Introduction

Lonnie Johnson, Professional Musician

Alonzo "Lonnie" Johnson is inconvenient for scholars for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the stunning catalog of recorded work that he produced during his lifetime. This study addresses the body of work and not the biography of the person, although traces of the life are to be found in the artistic works. The archive of recorded materials that Lonnie Johnson left invites analysis precisely because of the challenges it presents. To begin with, the sheer number of recordings is staggering. Johnson claimed in an interview with Paul Oliver in 1960 that he recorded 572 songs, adding "I know, I got copies."[1] The discography to the present volume provides a listing of the recordings that I have been able to document, including songs recorded after 1960: 724 songs in all, but that total is likely incomplete.[2] The number alone presents a daunting task of examination and analysis. Complicating the picture, Johnson recorded as a soloist and featured artist, as a backing musician, and as a member of ensembles. In these various roles, he played in a variety of genres and styles: blues, but also jazz, vaudeville, popular song, and ballads. In addition to his work as a vocalist, he also performed on several instruments—violin, piano, harmonium, kazoo, and banjo—before focusing exclusively on guitar. But musical production is only part of the equation. Musicians rely on various intermediaries—owners of venues, producers, recording companies, and others, as well as technology—to bring their work to a public. In the case of Johnson, professional mediation of his work helped shape his artistic output. On the reception end, listening to his music and understanding it through processes of categorization have led to further difficulties. Is he really a blues musician? Is his music "authentic" blues? While his influence is clear in the

work of numerous blues singers and blues and jazz guitarists who have come after him, the significance of his own work remains vexing and elusive.[3]

To give one example of Johnson's complicated legacy and the role of mediation in it, on 1 October 1928 in the OKeh studio in New York City, he recorded "Move Over" (fig. 1). Although the label gives composer credit to Duke Ellington and classifies the piece as a foxtrot, the artist is listed as Lonnie Johnson's Harlem Footwarmers. On the same day at OKeh, they also recorded "Hot and Bothered" and "The Mooche" with vocalist Gertrude "Baby" Cox, each of which features a solo by Lonnie Johnson.[4] Both of those tunes were released under the Duke Ellington Orchestra name. Eighteen days later, Ellington was in the Pathé Studio, recording "Move Over" again. This time composer credit was given to Ellington-Mills and the song was released as Cameo 9025 and Romeo 829 with "The Washingtonians" listed on the label as the artist. Johnson was not included in that session. Ellington and his agent-publisher Irving Mills clearly worked the system by having him record on multiple labels, sometimes releasing the same composition under different pseudonyms. Lonnie Johnson, under contract with OKeh, sometimes did the same, recording with Columbia (the parent company of OKeh) or Gennett (a competing label) under various pseudonyms.[5] But it is worth noting that in 1928, Johnson was a big enough draw to have his name, rather than Ellington's, prominently displayed on the first release of "Move Over."[6] The story raises a number of important questions: How can an artist who rivals Ellington in 1928 for billing on a label become relatively unknown? How do recording companies shape archives and, therewith, perceptions, not only of artists but of genres and styles? How did Johnson become associated almost exclusively with the blues? The following study proposes to tackle numerous factors that shape the reception of Lonnie Johnson's corpus and the portrait of the artist that emerges from it with the goal of better understanding the dynamics of blues production, mediation, and reception.

This study is not a biography, but understanding Johnson's music does require taking account of, to the extent possible, his professional experiences in the various places he lived and performed, precisely because of the ways they depart from the usual conception of a blues artist. Before providing an overview of the most significant events in his life relative to his musical career, it is important to address the difficulties the record poses. First, as is the case with most African American musicians born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the official record is spotty and unreliable. Birth certificates, marriage certificates, census data, and other documentation produced as a result of contact with state and local authorities is scarce, unreliable, or

FIG. 1 Lonnie Johnson's Harlem Footwarmers, "Move Over," OKeh 8638. Photo courtesy of New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound.

nonexistent.[7] Second, information provided in interviews with both Johnson and others is also unreliable. Because of a variety of factors, ranging from faulty memory to a desire to project a particular image to a specific audience, information provided in interviews may be inconsistent, difficult to corroborate, or even easily falsifiable, especially dates, places, and time intervals.[8] Always aware of the performance entailed in all forms of social interaction, when speaking to white blues and jazz scholars, critics, record collectors, and fans, at different stages in his career, Johnson produced different narrative accounts of his life. But just because information provided in interviews is not 100 percent factually accurate does not mean it does not contain elements of truth. Research in neuroscience suggests that memory is always a kind of reworking of the past, particularly as it involves autobiography. As people remember events, they piece together bits of information from the past and often move them to different spatial and temporal locations, modifying and rewriting rather than preserving exactly.[9] In Johnson's case, racialized power relations tied to reception, as well as financial interest, further complicate an already complex dynamic. Rather than look to interviews for verification of facts, I rather read them as containing a kind of truth about his life and

work.[10] If dates and timelines can be proved to be false, that does not mean that Johnson lied, misrepresented, or intentionally misled, although he might have. What he presents in the interviews is an image of himself that, as we will see in chapter 1, is something that he self-consciously constructed and manipulated in relation to what he perceived as his audience throughout his professional career. This self-representation should not be taken at face value, nor should it be entirely discounted as devoid of truth. Instead, the information provided in interviews should be interpreted as part of the archive of performances that Johnson left, akin to the songs themselves. In the end, the recordings present the richest trove of information we have. In addition to the music, recording dates, locations, and personnel rosters provide further documentation that aid in the construction of a chronology. Bearing all these caveats in mind, I provide a plausible narrative account of the timeline of Johnson's professional life. His lengthy career allowed for an unusual variety of musical experiences, in particular, work as both a soloist and ensemble player in a number of styles and genres that shaped his artistic output and profile as a musician.

Johnson's Life: The Early Years

Alonzo "Lonnie" Johnson was born in New Orleans, most likely on 8 February 1894.[11] Scholars indicate dates ranging from 1889 to 1900 for his birth year, citing interviews at various stages in his career with different interlocutors, but 1894 seems most likely.[12] In general, Johnson cited earlier birth dates when he was younger, perhaps telling the truth or perhaps wanting to give the appearance of more maturity and experience, whereas later in life he tended to shave off years, likely according to his perception of his marketability. He was born into a large family with five brothers and six sisters, many of whom played music.[13] When asked about his musical background in an interview with Moses Asch recorded in 1967, Johnson explained, "Well, in the first place, the whole entire family was musicians and I started playing when I was fourteen years old. My father played music, my mother played music, my five brothers played music, and I had two sisters played music. And I just bought an instrument and six months I was holding a good job. I was playing with my father's band."[14] Playing in the family band led to performing in various venues and eventually to jobs gigging in New Orleans.

In addition to his early musical experiences in New Orleans, Johnson also played in rural areas of Louisiana. Ernest "Punch" Miller, jazz trumpet player,

recounts performing with Johnson in Raceland, in Lafourche Parish, about forty-five miles southeast of New Orleans: "Me and this boy they call Lonnie Johnson now, we called him Rooster at home, we played on a Saturday evening on big store galleries, see. We'd put our hat down and all the people . . . we didn't have no salary . . . we had enough money to last us all that next week. . . . We might play some guitar, bass and trumpet for white folks on Sunday night."[15] In rural Raceland, Johnson played for both African American and white audiences, as he did in New Orleans. The variety of places, venues, and situations in which Johnson played growing up gave him broad exposure and familiarity with different styles and genres of music in urban and rural settings. He played guitar and violin as a young person, but likely had experience with banjo and piano as well.

Johnson gigged in a number of venues in New Orleans, including in Storyville, the infamous red-light district, from roughly 1908 until 1917. In 1917 he seems to have traveled to England. The year marks the official closure of Storyville, although Johnson did not work exclusively in the district. Its commercial viability had been declining before its closure and musicians had already begun leaving New Orleans by that time.[16] World War I presented opportunities to perform in Europe, and Johnson could have benefited from them, although I cannot discount the possibility that, like Big Bill Broonzy, who likely fabricated military service overseas during the First World War, this story may also be based on information gleaned from the experience of other musicians.[17] Work with Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra and the comedy team of Glenn and Jenkins in England has been disproved.[18] In all likelihood he was away from New Orleans gaining experience performing in a theatrical setting beginning in 1917. Upon his return to New Orleans in 1919, he learned of the death of most of his family during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Although most sources indicate that all members of his family died, with the exception of his brother James, Dean Alger argues persuasively that his parents may have also survived.[19] The brothers moved to St. Louis in late 1919 or early 1920, a decision presented by Johnson in interviews as motivated by the loss.

It is unclear why they chose St. Louis; perhaps they had employment lined up and/or other connections there. In the early years in St. Louis, Lonnie Johnson was employed by traveling theater troupes and on riverboats performing jazz and popular music, both of which were probably made possible by connections established earlier in New Orleans. It is quite likely that he supplemented touring theater work and playing on the boats with solo and small group gigs in and around St. Louis.[20] The work for traveling shows

stands as evidence of prior theatrical experience, possibly in England. Mark Miller notes that "he appears to have started very near the top, albeit in a supporting role, when he travelled on the 'big time' B. F. Keith circuit with the popular African-American song, dance and comedy team Glenn & Jenkins," in the early 1920s.[21] In an interview with Paul Oliver, Johnson said, "Well, I played on the TOBA [Theater Owners Booking Association] and I played on the RKO [Radio-Keith-Orpheum] circuit too. I worked from Coast to Coast on the RKO circuit and I played in everything that was playable. Every theater there was every place they could make into a theater or call a theater. I was with the team of Glenn and Jenkins and I was with them for four years. But the TOBA . . . God, I played the TOBA from end to end."[22] For many years, Johnson worked in vaudeville, here mentioning the blackface comedy and dance team of Glenn and Jenkins he backed, but not in England.[23]

The TOBA was an association of Black vaudeville theaters formed in 1921.[24] A statement published in the *Chicago Defender* shortly after the association's founding lists twenty-five member theaters in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, with seven additional theaters indicating interest in joining, adding Indiana and Oklahoma.[25] Johnson describes the work:

> Just every place they had from New York to Texas. . . . TOBA's like any other business, you're on the stage and you do so many shows. At that time on TOBA you work—you do five, six shows a day; you got little money, but everybody was happy. I started on TOBA in Philadelphia—that's where I started from, the old Standard Theater. I first had the band in the theater. Then after they put all the live shows out, then I went on the road, traveling, and I went as far as TOBA can carry you, from Philadelphy to New Orleans. I played the Lyric Theater there—oh God—with Clara Smith and with Mamie Smith—yeah, Clara and Mamie both. I knew Clara real well, she were a lovely piano player and a lovely singer. She played piano and she sure could sing. And worked right back . . . and back again. Played in Atlanty, Georgia at the old 81 Theater.[26]

Interestingly, although Johnson mentions Clara Smith and Mamie Smith to Oliver, perhaps because they were known as blues singers who toured on the TOBA circuit, he does not mention the Whitman Sisters, perhaps the highest paid act on the TOBA, for whom he served as bandleader off and on for nine years.[27]

Around the same time, Johnson performed for the Streckfus Steamers, which had an excursion boat based out of St. Louis with an eight- or nine-piece jazz band and large dance floor as well as smaller boats that operated for four of five months during the summer.[28] George "Pops" Foster, the jazz bass player, reports that work on the boats was year-round, with the boats traveling as far as Pittsburgh, St. Paul, and New Orleans.[29] Johnson would have been familiar with the music on the boats from New Orleans and may have even benefited from connections with musicians who played on them. Fellow guitarist and banjoist Johnny St. Cyr was hired to play on the boats and traveled from New Orleans to St. Louis by train in 1918 and 1919 to perform.[30] Fate Marable was the original bandleader for Streckfus and likely hired Johnson, who claimed to have played with him in an interview with Oliver: "We were playing on the excursion boats out of St. Louis. Well I played a couple of times on it but after that I started playin' violin with Charlie Creath's band on the steamer St. Paul—he taken it over."[31] A cornetist, Creath briefly challenged the Streckfus line with "Blacks-only" cruises during the summer of 1921, but he was eventually hired by Marable.[32] Johnson likely performed on the riverboats from 1919 until 1922, although he may have continued until as late as 1925.[33]

In addition to the ensemble work on riverboats and on theater circuits, Johnson continued to hone his singing and guitar skills as a soloist and in small combos in clubs and other venues during the early 1920s, building out his repertoire in blues. In 1924 he entered and won a blues contest hosted by the Booker T. Washington Theater. The theater originally opened in 1912 in Chestnut Valley, which was still the center of African American musical life in the city in the early 1920s.[34] As part of the TOBA circuit, it "featured appearances by such Black stars as Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey."[35] The theater ran a blues contest as a form of scouting for OKeh records.[36] Jesse Johnson, owner of the De Luxe Music Shoppe, worked as a promoter for Creath's riverboat cruises in addition to his work as a freelance talent scout for record companies.[37] Thus, Lonnie Johnson's artistry, as well as his connections with Jesse Johnson and TOBA, likely helped him win the contest and the prize of a recording contract with OKeh that would last seven years.[38]

Johnson began recording in St. Louis in November 1925 as both a featured artist and a member of Charlie Creath's Jazz-O-Maniacs. From OKeh ledgers, we know that he traveled between St. Louis and New York City, OKeh's headquarters, from November 1925 until November 1927.[39] From December 1927 to May 1928 he covered more territory, recording in Chicago in December 1927 (including for Gennett in Richmond, Indiana, under various pseudonyms),

in Memphis in February 1928, and in San Antonio in May 1928.[40] In October 1928, he returned to New York City to finish out his contract with OKeh and remained there until his last session for them, on 12 August 1932.[41]

Johnson's pattern of geographical locations for recording shares something of both blues and jazz artists of the period but is distinctly different from both. Speaking from a jazz perspective, Foster, who was also a member of Charlie Creath's Jazz-O-Maniacs (likely playing with Johnson aboard the *St. Paul* and certainly recording with him), observes, "The big music field was Chicago from 1920 to 1925. From 1925, it was in New York."[42] Indeed, Freddie Keppard, Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and other major figures of New Orleans jazz performed and recorded in Chicago beginning in the 1910s, continuing through the first half of the 1920s. Johnson did record jazz with Armstrong and his Hot Five in Chicago, but it was not until December 1927. In 1925, Johnson was debuting in St. Louis, one of OKeh's "field" locations, in jazz and blues. Memphis and San Antonio, where he recorded in 1928, are more typical of locations for sessions with blues artists. Indeed, it is likely that Johnson traveled to Memphis to work as a staff or studio musician, backing blues singers Mooch Richardson and Keghouse, but also taking advantage of the opportunity to record some solo pieces. He did the same in San Antonio with Texas Alexander. It is also possible that tour dates with traveling shows and other bookings made it more convenient for him to record in locations other than St. Louis and New York.[43] The geographical locations and alternation between solo and studio work differentiate Johnson from both solo "folk" blues artists, like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charley Patton, and also jazz players embedded within ensembles recording in major cities. Johnson's professional experience crosses genre boundaries as well as the line between soloist and sideman, shaping his identity in an unusual way.

After he relocated permanently to New York, the headquarters of OKeh and other companies, he recorded in a variety of genres and styles. In 1928 and 1929, he recorded jazz with Ellington, as noted above, as well as with Armstrong and His Savoy Ballroom Five, and in a duo configuration with white guitarist Eddie Lang.[44] But he also recorded with Victoria Spivey and Spencer Williams, backing them in vaudeville-style songs, while he continued to record his own blues. New York was an ideal location for a "utility player" type of musician: able to perform in jazz ensembles, small combos, as an accompanist and soloist, in a variety of styles and genres.

Copyrights for Johnson's compositions were filed beginning in 1926.[45] "Mr. Johnson's Blues" and "Falling Rain Blues" were registered 8 September 1926, crediting Lonnie Johnson as composer, but granting copyright to

F. Wallace Rega, a music publisher located in Bayside, Long Island, New York. Ironically, "Mr. Johnson's Blues" did not belong to Mr. Johnson. This pattern of copyrighting songs to music companies is typical of the exploitation of blues and other artists by the recording industry. Labels like OKeh were often linked to a music publishing house subsidiary that registered titles with the US Copyright Office in order to collect royalties. "Composers" like Johnson (who was likely able to write out music) as well as artists from the folk tradition or even theatrical stars like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey (who likely depended on others to write out songs in musical notation for them) often were either pressured to sign away copyrights in exchange for the "privilege" of recording or sold them for a flat fee. Jazz musicians were often pressured in similar ways, as we saw in the example of Ellington above, who granted co-songwriting credit to his manager, thereby forfeiting half of his royalties, although still retaining the right to some. Johnson's songs copyrighted subsequently in 1926 and continuing through January 1927 were registered to Jesse Johnson, the St. Louis promoter and talent scout.[46] In June 1927, copyrights for Johnson's songs began being registered to St. Louis Publishing Co. Telling among the songs of this period, "Tin Can Alley Blues" was composed by Johnson and Porter Grainger, but the copyright was assigned to the professional songwriter Grainger and not Johnson.[47]

Significantly, and atypical of blues artists, during a brief window from 1 September 1928 until 18 November 1929, Johnson filed and was granted copyright on nineteen of his own songs.[48] It is highly likely that Johnson was familiar with the financial benefits of writing out and copyrighting songs from his time in New Orleans and from his collaborations with jazz musicians and professional songwriters. Owners of copyright for compositions received "mechanical royalties" for all recorded performances.[49] As Pops Foster explains, Clarence Williams, the piano player who performed in the mansions of Storyville, aided local musicians, but also helped himself:

> Clarence [Williams] wasn't down there too long when he and Armand Piron opened a little music store and music publishing house. I think that was around 1910 or 1912. We used to rehearse there sometimes. If you had written a number, you'd go to Clarence to write it down. He could write very fast; as fast as you could do the number, he could write it down. After he'd write it down, he'd arrange it and send it to have it copyrighted and published. Clarence always managed to cut himself in on a number. When a number was published, it would have four or five names on it. Clarence would get as much of it as he could. His name

would be in two or three places and the guy who really wrote it was usually way down the line. After he got through, he had more of your number than you did.[50]

So, for a brief time, Johnson benefited from copyright ownership of his own songs, more like a professional songwriter (or A&R man) than a blues artist.

The period of copyright ownership by Johnson was short-lived: with the sole exception of "Deep Minor Rhythm Stomp" written by Johnson and Lang and copyrighted to Johnson, the remaining songs of 1930 were registered to Georgia Music Company of New York. The songs of 1931 and 1932, until the end of his contract with OKeh, were registered either to OKeh or Columbia Phonograph Corp., its parent company.[51] All of the songs copyrighted from 1926 until 1932 remained unpublished, eliminating the possibility of income from sheet music sales.[52]

Throughout the period Johnson was recording, he continued touring as part of professional theater troupes off and on. For example, he was a member of Bessie Smith's Midnight Steppers Tour in fall 1929 and was reported to have been involved in a romantic relationship with her.[53] It is likely that his theater work continued into 1930, at which point the Depression put an end to the profitability of large traveling shows.

As part of a broader context, it is worth remembering that travel for African Americans in this period was not easy, to say the least. Taking a train from St. Louis to New York was probably not too fraught, but Jim Crow restrictions were a significant reality in travel to Memphis, San Antonio, and certainly across the United States, including the South, as a member of show casts and crews. Stops in Atlanta, New Orleans, Birmingham, Little Rock, Memphis, Charleston, Chattanooga, Louisville, Dallas, Houston, and other cities on the TOBA circuit required riding in uncomfortable Jim Crow cars and then finding whatever "colored only" accommodations for eating and spending the night were available. For those traveling by car or bus, "Sundown Towns" dotted not just the South, but the nation: "In 1930, 44 out of the 89 counties that lined Route 66 were all-white communities known as 'Sundown Towns'—places that banned blacks from entering city limits after dark. Some posted signs that read, 'Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Set on You Here.'"[54] Beyond discomfort and humiliation, touring also opened entertainers up to the possibility of violent confrontation.

Johnson had his last recording session with OKeh in New York on 12 August 1932. OKeh, owned by Columbia since 1926, continued putting out occasional

race records until 1935 in the 8000 series that had included Johnson, but the Depression crippled record sales and left Johnson seeking new employment.[55]

The Middle Years

Johnson left New York and went first to Cleveland, where he worked with Louis "Putney" Dandridge's Orchestra, en route to Chicago in hopes of continuing in music.[56] Finding no recording possibilities there, he returned to the St. Louis area and worked a series of day jobs. In various interviews, he mentions a steel mill in East St. Louis, hauling railroad ties soaked in creosote in Galesburg, Illinois, working in a steel foundry in Peoria, and an "easy job working at the golf club, taking care of the lawns."[57] It is likely that he continued gigging in this period, as he always had. He specifically mentions a night club he played in Peoria in the interview with Asch.

The recording hiatus ended on 8 November 1937 with Johnson back in the studio with Decca in Chicago. On that day, he cut eight songs, including two solo instrumental pieces. He stayed in Chicago until 1947 (with two brief trips to New York) recording his own material, but also backing blues musicians, such as Ollie Shepard, Alice Moore, and Peetie Wheatstraw, and playing in jazz orchestras, such as those led by Jimmie Noone and Johnny Dodds. During this period, he recorded for Decca, Bluebird (RCA Victor's blues and jazz subdivision), Mercury, Disc, and Aladdin.[58] Sometimes he put in marathon sessions, such as on 31 March 1938 in New York City, when he recorded eight of his own songs, including the masterful "Mr. Johnson's Swing," in addition to ten tunes with Ollie Shepard and His Kentucky Boys. During this period he began recording on electric guitar, likely the first songs backing Wheatstraw on "Truckin' thru Traffic" (Chicago, 18 October 1938) and his own "The Loveless Blues" (Chicago, 2 November 1939).[59] While the two early recordings sound a great deal like acoustic guitar, his recordings for Aladdin in 1947 mark a smooth and seemingly effortless transition to an electric style. Unlike guitarists who had to make stylistic adaptations, such as the Delta guitarists who pioneered the Chicago blues sound, Johnson's controlled single-note style of play and use of sliding half chords are ideally suited for amplification. But this lack of need to evolve likely hampered his legacy for the blues. Without constraints imposed by amplification altering his style and technique, he did not explore the sound capabilities of the electric guitar, making his work in the 1940s and '50s sound antiquated to some.

Changes in recording technology, especially higher-quality microphones and better microphone placement in some of the songs recorded in the mid-1940s, enable subtleties in Johnson's vocal delivery to be captured in more detail than in prior recordings. The 1947 Aladdin sides faithfully reproduce changes in vocal intensity, extended nasals, and even some limited and subtle use of vocal noise[60] not normally associated with Johnson—for example, on "You Know I Do" (Chicago, 2 June 1947). The presence in these recordings of vocal timbre that often serves as a marker of the blues raises the unanswerable question of whether restricted use of growl or other effects produced with vibration in the vocal folds was used by Johnson in earlier recordings, but that poor microphone quality and placement failed to capture it.[61] It is difficult to say how the presence of these qualities and their faithful reproduction might have altered Johnson's image and identity. Clearly, their absence contributed to the questioning of his "authenticity" as a "blues singer."

As was the case in the early years in New York and St. Louis, copyrights for almost all of Johnson's songs from this period were registered to various music companies owned by Lester Melrose, RCA Victor's talent scout for blues and jazz.[62] One anomalous item stands out in the copyright record, an unpublished song titled "Won't You Share My Love Nest," registered 13 April 1938 to Johnson indicating Toronto as his location. I have not been able to locate a recording, nor can I explain the Toronto address.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, musicians worked according to wage scales for both club and recording work established by the Chicago Federation of Musicians, which was divided into segregated locals.[63] Some artists were under contract to record companies who abided by guidelines established by the union; however, union bylaws did not shield artists from financial exploitation.[64] Johnson was likely not under contract in this period, as he recorded for both RCA Victor–Bluebird and Decca in fall 1939. Myra Taylor, a singer who performed with Johnson in Chicago, expressed her dismay at his earnings: "I was kind of disgusted with Lonnie Johnson because his record label was making big bucks off his recordings, but were only paying him $25 a side—and he acted happy to get that. It upset me to no end the way they treated him!"[65] Depending on Johnson's time in the recording studio, the amount is probably accurate.[66] Neither a contract nor the union provided financial protection for musicians.

While in Chicago, Johnson also played in various clubs. He told Oliver, "First club I played in Chicago was the Three Deuces on North State with Baby Dodds on the drums and after that—lots of them. That's right I played a couple of places on East 51st Street. I played at the Boulevard Lounge there

FIG. 2 "Entertainers at Negro Tavern," Chicago, April 1941 (Lonnie Johnson on far left). Photo by Russell Lee for the US Department of Agriculture Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-DIG-fsa-8c00653.

on East 51st Street and then at Square's at 931 West 51st Street—I was there about five years, something like that. Then I went into the Flame Club at 3020 South Indiana."[67] The mention of Warren "Baby" Dodds and the names and locations of the venues signal that he was performing jazz. A photo taken by Russell Lee for the Farm Security Administration in 1941 documents a two-guitar and double bass combo (fig. 2). Nighttime work in clubs supplemented meager earnings from daytime recording sessions, as it always had.

The rise of a more aggressive sound for the blues in Chicago decreased Johnson's opportunities for employment in the late 1940s and likely motivated his move to Cincinnati, where he began recording with King Records in December 1947.[68] During this period, he scored a major success with the ballad "Tomorrow Night," which "topped the R&B charts for seven [non-consecutive] weeks in 1948."[69] With King, he recorded a combination of blues—some new and some rerecordings of earlier material—and ballads, in an attempt to duplicate his success with "Tomorrow Night" (Cincinnati, 10 December 1947). He had some minor hits with "Pleasing You (As Long as I Live)" (Cincinnati,

13 August 1947), "So Tired" (Cincinnati, 19 November 1948), and "Confused" (Cincinnati, 29 November 1949), but the recordings with King were uneven, including with respect to quality of performance and recording.[70] Stylistic mismatches, as in the driving four-four feel at odds with the swing of Johnson's vocal in "She's So Sweet" (Linden, NJ, 9 May 1949) and the heavy band arrangement with horns that practically drown out his vocal in "You Can't Buy Love" (Cincinnati, 3 June 1952), and silly popular songs like "I Know It's Love" (Cincinnati, 13 August 1947), with an uncharacteristically out-of-tune solo, are interspersed with tunes that showcase Johnson's strengths, like "My My Baby" (Cincinnati, 19 November 1948) and "Little Rockin' Chair" (Cincinnati, 14 September 1950). Most of the copyrights for songs in this period were credited to Johnson but registered to Lois Publishing Co., part of King Records' owner Syd Nathan's music production empire.[71] Although Johnson claimed in an interview with Oliver that "I Found a Dream" was "published in '48," copyright records show that the unpublished song was copyrighted both to his second wife, Kay Armstrong Johnson, and Lois Publishing Co.[72] Johnson toured England in 1952 after his final sessions with King.[73] By 1953, musical taste in America had changed sufficiently that Johnson left Cincinnati and recording, and moved to Philadelphia.

Late Years

In Philadelphia, Johnson returned to day jobs and occasional gigging.[74] He was "rediscovered" in 1959 by Chris Albertson, a jazz and blues scholar, producer, and DJ at WHAT in Philadelphia, who received information from a listener that Johnson was working as a janitor at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel.[75] In the same year, Samuel Charters published *The Country Blues*, encouraging white fans, guided by 78 recordings, to search out blues artists and help them relaunch their careers.[76] Johnson's "rediscovery" led to new recording opportunities in the early sixties as a soloist, in small combos, with Victoria Spivey, on her label Spivey Records, and with Elmer Snowden, released on the Prestige Records subsidiary label Bluesville.[77] His final recording in the United States was with the engineer and executive of Folkways Records, Moses Asch, in 1967. The performance was eventually released as part of the Smithsonian Folkways series in 1993 and included a recorded interview with Johnson.[78] The pattern of copyrights for songs being held by music publishing companies continued through the end of his career.[79]

Johnson was invited to participate in the American Folk Blues Festival Tour of Europe from September through November 1963, alongside other blues artists running the gamut of styles from Victoria Spivey to Muddy Waters.[80] In an interview with *Melody Maker*, he acknowledged the financial benefit to the performers.[81] Invited by two jazz enthusiasts to perform, Johnson decided to move to Toronto in 1965.[82] In November 1965, he recorded five songs on the LP *Stompin' at the Penny* for Columbia with Jim McHarg's Metro Stompers, a group of young traditional jazz musicians based in Toronto.[83] He struggled to find work in Toronto, even briefly opening a club that failed.[84] He was struck by a car on 12 March 1969, which resulted in serious injuries, and then had a series of strokes.[85] He performed two songs at a final show billed as "Blue Monday," accompanied by Buddy Guy on acoustic guitar and Jim McHarg on bass, on 23 February 1970.[86] He died alone in his apartment on 16 June 1970.[87]

Corpus, Genre, and Style

My study treats Johnson's body of recorded work as a corpus. One normally thinks of a corpus as a "body or complete collection of writings" of a particular author, now often analyzed with the assistance of digital technology.[88] I propose rather to analyze Johnson's artistic output according to a more old-fashioned literary understanding of a corpus, in which readings and interpretations are guided by the recognition of repetitions and patterns across a body of work.[89] Analyzing an individual author's or artist's output reveals themes and ideas, patterns of style, expression, and thought, as they are both repeated and change over time.[90] For example, the study of the corpus of a poet, playwright, or novelist may reveal patterns in the choice of verbal expressions or formal attributes across works, enriching our understanding of each work in relation to the whole. Rather than simply interpret a word or phrase according to its usual, historically contextualized usage, the corpus approach enables an interpretation of particular articulations informed by their contextualization among the repetitions and variations across the body of the artist's work. Considering each work as one part of an artistic whole enriches our understanding of phrases and figures as they appear and reappear in new contexts. This enables the recognition of consistency, but also change over time, in modes of expression.

If we take Johnson's corpus to comprise all his recorded works, the approach also allows for the setting aside of genre boundaries, such as those between blues and jazz or blues and popular song, to consider the body of

work as a whole.[91] This enables the recognition of musical figures and lyrical expressions as they appear in different stylistic contexts. In Johnson's corpus, similar types of patterns—not only of linguistic usage in lexicon and lyrical phrasing, but also recurring musical ideas and figures—repeat across styles, genres, and instruments. They also repeat in solo performances and duets, accompaniments, and ensemble work. Considered from this perspective, Johnson's recordings demonstrate coherence in his composition and performance styles. James Dalton, having transcribed many of Johnson's recordings, remarks on his consistency: "Throughout his prodigious career Johnson managed to maintain a consistent vocabulary while still fitting into each situation in which he found himself."[92] For example, his use of tremolo in his early violin performances resembles the vibrato in his singing that carries on throughout his life. His impeccable phrasing stands out, whether on guitar or vocal, in blues and in ballads.[93] His sense of rhythm and timing is evident across performances, as a soloist, an accompanist, or as a member of an ensemble. The corpus approach enables a picture to emerge of a musical career shaped not only by Johnson, his artistry, his idiosyncrasies, and his life experiences but also by broader social forces during his lifetime.

Over a very long career, far longer than most blues artists of his generation, Johnson earned a living from his music, performing what he and various intermediaries perceived as what audiences wanted to hear. The variety on display in his corpus represents another inconvenience, posing difficulties in terms of categorizing him as an artist. His early life in New Orleans played a significant role in his attitude toward genre and style. Like many musicians in New Orleans of his generation, for Johnson, distinctions between genres were not clear-cut. Moreover, as jazz scholar Bruce Boyd Raeburn attests, "What I learned on the bandstand was that most New Orleans musicians had extremely eclectic tastes and took pride in their ability to perform beyond (and in spite of) categorical boundaries."[94] Distinguishing styles and genres of music in the early decades in New Orleans is no easy task. As I argue, distinctions between types of music are dependent not only on stylistic features, such as rhythm, tone, timbre, and scale, but also on socioeconomic factors related to performance, such as race, class, and gender. The understanding of stylistic features Johnson developed in New Orleans carried on throughout his career.

Musicians a little older than Johnson and those who were his rough contemporaries often used a different vocabulary to describe distinctions between styles of music than the terms we employ today. The distinctions often apply to the venue, the audience, and the style of music being played, conflating the socioeconomic and the musical.[95] For example, guitarist Danny Barker,

who was younger than Johnson, cites his maternal grandfather, the musician Isidore Barbarin, describing Buddy Bolden's music as follows: "I heard Isidore once say of Bolden, 'Sure, I heard him. I knew him. He was famous with the ratty people.' I soon learned what ratty people, ratty joints and dives meant: it meant good-time people, earthy people, who frequent anywhere there's a good time, regardless of the location of the element of social class distinction or position. So, ratty music is bluesy, folksy music that moves you and exhilarates you, makes you dance."[96] Pops Foster makes similar distinctions based on venues, clientele, and types of music: "From about 1900 on, there were three types of bands around New Orleans. You had bands that played ragtime, ones that played sweet music, and the ones that played nothin' but blues. A band like John Robichaux's played nothing but sweet music and played the dicty affairs. On a Saturday night Frankie Dusen's Eagle Band would play the Masonic Hall because he played a whole lot of blues. A band like the Magnolia Band would play ragtime and work the District."[97] In this tripartite division of music in the early period, repertoires are shaped by venue and audience, race and class. Venues ran the gamut of respectability "from the Jeunes Amis, 'the most exclusive, . . . where very few jazzmen ever entered—down to Animal Hall, where even a washboard band was welcome if they could play the blues.'"[98] The blues are associated with the lowest classes, manual laborers and prostitutes in the district. Barker describes "Animule" [Animal] Hall, a working-class venue where only blues was played: "The star attraction at the hall was Long Head Bob's Social Orchestra. The patrons loved Bob's music; in fact, no band would play there but Bob's orchestra. Bob's repertoire consisted of the blues, and only the blues: fast blues, medium blues, slow blues, and the slow, slow drag. . . . The men and women who patronized the hall were very hard-working people: stevedores, woodsmen, fishermen, field hands and steel-driving men, and the women were factory workers, washer-women, etc. All were very strong and physically fit."[99] The mention of the "slow, slow drag" signals not only the music's tempo but its use as a background for slow, sexual dancing. The association between the blues and sex is even more explicit in musicians' descriptions of the music in Storyville and, particularly, the taste of the prostitutes.

Louis Armstrong describes advice he received as a youngster from Cocaine Buddy Martin about earning money: "All you have to do is to put on your long pants and play the blues for the whores that hustle at night. They come in with a big stack of money in their stockings for their pimps. When you play the blues they will call you sweet names and buy you drinks and give you tips."[100] Dude Bottley's remembrance of Buddy Bolden's performances also stresses the association between prostitutes and blues: "I used to love going to Lincoln

Park on Monday nights, all them pretty whores would come to the park all dressed up with their pimps and madames [*sic*]. That's when you should have heard Bolden blow that cornet. His music was like medicine, made you feel happy and made you feel great. He'd play them low, lowdown-under blues and them whores would perform something terrible 'til they'd get out of hand, shaking down to the floor and dropping their drawers and teddies: that was a beautiful sight to see."[101] In these accounts, blues signals as much where the music is played, and for whom, as it does a style of music. This mode of distinguishing styles of music is not anodyne. As Charles Hersch argues, racial purity and social divisions were maintained in part by segregating sound. As a corollary, styles of music were perceived in terms of respectability.[102]

This conflation of the socioeconomic, racial, and musical does not mean that stylistic differences are a fiction. Perceptible differences of tempo, rhythm, scale, timbre, and musical structure form a sign system that creates different "meanings" for different audiences. For example, although Barker's description of the band in Animal Hall lists "fast," "medium," "slow," and "slow, slow" as possible tempos for blues, tempos could signify degrees of respectability coordinated with class and race. William Howland Kenney argues that Joseph Streckfus constrained musicians aboard his boats to evoke nostalgia for the antebellum South to please the white passengers, by controlling tempos, playing slightly faster than hotel bands and avoiding "slow grinds" and "belly rubs."[103] As Hersch points out, tempos "carr[y] racial and class connotations, impelling listeners to move in particular ways and evoking certain attitudes and experiences."[104] In the case of the "slow, slow drag," extremely slow blues tempos invite sexualized forms of dancing associated with working-class Blacks. Very quick tempos also functioned as markers of "African American music."[105] Lillian Hardin Armstrong recounts a humorous anecdote about a rehearsal session with a singer who makes a revealing error: "We were rehearsing her, and she was singing and she stopped and said, 'I can't sing that song in that temperature.'" Armstrong breaks up laughing and reports that the band at the time did, too. She speculates that the singer meant tempo.[106] "Hot" in the context of music can mean many things. The singer's mistake points to tempo as one distinguishing feature of this "exciting" dance music.

"Hot," with its sexual overtones exploited with titles like "Hotter Than That" that Johnson played on with Armstrong and His *Hot* Five, also refers to rhythms. Andrew S. Berish argues that early critical reception of jazz created a spectrum with racial overtones from "hot" to "sweet" to classify and judge music according to its "authenticity."[107] Syncopated rhythms, in particular, were read as markers of authentic, African American music.[108] Playing

ahead of or behind the beat created a feeling of "swing," a rhythm with "a forward-directed motion and bounce to it."[109] Rhythm sections, of which Johnson as a guitarist was an integral part, were the key element in the band for creating grooves to make people move. Rhythm musicians work together, playing with and against one another, to accentuate different beats in the measure. For example, a drummer might maintain a consistent 1 and 3 on the bass drum and accentuate 2 and 4 on the snare (sometimes ahead or behind the beat), with occasional pickups and accents, all accompanied by a shuffle or triplet ride on the cymbals. At the same time, the bass player might "walk" with steady quarter notes with slight accentuations that pull slightly against the snare and bass drum. The guitarist might provide contrastive upticks on the offbeats or alternately join in to complement the bass and drum parts. Together, the beats and rhythms combine to create a swung "groove," especially important in dance music.[110]

These rhythms and grooves are difficult to notate in conventional ways and posed particular challenges at the time, reinforcing conflations of playing "hot" music and playing by ear.[111] Rhythmic but also harmonic and melodic improvisation thus feed into these dichotomies. According to this logic, "authentic" musicians do not read music; they play what they feel, based on what they hear.[112] Trumpeter Thomas "Papa Mutt" Carey's comments about Armstrong are typical in this regard: "Louis makes you feel the number and that's what counts. A man who does something from the heart, and makes you feel it, is great. You see, Louis does that for everything. And one thing, Louis never rehearsed a blues number; he played them just as he felt at the time he was up there on the stand."[113] And, in the context of New Orleans, the distinction between reading and not reading music maps onto racial categories: whites and Creoles are presumed to read music and, therefore, be incapable of playing "hot" music, while Black musicians cannot read and are, therefore, capable of playing "hot" rhythms and dance grooves and improvising.[114]

Finally, the scale and timbral palette of music also carried significance for categorization along the sweet-to-hot spectrum tied to notions of "authenticity" and "race." "Blues" elements—such as "dirty" tone, blue notes, unusual sounds, as well as a pentatonic scale and twelve-bar progression—were associated with working-class African Americans. Elements of timbral and tonal variation, most prominently the use of mutes, can be employed to inject an element of signifying (improvising, altering, and/or varying) even the most staid tune. Indeed, many bands played the head of pieces "straight," followed by choruses of increasing degrees of movement away from a "sweet" sound, often culminating in a very "hot" out chorus.[115]

All these elements of musical performance—tempo, rhythm, groove, improvisation, timbral and tonal palette—are interpreted as part of a sign system related to class and race by audiences, critics, and record companies. In and of themselves, the signs do not have any significance, but within a given context, subtle variations can take on meaning.[116] Venue owners, record producers, critics, scholars, record collectors, and listeners all focus on aspects of musical performance to make identifications such as hot or sweet, jazz or blues, ratty or dicty, authentic or inauthentic, that relate to notions of class, race, and sometimes gender.

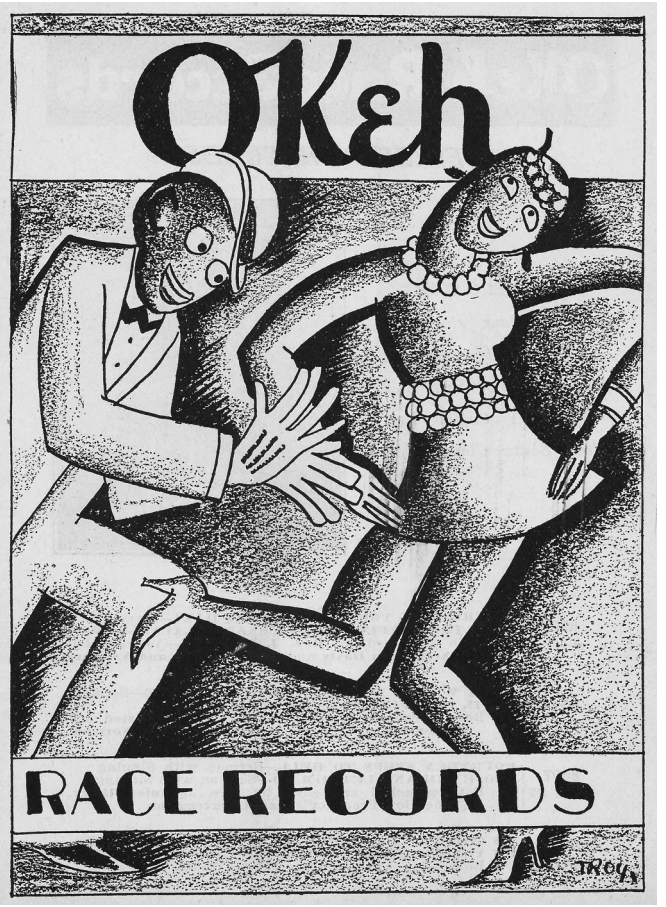
While musicians have tastes and tendencies in terms of performance style, they also need to make a living. Musical ability, adaptability, taste, and temperament vary, making some musicians gravitate toward one or the other end of the sweet–hot spectrum or the jazz–blues continuum. Artists' identities and especially their reception often depend on alignment with a particular style or genre situated along a spectrum. For example, in jazz, Guy Lombardo is often cited as the "degree zero" of "sweet," while Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman are used as points of reference for the "hot" end of the continuum.[117] In the case of blues, rural, male artists like Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and others occupy a similar position in terms of "authenticity" to that of Oliver, Armstrong, and Goodman in jazz.[118] The case of Lonnie Johnson poses particular challenges due to a number of factors that enabled him to perform as a solo artist, accompanist, and ensemble player in a number of styles and genres of music. If one imagines the classificatory schemes in terms of lines in space, his performances could be placed at many different points along the sweet–hot or jazz–blues or rural–urban spectra. In other words, his performances, pinpointed in terms of these criteria, would cover a lot more "territory" than most artists. This enabled him to land more paying gigs as an artist, but it also makes his reception more complicated. If he can perform with Ellington and Armstrong, Texas Alexander and Stovepipe Johnson (a yodeler), Victoria Spivey and Spencer Williams, in addition to his own blues and ballads, how do we understand him as an artist? In the end, versatility as an artist—familiarity with a variety of genres and styles and technical mastery in them—functions as an obstacle to the creation of a legible musical identity, which, in turn, colors critical reception. As a musician, he is skilled and employable. From the perspective of recording companies, this means he is exploitable as both a soloist and a studio musician, precisely because of his adaptability and even malleability in response

to changing tastes. But for critics, record collectors, and fans, this means he is a protean, labile, flexible, difficult-to-categorize artist precisely because of the variety represented in the corpus.

All musicians, to some degree or another, can play in different styles. Indeed, jazz and blues depend on citational practices in the creation of new material that complicate genre divisions. Bits and pieces of melody, lyric, rhythm, and groove are lifted from any and every context and varied through signifying to create new songs. But Johnson's case is extreme. To begin with, his mastery of different instruments poses interesting challenges. To cite one example, his performance of blues on violin stands out for its seeming juxtaposition of different musical traditions (figs. 3 and 4). In the context of New Orleans and rural Louisiana, violins were employed in string bands that performed blues, among other styles, but in the context of the idea of the blues created by record companies and scholars working in a folkloric tradition, the violin seems out of place. Likewise, his solo guitar work in jazz ensembles is revolutionary, recorded at a time when guitar and banjo were relegated to the rhythm section. This appearance of a "blues" practice in the midst of jazz orchestras paves the way for revolutionary jazz guitar duet recordings with the white artist Eddie Lang and coverage in jazz publications, although not in jazz scholarship (fig. 5).[119] In the end, his ability to play different instruments in different styles and genres for different performance contexts and audiences hindered the construction of a unitary, fixed identity as an artist. Or, put another way, his expertise in manipulating musical sign systems blocked the construction of his own artistic identity as a stable sign. Keenly aware of the tastes of his various audiences and able to adapt accordingly, the construction of a unitary musical identity was hampered by his deep understanding of the social systems in which music is embedded.

The role of record collectors in the construction of Johnson's identity further complicates the reception of Johnson's varied artistic output.[120] In the early years of jazz and to some degree blues scholarship, record collectors helped shape the lines of inquiry. Rather than pose questions informed by musicology or ethnomusicology, record collectors focused on "facts" involving personnel rosters at recording sessions. Miller summarizes a poignant episode from late in Johnson's life that occurred at the International Association of Jazz Record Collectors (IAJRC) fourth annual convention, held 20–21 July 1967 in Toronto:

> Johnson's presence at the convention allowed [Alexander] Ross [writer for the Toronto *Telegram*] to point up what he saw as the paradox of



IAJRC's preoccupations. "History itself walked in," Ross wrote of the moment, late on the 20th, when Johnson arrived, carrying his guitar in a vinyl bag. "He has a deep, wise face, and he looks like he's spent all of his life in a succession of strange furnished rooms. Somebody grabbed a microphone and introduced him by saying "Lonnie was one of the greatest guitar players who ever . . . Uh, and *still* is." Most of the collectors, though apparently not all, turned their attention Johnson's way as he listened intently to the recording of *Broken Levee Blues* that he had made for OKeh in March 1928. "And just for a moment," Ross noted pointedly, "the International Association of Jazz Record Collectors forgot about their discographies, their transcriptions, their disputed personnel lists, their endlessly accumulating collections, and remembered what jaz[z] was all about."[121]

OKeh Race Records

ELECTRIC RECORDS

Lonnie Johnson
(Exclusive Okeh Artist)

LONNIE JOHNSON

is weighted with misery... hear him sing the horrors of "St. Louis Cyclone Blues". The wind goes wailing through the song like a gale of madness.

8512 10 in. .75	**ST. LOUIS CYCLONE BLUES**—Vocal with Guitar and Piano **SWEET WOMAN YOU CAN'T GO WRONG**—Vocal with Guitar Both sung by **Lonnie Johnson**
85C5 10 in. .75	**LONESOME GHOST BLUES**—Guitar and Singing **FICKLE MAMMA BLUES**—Guitar and Singing Both sung and played by **Lonnie Johnson**
8506 10 in. .75	**BEST FRIEND BLUES**—Vocal with Piano and Clarinet **STINGING BEE BLUES**—Vocal with Piano and Clarinet Both sung by **Margaret Johnson**
8514 10 in. .75	**A WOMAN GETS TIRED OF THE SAME MAN ALL THE TIME**—Vocal with Stovepipe and Guitar Accomp. **COURT STREET BLUES**—Vocal with Stovepipe and Guitar Accompaniment Both played and sung by **Stovepipe No. 1 and David Crockett**

FIG. 3 (OPPOSITE) Cover of OKeh Race Records catalog, circa 1926 or 1927. Author's collection.

FIG. 4 One-page ad for Lonnie Johnson's OKeh sides from OKeh catalog, circa 1926 or 1927, featuring the only publicity photograph of him with a violin. Author's collection.

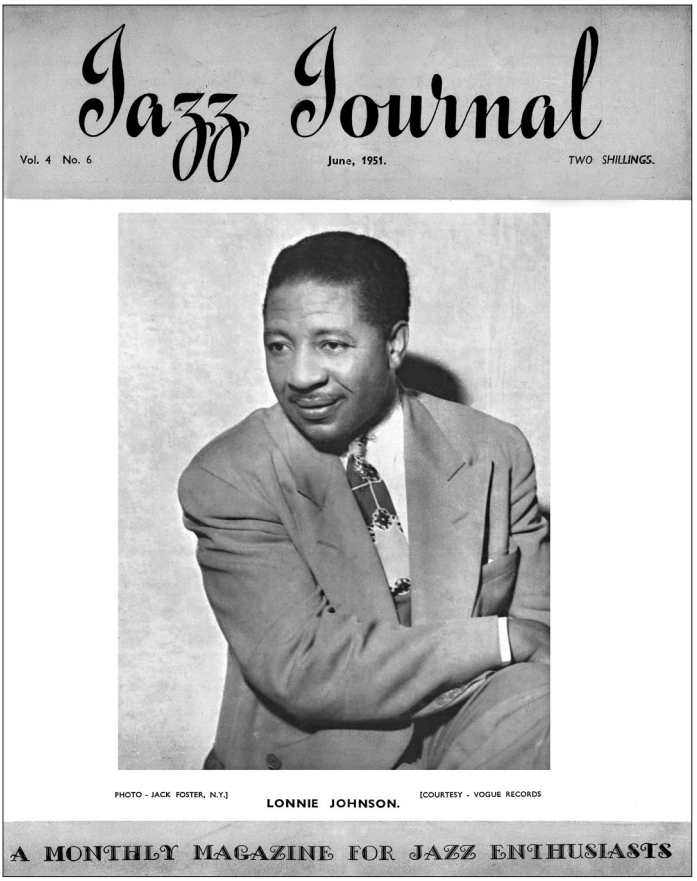


FIG. 5 Lonnie Johnson on the cover of *Jazz Journal*, June 1951. Reproduced courtesy of *Jazz Journal*, https://jazzjournal.co.uk. Copy in author's collection.

Miller reports that record collectors were more interested in resolving a personnel dispute concerning the Gin Bottle Four recordings of Blind Willie Dunn (Eddie Lang) than anything substantive about his life and work. Stefan Grossman, who has transcribed some of Johnson's pieces, highlights the lost opportunities:

> Lonnie was sadly overlooked in his later years by blues and guitar playing historians. He was never interviewed in depth about either his life or his guitar techniques. . . . What is very unusual is that the tonality and key is the same for so many tunes. He might have his guitar tuned

> low, or play it with a capo, or use a twelve string instead of a six string but the chord shapes are always based around the key of D. Document Records . . . have released a 7-volume CD set Lonnie Johnson—The Complete Recorded Works (each CD containing over 20 titles) and within those 140 plus tracks, you will only find 3 or 4 tunes in a key other than D! Yet, Lonnie's recording output in the 1940s and 1950s has little in common with blues in D, and he in fact rarely played in that key or style during these years. I personally cannot cite another guitarist whose style and technique changed so dramatically, especially after it was so widely acclaimed and imitated. This is a very strange phenomenon that only Lonnie would have helped us to understand.[122]

Grossman's lament about lost opportunities speaks directly to the role played by record collectors who went on to become archivists and authorities on early jazz and blues. Relative amateurs with respect to musical knowledge, they nonetheless shaped the contours of reception for many years. The role played by record collectors in reception adds another wrinkle to the history of the reception of Johnson's work.

As we have seen, Lonnie Johnson's musical identity is not easily reducible to one particular genre or style of music, and yet he has been pigeonholed as a blues artist, largely because of his solo work, and either ignored or labeled as "inauthentic" in recent years because of the stylistic variability that his musical talent enabled.[123] The longevity of his career and the pressures exerted by commercial constraints contributed to the varied content of his corpus. If some artists complained about being limited to the blues, such as Floyd Campbell (drummer and vocalist) who recorded blues with Charlie Creath—"Frankly, I didn't care for the Blues but back in those days that's the only thing they let colored bands record"[124]—generic variety did not help in Johnson's case, for he has still come to be known as a blues guitarist. His work as a studio musician and attempts to adapt to the changing tastes of the listening audience only complicate the picture. Indeed, even more than the work in jazz and vaudeville, the ballads recorded with King have led to charges of inauthenticity. His vocals display prominent vibrato and breath support and a distinct lack of the hoarseness, harshness, or growl associated with "authentic" blues.[125] While the ballads showcase his strengths as a vocalist, later fans expecting a "blues artist" did not appreciate his choice to perform "My Mother's Eyes" and other popular songs in the 1960s.[126] Blues scholar Pete Welding's negative reaction to a performance in Philadelphia in 1960 is representative:

> Initially, it must be stated that Johnson is by no stretch of the imagination that authentic blues artist his older *Okeh* and *Bluebird* recordings attest he once was. True enough, he offers a number of blues in his program, such tunes as Bessie Smith's *Backwater Blues*, Handy's perennial *St Louis Blues* and several originals, among which was his hit single, *Mr Jelly Roll Baker*. He does a creditable job on them, but one gets the distinct impression—and this was especially noticeable in the Smith classic—that he doesn't really attach too much significance to them. He doesn't feel them as deeply as he does the sentimental, mawkish ballads which comprise the bulk of his repertoire.[127]

Welding goes on to write that "the blues have lost all meaning for him," and that "he's at his best in the maudlin, saccharine ballads which comprise at least 70% of his program."[128]

If it is not the ballads, it is the "clean" technique, use of major and diminished chords on guitar,[129] "the steady flow of melodic riffs and runs . . . [that] were too sophisticated and jazz-oriented,"[130] the vibrato in the vocal as opposed to a rough growl, the clear diction, the long lines of lyrical verse, or some other feature that invites ignoring or dismissing his work.[131] While no one distinguishing marker is definitive in terms of its absence or presence for the blues, jazz, or any other genre of music, the tendency remains to attempt to identify a binary opposition and operate a gesture of exclusion based on it.[132] But in the realm of African American culture, as Stuart Hall reminds us, looking for binary oppositions is a futile endeavor fraught with power dynamics: "By definition, Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low, resistance versus incorporation, authentic versus inauthentic, experiential versus formal, opposition versus homogenization. There are always positions to be won in popular culture, but no struggle can capture popular culture itself for our side or theirs."[133] Not only is searching for binaries unproductive, but in the end, it only serves to crush the fragile construct that is performance.[134] In Johnson's corpus, I seek to go beyond the binaries to explore the multiple possibilities for meaning that his performances enable us to hear.

Analyzing and interpreting Johnson's corpus in its entirety is neither feasible nor particularly productive in terms of a greater understanding of the meanings of his work. I have taken my cues from Johnson's performances in selecting avenues of questioning to pursue. Recurring imagery, themes, lexicon, and musical figures trace patterns throughout his corpus. My song

selections have been shaped by what I perceive as a degree of overarching coherence that these patterns create. In addition, the corpus cannot simply be read as Johnson's individual acts of expression. His artistic output is embedded within contexts of live performance and recording. The songs reflect the contexts in which they were produced that entailed relations with other people—other musicians, producers, and audiences. My approach to the songs analyzed in the following chapters attends to both Johnson's modes of self-presentation and his reflections on the world around him, a world of production, mediation, and reception.

What emerges from an examination of Johnson's corpus is the articulation of a rare degree of awareness of the self's embeddedness in a social world. As the following chapters will develop, Johnson's early experiences in New Orleans and St. Louis shaped an understanding of how individuals function within larger social configurations that is distinctly different from other blues artists. His experience of urban environments, as well as his professional experiences performing as a soloist and in various group configurations, shaped a notion of self that is less solitary and more embedded within larger networks than what is ordinarily represented in the blues. Working as a soloist but also as a sideman and as a member of larger ensembles enhanced this awareness of an individual identity shaped by broader social forces. Successfully maneuvering as a professional musician depended on adapting and conforming to musical and social expectations. As a musician he relates to other musicians, but also promoters, venue owners, record producers, and audiences. As we will see, this is neither the experience nor the portrait of the typical blues performer. Johnson exhibits none of the single-minded passion and mode of expression of a Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, or Son House. Furthermore, the world he inhabits musically and socially is reflected in the world he creates in and through his music. As articulated in his music, Johnson's understanding of himself and of the world in which he is embedded reflects in a way unlike any other blues performer the mediation of the self by social forces. In his lyrics and in his musical performances, individual and community perform a complex dialectical dance of interdependence.

Outline and Technical Details

My study begins with an exploration of the rich sociohistorical contexts of New Orleans and St. Louis—in many respects atypical of the early twentieth-century South—that shape the performance of race, music, and the

social world in Lonnie Johnson's archive. Of particular interest are the sites of music performance in their intersection with the understanding and politics of race in those two cities. Chapter 2 explores Johnson's construction of a persona for himself through his recordings. Careful readings of songs reveal a self-conscious manipulation of various kinds of signs to produce an unstable identity that responds to others' perceptions. Johnson's attention to how he is perceived by others determines a musical self-construction that portrays the self as embedded in and dependent on social relations. Chapter 3 turns to the social world that Johnson constructs in his lyrics. The complicated networks of relations that Johnson represents involve a typology of individuals. People occupy positions and perform roles, like his own as a musician, within social structures that shape their behavior. In Johnson's lyrics, deceit and betrayal are often exposed as a function of the roles people play, manipulating and exploiting others. Rather than the oppositional relation between self and other typical of many blues lyrics, Johnson instead understands social interactions as conditioned by prescribed roles and functions, consistent with both his musical and life experiences. Social roles delimit possibilities for modes of interaction for the self and others, allowing Johnson to imagine and represent conflict in more complex ways than most blues artists. His exposure to urban environments afforded him insight into social networks of power relations in which he was himself caught up that he communicates to an audience of listeners.

The manipulation and betrayal in the social world Johnson constructs lead, at times, to loneliness and despair. Being alone is a product of deceit, abandonment, and both voluntary and involuntary isolation. Chapter 4 explores the complicated representation of the isolated self in Johnson's lyrics. Representations of breakups, natural disasters, and homelessness lead to meditations on death. The isolated self is forced to face his or her own mortality and the fact of dying alone. I argue that Johnson's representations of the self alone contain a philosophical dimension. Paradoxically, while we all must die alone, we share this common existential condition. The conclusion explores a key central thread that runs throughout Johnson's corpus: the dialectical relationship between the self and others. With particular attention to his instrumental work, I reframe the question of Johnson's authenticity to ponder what we are listening for in his corpus.

All transcriptions of songs are my own. I have chosen to reproduce pronunciation and words as sung to underscore the poetic quality of Johnson's lines, rather than to "correct" African American Vernacular English.