As rock has gradually begun to incorporate new elements from other music forms, both musicians and listeners alike seem to have developed a new interest in its roots. Unquestionably, a major influence on much of today's rock music is the blues — more specifically, rural blues.

What you hold in your hands is a collection of 16 songs by the greatest down-home blues singer of all time, Robert Johnson. This, the second volume of "King of the Delta Blues Singers," completes the release of Johnson's total recorded output.

Robert Johnson's influence on contemporary rock is just beginning to be felt. The Stones included one of the tunes from this collection (Love in Vain) on their "Let It Bleed" album. It's even rumored that Johnny Winter learned to play slide guitar off the first Robert Johnson album. So, if you dig contemporary music, especially the blues, give a listen to Robert Johnson, the original master.

—Jon Wexman
The twenty-nine compositions recorded by Robert Johnson for the American Record Corporation in 1935 and 1936 rank as the most expressive and poetic body of work committed to record by any blues singer. These songs are his estate, the chronicle of his experience and the enduring legacy of his imagination.

These recordings of Johnson's songs represent the ultimate flowering of Mississippi Delta blues, the extension of that intensely fierce idiom to the fullest reaches to which it can be taken. In his songs there is revealed a vision of the world, a poetic dimension and an expressive level that are unequaled in the blues. No other blues are so apocalyptic in their life view. They are shot through with dark foreboding, and almost total disenchantment with the human condition.

His songs deal with three recurrent themes: the impermanence of human relationships, particularly those of love; inexorable wandering, most often as the result of disappointments suffered at the hands of women; and the besetting, mindless terrors that haunted all his days and nights. There's no home for him anywhere, his songs say; there's no place for his body even after death; all he can imagine is fleeing, as he did all his life. He saw conflict as a basic element of life—women refused him, stones blocked his passway, opportunities passed him by, and hellhounds pursued him. His songs are the diary of a wanderer through the tangle of the black underworld, the chronicle of a sensitive black Orpheus in his journey along the labyrinthine path of the human psyche. In his songs one hears the impassioned, unheeded cries of man, rootless and purposeless. The acid stench of evil burns ever in his mind.

What is remarkable about his music is that, unlike blues rooted in the experiences and private vision of its writer, Johnson's songs attain universality. Despite whatever relevance they might have as fragments of his autobiography, his blues—by virtue of the strength and directness of their language, the sharpness and richness of his poetic vision, and the telling statements they make about the human condition—speak to us eloquently and movingly. Johnson's songs are powerful, sharply connotative utterances, and often brilliant folk poetry that treats much of the same matter, and in the same manner, as does the best modern poetry.

Johnson's view of life evidences a basic concern with human relations: his concern is not with the deity or with nature. Here he may have had a strikingly prophetic insight. Since the days when he sang, we have had less to say about nature as an influential force on our actions. Our lives have become a function of how we relate to each other—the burden of Johnson's songs. He is aware, he shows us, of the force of the subconscious on our actions—"I mistreated my baby and I can't see no reason why"—but his knowledge is dim and unrealized.

Stylistically, Johnson was a Mississippi Delta bluesman. The music of that area always has placed a high premium on the close relationship between voice and accompanying guitar, but in Johnson's case that relationship was uncanny—singular, in fact. In most of his performances, voice and guitar seem a single incandescent instrument, one of almost indescribable sensitivity and complex subtlety. The guitar does not support or respond to the voice so much as it simultaneously articulates with equal intensity, though with differing focus, the same thought. He needs to express both the complex subtlety and the more than occasional ambiguity of his thoughts. The two are so inseparably fused in his mind that the words of his songs come fully alive only in the context of his performances.

Johnson was a brilliant musician, a tireless perfectionist who worked over his music until he had placed every element precisely where he wanted it. Those musicians who knew and worked with him—Johnny Shines, Henry Townsend and David Edwards, among others—have commented on this aspect of his music, remarking that once Johnson had developed a song to his satisfaction, he performed it exactly the same way every time he did it thereafter. This is supported by a comparison of the several takes of some of his recordings; in most cases where alternate versions of his songs exist, they are almost identical, even to the smallest subtleties of accompaniment, to the originally issued takes. The few exceptions to this ("Ramblin' On My Mind" being the most notable)—are probably the result of Johnson's not yet having brought the songs to the ultimate shape he desired. In these cases, the second take is usually much stronger, more tightly focused. That this attention to detail paid off handsomely is self-evident: listen to the performances in this album and Johnson's earlier Columbia album ("King of the Delta Blues Singers," CL 1654) and you'll hear some of the most forcefully impassioned and starkly beautiful blues ever recorded.

Little is definitely known of the details of Johnson's biography. Reports of his birthplace and date, his early years, musical development and the details of his death remain hopelessly confused, even after considerable research: one gets a different story from virtually every person purporting to have known him.

The accounts of his death are typical of this confusion. Johnny Shines recalled, "He was poisoned by one of those women who really didn't care for him at all. And Robert was almost always surrounded by that kind... seems like they just sought him out. That was down in Eudora, Mississippi, that it happened. And I heard that it was something to do with the black arts. Before he died, it was said. Robert was crawling along the ground on all fours, barking and snapping like a mad beast." Son House, on the other hand, heard that Johnson had been stabbed to death by a jealous husband, stabbed by a woman, and also that he had been poisoned—all three accounts were circulating at the time, the fall of 1938.

However apocryphal the accounts, they have one thing in common: all detail an end for a man who all through his adult years felt the hounds of hell baying loudly and relentlessly on his trail. In the end, he just couldn't outrun them any longer. —Pete Welding