “For black drivers, the road’s only constant was uncertainty” (115). Foster stresses the lack of equality and danger the road represents even for prosperous African Americans.

<sup>24</sup> In a very odd intertext, Thérèse Smith documents a “Harvest Day” sermon from a Baptist church in northern Mississippi in 1986 that employs the car metaphor to evoke the warmth of religious faith: “If you don’t crank automobile up (sic.), the motor never will get warm. Ain’t God all right? You crank the thing up and let it run a while and I declare it get warm. But I’m goin’ to leave you now. But every once in a while, I have to crank mine up and let the Holy Ghost warm it up” (191-2).

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