

BOOK REVIEW

The Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson: Blues, Race, Identity. By Julia Simon. University Park: PA., Pennsylvania University Press, 2022. 236pp. \$109.95.

MONICA F. AMBALAL

While a few texts have been written in recent years to further our knowledge of Lonnie Johnson, Simon's new publication *The Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson* allows us to reframe our understanding of the multi-talented blues guitarist. This text does not portray the blues musician as icon, along the lines of Dean Alger's *The Original Guitar Hero and the Power of Music: The Legendary Lonnie Johnson, Music, and Civil Rights*, nor does it employ an empirical approach to reifying the biographical subject. Drawing extensively on archival data and thoroughly researched, *The Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson* presents an alternative way of viewing Johnson: through his lived experience.

Simon's text examines the ways in which Johnson's position as a multi-talented, multi-instrumentalist coming up in cosmopolitan New Orleans afforded him space to explore various avenues of performance while inhabiting untraditional spaces as a musician. The author recognizes the many unique positions Johnson inhabited within the blues community during his long career while also acknowledging how the guitarist has been regarded and misinterpreted by authors and ethnomusicologists. As Elijah Wald has argued, blues musicians have historically been legitimated by how "down home" or "real" they appear to (mostly white) audiences. "What makes us file some artists as rock n' rollers, others as R&B singers, and still others as hard bluesmen," Wald contends, "has more to do with who accepted them, and how famous they became, than with how they sounded."¹ Similar to Wald, Simon notes the privileging of the "rural bluesman" as a model representation within blues narratives informed by the likes of Alan Lomax, and reminds us how such narratives were constructed and what purposes they served. Simon's book challenges the limitations of traditional blues histories—frameworks that could only categorize Johnson a "lone bluesman" or as figure peripheral to a more coherent story—by leaning into the ways that Johnson's life and work defied expectations.

¹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 208.

One way *The Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson* does so is by highlighting Johnson's work as an ensemble player. Simon carefully considers how Johnson was able to navigate between the roles of soloist and accompanist in various settings, noting in the latter his penchant for allowing the collective voices of instruments to speak to audiences. The author argues that this keen awareness of the delicate balance between lead and rhythm helped make his duet work with Eddie Lang and Lil' Hardin so successful. As noted in all of Johnson's biographies, it is difficult to understand how this extraordinary musician—a star in his own right for a time, and who recorded with pillars of the jazz canon like Lang, Hardin, Kid Ory, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington—was not afforded the same level of fame achieved by his peers. Simon contends that Johnson's marginal status within jazz and blues histories is due to the "inconvenient" ways his navigation of taste departed from the jazz aesthetics of the 1950s and '60s that grew and changed around him.

Detailing Johnson's travels from New Orleans to St. Louis, and later Philadelphia, the first chapter, "Lonnie Johnson: Professional Musician," is largely focused on the artist's biography and discography. The author recreates this historical period through archival findings (drawing extensively from Tulane University's Hogan Archive of New Orleans Music and New Orleans Jazz and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), cross-referenced with discographical data, to inform the reader of the larger story of Lonnie Johnson in action. This chapter provides detailed information about Johnson's recordings, as well as the highly regarded record labels and musicians with whom he worked with across multiple repertoires and styles.²

Simon is hyperaware of the complexities and stereotypes at work in archaic narratives that cast the blues musician as male, black, poor, musically illiterate and entirely dependent on oral tradition. She is likewise well versed in the history of early twentieth-century New Orleans, with its intricacies of social stratification, the aftereffects of colonization, and the multiple layers of fictive kinships that existed for musicians and black communities in Storyville and neighboring parishes. Her examination of Johnson's youth in New Orleans brings to life the constantly evolving landscape of the city at the turn of the century when immigrant populations, communities relocating to the city from rural areas, and families that were part of a tripartite caste system (black, white, Creole) existed together in a single parish. In doing so, she reminds readers of the implications of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the resistance to segregation in the businesses and structures of Storyville, and the effects of the Great Migration,

² This list includes: OKEH Records, Eddie Lang, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and Bessie Smith among others.

and how all three of these affected music-making. Just as importantly, she points out how Johnson was able to adjust his performance style to meet the demands of the wide range of audiences that emerged from the lived experiences of New Orleans at this time.

The second chapter (“Self-Construction and Self-Awareness”) delves further into the “inconvenient” nature of Johnson’s life and music. The author dedicates the opening pages to an analysis of the song “Mr. Johnson’s Blues” to demonstrate Johnson’s awareness of the self where he establishes his position as an artist to be reckoned with by using the word “Mister.” The themes in this vignette are developed throughout the chapter as the author writes about Johnson’s showmanship as a performer—as demonstrated by his impeccable sartorial choices—and his ability to market himself for a variety of venues due to his malleable, high-caliber musicianship. In this chapter, Simon reminds the reader that Johnson was also a skilled violinist and made a number of blues recordings on the instrument; yet another reason why Johnson has proved “inconvenient” for scholars invested in the traditional narrative of blues. Through his choice of clothing, stage persona, instrumental proclivities and lyrics, Johnson defies the fiction of the down-and-out bluesman, ready to sing and strum his guitar for a dime, always with a sad song in tow.

“Social Relations: Race, Gender, and the Perception of Systemic Complexity,” further explores Johnson’s time as a musician, entrepreneur and businessman in Storyville in the 1910s. Simon argues that Johnson’s presence in these environs—particularly in brothels, bars, and gentlemen’s clubs—contributed to his knowledge and understanding of the venues in which he became both active participant and observer. Simon includes a section in this chapter dedicated to the gaze in blues songs. It is refreshing to see an author in a blues text acknowledging the ways in which gender plays out in misogynist blues lyrics (“triflin’ woman,” “Ball and Chain Blues”) without penalizing the lyricist in question. She is sure to remind readers that such lyrics were a result of Johnson’s lived experiences and were informed by his time as a witness to these unique venues and settings.

The final chapter (“The Suffering Self”) focuses on ideas of isolation, the end of life for a musician, and how Johnson’s passing reflected the “end of an era.” Refreshingly, the trope of the lonely bluesman is absent here. Instead, the author demonstrates how Johnson interacted in new, revivalist-oriented spaces and performed introspective viewpoints toward the end of his life, particularly with remakes of “The Lonesome Road,” and “End it All” in 1961. In addition, the author offers a comparison of the lyric narratives presented in his performance of “A Good, Happy Home,” with those found in his earlier “Very Lonesome Blues.” It is in this comparison where Simon’s training as a literary scholar and

linguist shines as she deconstructs each song to find embedded themes of loss and guilt behind the lyrics and song form. While this chapter is definitely Simon's own interpretation of Johnson's end-of-life storyline, her deconstruction of his later song lyrics and disrupted forms and structures are brought to the forefront as metaphorical representations for Johnson's life.

Outside of being categorized as a musician's biography (as suggested by the Library of Congress classification of "ML 419"), Simon's text can serve as a useful resource for scholars from a wide range of disciplines including, but not limited to Sociology, African American Studies, and American History. As a teaching tool, I envision excerpts from Simon's text being used in conjunction with traditional textbooks in a jazz history, blues history or African American music survey to provide additional context and insight into the lived experiences of one of the music's most highly regarded, if misunderstood practitioners. To this end, I felt maps of the artist's hometown and cities in which he worked might have been useful additions to the text, as would at least one transcription of a Johnson recording. While seemingly intended for the academic market, *The Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson* is certainly an engaging and informative read for the hobbyist and novices to the history of blues music. One hopes that a softcover version may be available in the future to make Simon's contributions more accessible to those who might balk at the \$109.95 list price.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

MONICA AMBALAL is chair of music at Merritt College in Oakland, CA. She is also a current PhD candidate at UC Santa Cruz (ethnomusicology), and she is an accordionist. She holds a BA in Music from the University of New Orleans, an MA in musicology from CSU Long Beach, and an MA in ethnomusicology from UC Davis. Areas of research include: Italian-American histories, the development of piano accordion in California, post-war popular music, music and memory, and music and material culture.