Johnson, Tommy

(b. c. 1896, Terry, Miss., U.S.--d. Nov. 1, 1956, Crystal Springs, Miss.), African-American singer-guitarist, one of the most evocative and influential of blues artists.

Born on a plantation, Johnson grew up in Crystal Springs, Miss., and learned to play guitar from one of his brothers. He ran away from home to play in the Mississippi Delta region, where he encountered other early blues singers, most notably Charley Patton. Subsequently, he spent much of his life there, playing at parties, dances, picnics, and juke joints, performing for donations on town streets, and sometimes taking nonmusical jobs; he also played in neighbouring states.

Johnson's only two recording sessions, in 1928 and 1930, reveal his sweet voice, with near-yodeling falsetto phrases, over a simple but active guitar accompaniment. Lyrics from his songs, including "Maggie Campbell Blues," "Big Road Blues," and "Cool Drink of Water Blues," became standard features of the blues repertoire, while one of his most compelling works, "Canned Heat Blues," was autobiographical: Johnson was severely alcoholic, a factor that narrowed his career.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.