Johnson, Blind Willie

(b. c. 1902, near Temple, Texas, U.S.--d. c. 1947, Beaumont, Texas), African-American gospel singer who performed on Southern streets, noted for the energy and power of his singing and for his ingenious guitar accompaniments.

Johnson grew up in rural eastern Texas. When he was seven years old his stepmother, fighting with his father, threw lye in Johnson's face, permanently blinding him. From his youth he sang gospel songs, accompanying himself on guitar, for donations on the streets of small towns and cities, mostly in Texas.

Johnson recorded 30 songs in Dallas, Texas, and Atlanta, Ga., in 1927-30. His strong voice was a rough, low baritone; joined with his urgently rhythmic guitar, his harsh singing achieved great force in "If I Had My Way I'd Tear the Building Down," a narrative of the biblical Samson and Delilah story. While most of his recordings conveyed similar potency, he created a unique joining of vocal moaning with slide guitar lines in the slow, haunting "Dark Was the Night--Cold Was the Ground," a song about Christ's Crucifixion. He continued to sing and beg until, after his house burned down, he slept in its remains, caught pneumonia, and died.