

Jelly Roll Morton's Parole from Hell

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Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West, by
Phil Pastras, The University of California Press.

*Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly
Roll Morton*, by Howard Reich and William Gaines,
Da Capo.

“WHEN JELLY ROLL was a boy, his loving godmother sold his soul to the devil in return for a gift of boundless musical talent.” So begins Alan Lomax’s preface to the 1993 edition of *Mister Jelly Roll*, first published in 1950, the book that codified the enduring conventional portrait—and self-portrait—of Jelly Roll Morton as a mythic character out of darkest New Orleans. In 1938, three years before Morton’s death, Lomax sat him down at the piano in the auditorium of the Library of Congress, plied him with leading questions and booze, and taped his extended disquisitions on the origins of jazz, sportin’ life in old Louisiana, the greatness of Jelly Roll Morton, and related subjects. Lomax built his book from verbatim (if sometimes misheard) chunks of the transcripts of those interviews, supplemented by the recollections of others and framed by Lomax’s own prose, which favors apostrophic verve over precision and explanatory force: for example, “This is the master formula of jazz—mulatto knowin’ness ripened by black sorrow.”

If Lomax wanted to salvage Morton’s reputation—and it appears that he honestly did want to—he went about it the wrong way. *Mister Jelly Roll* presented Morton as a founding father of jazz, true, but one who had fallen on hard times and become merely colorful, and perhaps tragically ridiculous—still wearing a diamond in his tooth and playing “Spanish tinge” music redolent of turn-of-the-century cathouses, still complaining that these here whippersnappers they got playing jazz now were getting credit for ideas stolen from

him, still boasting of having invented jazz near-single-handedly. Snakebit, hoodooed, robbed of dignity and currency by the advent of fresher styles and the machinations of business associates who had hustled the self-styled hustler, Morton had become a big-talking has-been. For more than half a century, anybody wanting to say anything new about him or his music has had to reckon with this conventional Morton who emerges from *Mister Jelly Roll*.

According to Lomax, Morton's "Faustian story parallels that of Robert Johnson." Morton's story, more Promethean than Faustian, does not, in fact, parallel that of the supposedly devil-haunted Delta bluesman; or, rather, you have to throw out most of the recoverable biographical substance of Morton's life to get it to look like Johnson's sketchier, largely irrecoverable, heavily legend-obscured life. (Lomax even messed around with the details of Morton's legend to make it more like Johnson's: Morton's godmother was supposed to have sacrificed her godson's soul to increase her *own* uncanny powers, but Lomax changed the story to match Johnson's pact-with-the-devil story, in which the *musician* gains the powers.) But, as Lomax had surely noticed, in the early 1990s a surprising Robert Johnson boom was underway. Sales were so brisk—*Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* sold 400,000 copies within six months of its release in 1990 and was certified gold—that the fact of the boom itself became news. Johnson's music found its way as far into the mainstream as remastered acoustic blues recorded in the 1930s could possibly go. You would walk into a bookstore or coffee shop, independent or chain, and Johnson would be singing "Sweet Home Chicago" on the sound system.

In 1993, Lomax thought that a similar Morton revival might be taking shape. The encouraging signs included two Morton-themed musicals running at the same time in New York, one of them on Broadway. Having recast Morton as a jazzy Johnson to assist this comeback from beyond the grave, Lomax was optimistic: "There will be more to come, doubtless—movies, television, better musicals (I hope), and, God help us, deconstruction—all the recognition that our ravenous culture denies to the geniuses it neglects and punishes

when they are alive, and lavishe[s] upon them when they are dead." That's what a long-dead musician's due looks like these days, and Lomax wanted Morton, whom he describes as "the first jazz composer, the equal or, some feel, the superior of Ellington," to get his due.

A certain irony shadows Lomax's desire to give Morton a Johnson-themed makeover. Morton may well be the major figure in American music he claimed to be: okay, he didn't invent jazz, but he was present at the creation and played a significant role, perhaps the most significant role of any individual, in its initial emergence and early development as a distinct genre. He deserves better treatment than he received from the 1930s onward. But Johnson, by contrast, is probably overdue for a demotion from his exalted place in the canons of American culture—a demotion for his own good, so he can stop carrying around the crushing load of other people's baggage. Although Johnson was a powerful bluesman, he was not a particularly influential one in his day, and he was not an innovator on the order of, say, Muddy Waters, who turned the genre in a new direction. Johnson's singing, set against his deceptively fancy guitar technique, sends chills down the back of listeners' necks, but so do Charley Patton's and Otis Rush's.

So why do so many people assume that the blues begins (and perhaps ends) with Robert Johnson? In part it's because he was a deeply affecting singer and, for audiences unfamiliar with early blues formulas, an enigmatic lyricist. His recordings have a hard-to-pinpoint compelling quality—usually described by combining variants of "raw" and "intense"—that encourages a listener to return to them over and over to plumb their depths. And some of those recordings, collected on an album self-fulfillingly entitled *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, were reissued on a major label (Columbia) in the early 1960s, just in time to beguile the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and a lot of other people who traced the roots of rock back through Chicago to the Delta. Johnson may not have significantly influenced the course of blues, but he certainly shaped the development of blues-based rock (which may help explain the Johnson boom of the 1990s,

when people aging out of their prime rock-loving years began to take stock of their trajectories as music fans).

In part, too, Johnson remains a household name because of the legend that has grown up around him. In it, he upgrades his chops by selling his soul to the devil one midnight at a crossroads in the Mississippi Delta. Hellhound on his trail and the open road before him, Johnson pauses just long enough in his rambling to record twenty-nine songs brimming with the aforementioned raw intensity. He dies at twenty-seven, barking like a dog on all fours and/or calling out for the Lord's mercy after being fatally poisoned and/or stabbed and/or struck down by syphilis. Picture all five variants at once for maximum drama.

The alchemical chain reaction connecting this fairy tale, the music itself, and the proclivities of classic-rock fans has led Johnson, who in life did not get paid in full for his music, to collect a million times over in cultural capital after his death. He has become enduringly famous as an outsize being he cannot possibly have been: the ur-bluesman, the voice of black existentialism and the human condition in extremis, pure folk soulfulness incarnate, the mystic source from which flows the Nile of the blues to empty into the sea of rock. Give the guy—and his music—a break.

Jelly Roll Morton is not as sexy a character as Johnson; Lomax, for one, obviously felt that Morton could use some of Johnson's surplus aura. Rock stars do not single out Morton as their spiritual godfather and he remains an esoteric figure even in jazz circles, since he represents a prehistoric period before the advent of swing or the rise to primacy of the improvising soloist. Even for those who do know of him, Morton has proven harder to flatten into caricature than Johnson, more unwieldy to conjure with, because he lived longer and left behind more hard evidence and a larger, more various body of recorded music.

But Morton's life-after-death as a cultural figure does bear some structural resemblance to Johnson's—that's where their stories become usefully parallel. Both men came out of a storied Southern black milieu, a cartoon version of which too often serves to explain

their music: i.e., black essence plus cotton and Jim Crow equals Johnson's Delta blues; Creole hybridity plus New Orleans' climate of French- and Spanish-inflected license 'n' lust equals Morton's jazz. Both have been identified as a major influence on the development of American music, anchoring lines of important figures that extend all the way to the present: Johnson to Muddy Waters to Hendrix and Clapton to Stevie Ray Vaughan and so on; Morton to Armstrong to Ellington to Monk and Mingus and so on. Both have been cast as a particular romantic type, the great artist who is not only a man of the people but also a prince of the low life: Johnson alternately a dusty itinerant and a sharp-suited juke-joint cosmopolitan, Morton a bordello-trained pimp, pool shark, and rounder. And, as Lomax was at pains to remind everybody, both legends include a supernatural chapter that pretends to account for genius before depositing that genius in hell—where, presumably, Johnson and Morton pass the afternoons of eternity trading hot licks and shots of white-hot grog with Niccolò Paganini over a beat provided by John Bonham's drumming and the rope-jumping and bagwork of Sonny Liston.



If Robert Johnson (1911–1938) needs to be saved from existential sainthood, Jelly Roll Morton (1895?–1941) needs to be saved from quaintness. Remarkably similar two-pronged rescue missions have recently been undertaken. Two pairs of books—Phil Pastras's *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West* and Howard Reich and William Gaines's *Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton*, Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch's *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* and Elijah Wald's *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*—set out to clear away the clutter of fable and cant so that we can recognize each musician's distinctive form of greatness for what it is. Each rescue mission consists of a ground-preparing surgical strike followed closely by a general offensive. First comes an acutely focused debunking book, published by a university press in its prestigious series on American music, that patiently strips away accumulated layers of

liner-note convention and assembles evidence, detectivelike, to reveal what we can know of the actual man and to send us back to his music with fresh ears. Then comes a sweeping reconsideration, published by a commercial press, that restores the man and his music to a fully realized and properly historical context—rather than a myth-historical one—in order drastically to revise the terms on which they are understood.

These days, to say something new about Robert Johnson means above all to say something new about the myth of Robert Johnson. Pearson and McCulloch's *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* and Wald's *Escaping the Delta* devote themselves to taking down the effigy at the crossroads. They cannot replace it with a lifelike character, though, because there is not enough material evidence of Johnson's life to work with. So both books—Pearson and McCulloch's via tightly focused point-by-point debunking of much-repeated stories and received wisdom, Wald's via a broadly revised account of the blues that downplays the importance of folk culture and plays up the importance of the commercial sphere of popular music—offer contexts to replace the fateful mythscape in which Johnson's legend is set. First, they flesh out Johnson's social and cultural world: the Delta and the South, the race music business in the early twentieth century (and its selective revival as roots music in the 1960s and after), the loose community of traveling songsters. Second, they analyze the words and motivations of those who have given seemingly eternal life to the legend of Robert Johnson, often by ignoring or doing violence to what is known about the man and his times. Between these two books and Marybeth Hamilton's forthcoming *In Search of the Blues*, it's looking more and more as if the canonical devil-haunted Johnson, and perhaps the very notion of the Delta blues as America's deepest and truest rural folk music, was put together in the 1940s and 1950s from some really good 78s and a few scraps of cultural pocket litter by interlocking coteries of folklorists, buffs, and critics in New York and other points far north of that fateful crossroads. A hard look at the intellectual and emotional profiles of these taste-makers might go far to explain Johnson's place in the canon. The relatively few facts

known about his own life may not allow for full-blown revisionist biographies, but they can be put to work in constructing contexts for him that allow revisionists to contest this orthodoxy's reign.

The situation is not quite the same in Jelly Roll Morton's case: to contest orthodoxy's reign, you find fresh resonance in an extensive body of biographical evidence. Pastras's absorbing microhistorical investigation of Morton's time on the West Coast and Reich and Gaines's expansive reassessment of his whole career do set out to take apart the clownish Morton of Lomaxian legend, but they can (and therefore must) offer true biographical portraits to replace him. To this end, both books also present fresh documentary material: Pastras has turned up a scrapbook of Morton's that offers "an invaluable set of clues about what was on his mind toward the end of his life," while Reich and Gaines make extensive use of legal records and a body of Mortoniana made available only after the death in 1992 of William Russell, a memorabilia collector. (If fresh documentary material relating to Robert Johnson ever shows up, it will be big news, the kind that commands front-page—albeit below-the-fold—attention in newspapers, national TV news coverage, several seconds on MTV, and several minutes on *All Things Considered*.) Morton left behind plenty for biographers to work with: a rich trove of compositions written over four decades; recordings from several sessions and with a variety of musicians spanning two decades; letters and other papers detailing his private life and business dealings; photographs and memorabilia; and of course his own semiformal testimony in the interviews with Lomax (the original recordings of which still exist, so biographers do not have to rely on Lomax's edited transcripts of them). The evidence available in this archive may yet provide the basis for Morton's parole from the hell to which received wisdom, with his own and Alan Lomax's well-intentioned help, has consigned him.

Trying to scotch slippery, tenacious legends while offering better ways to understand Johnson's and Morton's significance, the rescuers' books revisit what is known of the musicians' lives in order to find new resonance in their music. I do not even attempt to

do justice here to cogently and intricately reasoned, rigorously researched books; I confine myself to considering what they suggest about the uses of biography in retuning our faculty for hearing meaning in music. And from here on I confine myself to treatments of Morton, who differs from Johnson in having left enough evidence for biographers, and especially to Pastras's book, in which biographical argument underwrites and enables all other strategies—like close analysis of recordings—for revising our understanding of musician and music. Pastras most deeply explores and tests the link between the recoverable facts of a musician's life and an assessment of his music.



Like the principal question raised by the legend of Robert Johnson—"Did he really sell his soul to the devil at a crossroads in the Delta?"—the principal question raised by the legend of Jelly Roll Morton—"Did he really invent jazz?"—is not worth answering. Either you move on to the next question or you modify this one to make it useful.

To pursue the latter course, begin by noting that Morton's claim to have invented jazz—made most famously in a letter to *Down Beat* in 1938 contesting W. C. Handy's even frailer claim to be the discoverer, if not the father, of jazz and blues—often amounted to nothing more than Morton insisting that he was doing things before other people did them. For instance, Morton told Lomax that he and another New Orleans pianist named Tony Jackson were scat-singing "for a novelty" in 1906 and 1907, when Louis Armstrong, who became famous as the originator of scatting, "was still in the orphan's home." Following this line of attack, Reich and Gaines add rigor to Morton's loosely grandiose boasting by identifying him as the first to synthesize—rather than necessarily the first to think of—crucial elements of what we now recognize as jazz. In contradistinction to the pseudoclassicism of ragtime composers on the one hand and the "stunt pianism and vaudeville comedy" of his musically unlettered whorehouse contemporaries on the other, Morton wrote the first

complex and self-conscious jazz compositions, deploying “breaks, stop-time devices, improvisatory feeling, and nascent swing rhythm” in ways that roadmarked the idiom’s development for at least the following two decades. “In effect,” Reich and Gaines argue, “Morton wasn’t just crafting new compositions but helping to invent a musical language that could accommodate them. . . advancing an art form while helping to write its underlying syntax.” No one person *invented* jazz, but. . .

Pastras makes Morton’s claim even more measured, finding an intellectual silver lining in the cloud of hot air. Emphasizing one of Morton’s more thoughtful iterations of his usual boast—“I started using the word [jazz] in 1902 to show people the difference between jazz and ragtime”—Pastras understands him to be saying only that he identified the emergent genre. “Unlike most other musicians of his generation,” Pastras notes, “he could not only perform the music, but he could also discuss the performance analytically.” Pastras concludes that Morton’s claim, once it is judiciously reduced to a claim to have named the genre, is “musically, etymologically, and historically accurate with respect to the words *ragtime* and *jazz*.” That’s a long way from the comically desperate figure complaining that everybody who plays jazz owes him royalties—and to come a long way from that desperate figure in order to make clear Morton’s importance in American musical history is, of course, the general idea.

So what sort of biographical, rather than myth-historical, questions *are* worth asking and answering? Fixing the exact date of Morton’s birth (20 September 1885? 10 October 1890?) or the exact spelling of his baptismal name (Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe? Lemott? La Menthe?) is not that important, it turns out; there’s not much at stake other than the title of champeen researcher. Nor do Mortonists disagree significantly among themselves about the shaping effect on him of his early life in the musical crucible of New Orleans. But they do disagree about the roles played by other characters, notably Anita Gonzalez, the love of his life, and Laura Hunter, the godmother who took him in when his parents put him out. And Pastras, in particular, encourages us to emphasize places other than

New Orleans, especially California, in an account of Morton's career. How you understand the importance of people and places in Morton's life eventually connects to how you understand him as a historical figure, rather than a mythological character, so the stakes can be high in the rethinking of biographical detail.

In *Mister Jelly Roll*, Lomax concludes that "Morton never felt certain whether voodoo or big business had ruined him; both were mysterious forces which finally overpowered his tiger." Lomax makes Laura Hunter and Anita Gonzalez into grasping harpies who embody these two principles: Hunter the sinister voodoo queen, Gonzalez the calculating bottom-liner. Of the two, Gonzalez plays the more crucial role. Born Bessie Johnson, she knew Morton from New Orleans but took up with him out West, in Las Vegas and California. A shrewd businesswoman who apparently changed her name as part of an effort to evade some of the strictures placed on a black woman who owned a saloon, she responded to Morton's love by taking him for all he was worth, at least as Lomax would have us see it. *Mister Jelly Roll* closes with an image of Gonzalez, having buried the near-penniless great artist who loved her, looking down "at her diamond-studded hands at rest upon her silken lap" and then, "with a quick smile," reminding Lomax to mention in his book that the chicken dinners served at her tourist camp are recommended by Duncan Hines. She is also Lomax's best source for the story of Hunter (a.k.a. Eulalie Echo, a.k.a. Eulalie Hecaud) selling her godson's soul to the devil. "Jelly always knew that she'd sold him to Satan," Gonzalez tells Lomax. That's why, when Morton dies in Gonzalez's arms, he begs her "to keep anointing his lips with oil that had been blessed by a bishop in New York. He had oil running all over him when he gave up the ghost."

Reich and Gaines, seeking to redeem Morton from sensation, push Laura Hunter to the background, emphasizing Morton's orthodox Catholicism as they downplay the voodoo angle that Lomax so enthusiastically played up. But they basically accept Lomax's rendering of Anita Gonzalez, which fits well with two central themes in their account of Morton. First, he did start out as a rounder who

counted music as merely the most legitimate of his several aptitudes, but "the young man who indeed started out as a New Orleans hustler. . . reinvented himself as a serious composer who spent every penny on his music." As they see it, Lomax villainously goaded Morton to obscure his own artistic seriousness by reverting to his more trivial street persona in the interviews for *Mister Jelly Roll*. Second, the tragedy of Morton's life is that business people, black and white, rooked him not only out of his money but out of his legacy, leaving only "the pathological liar of familiar lore" trying to talk his way back into his rightful place in the jazz pantheon. Gonzalez fits snugly into this scheme as a vice-district gold digger, an embodiment of business culture at its low end where it overlaps with street life. In Reich and Gaines's account, as in Lomax's, she might as well be an undercover operative assigned to hamstring Morton's genius. She manipulates him without mercy, bait-and-switching him by dangling before him the prospect of love and financial support and then, in the end, rewriting his will, walking off with the remnants of his fortune, and refusing even to put up a marker on Morton's grave.

Pastras takes seriously the characters of Laura Hunter and Anita Gonzalez in ways that the others do not. Seeking complexity in Morton's relationship to Hunter and voodoo, trying to get past the simplistic formula of a pact with the devil enforced by a castrating witch, Pastras emphasizes the extent to which Hunter filled the role of Morton's mother and figured prominently in the spiritual dimensions of his inner life. He also explores the possibility that she was a sort of distaff Gandalf of Storyville, performing white magic on behalf of prostitutes and musicians. Confronting analytically a story that Lomax presents at face value, Pastras seeks nuance in it: the real question, as he sees it, is, Why would Gonzalez say what she said to Lomax about Hunter? He proposes three possible explanations: like Morton, she told Lomax the sensational thing she thought he wanted to hear; in her old age she had moved closer to conservative Christianity and away from the tolerance of voodoo she had once had; there was some truth to what she said about Hunter. The last possibility sends him off into a historical account of voodoo in New

Orleans that proposes a connection between Morton's family and the noted nineteenth-century voodoo practitioner Marie Laveau, the point being to explore a misunderstood religious tradition as a context that helped to shape a misunderstood man. By the time he is done asking questions about the relationship between Hunter and Morton, Pastras has turned the pact-with-the-devil story sideways, so that the reader can see how thin it is, a mere screen of myth stretched across the thick and sometimes unknowable complexities of inner life.

It is typical of Pastras's book that a question about Hunter and Morton turns into a question about Gonzalez. Far from being a peripheral character made to embody a simple principle, she occupies the center of the story: "If anything, Jelly Roll Morton's statement that Anita Gonzalez was the only woman he ever loved grossly understates the length and depth of their relationship and the extent of their ties to one another. . . . In short, theirs was not just a love story; Anita's relationship to Jelly touched virtually every aspect of his life." Pastras extends and sharpens Reich and Gaines's point about Morton's transformation, arguing that it was specifically in California, and with Gonzalez, that Morton completely committed himself to music. If "from his early teens until he was about thirty-two, he used music as a front for his hustling," for the next decade "his focus never wandered very far from music. What happened to effect such a dramatic turnabout?" Pastras calls it a "conversion," and isolates three factors that brought it to pass: first, Anita Gonzalez, who not only inspired Morton but put her business sense and street wisdom to good use in watching his back, thus relieving him in part of mundane concerns so that he could concentrate on his art; second, the presence of Laura Hunter, another inspiration and the mother figure hovering over his spiritual life; third, "social factors" that include the shutting down of red-light districts, the advent of Prohibition, and the coming-of-age of the music industry, which afforded new opportunities to entrepreneurial musicians like Morton but also confronted them with "the concentration of power in the hands of a few media giants." *Mister Jelly Roll* skips lightly over Morton's time

in California, straying as little as possible from the familiar scenery of New Orleans, but Pastras's *Dead Man Blues* decenters New Orleans as the crucial ground of Morton's musical genius; California, and the company of Anita Gonzalez, becomes equally important.

Which brings us to "Ganjam," one of the compositions Morton wrote on the West Coast, and which both Pastras and Reich and Gaines present as an arrow pointing the way to the future of jazz and a new appreciation of Morton's greatness. As Reich and Gaines describe it, "Ganjam" is structured like "the first movement of a symphony, complete with multiple themes, a development section in which these themes are transformed, and a recapitulation." The piece "ventured into the kinds of unabashedly dissonant chords and exotic Eastern scales that were not to be heard in jazz for at least another decade, with the experiments of Charles Mingus in the 1950s." "Ganjam" was far ahead of the most daring work of Ellington and the other usual suspects, but the breakthrough came late in Morton's career, and practically nobody noticed. "With 'Ganjam,' Morton—who had given jazz its first great artistic leap, by proving it could be written down—gave jazz yet another, pointing toward the next generation's avant-garde. As he was doing so, however, he was being laughed at by his peers, ignored by the jazz industry, and robbed by his Chicago publisher and by ASCAP." Reich and Gaines end their book with "Ganjam," the perfect vignette with which to conclude their tale of a visionary who had the misfortune to become a character, while Pastras uses "Ganjam" to crown his case for California as the scene of Morton's artistic apotheosis.

This all begins to explain the seemingly crazy cross-country drive from New York to the West Coast that Morton made in the final months of his life. Why would he undertake it, leaving his loving wife Mabel behind, when he was in poor health, near-broke, and musically frustrated? In the legend codified by Lomax, this final trip seems to confirm that Morton is cursed. Laura Hunter dies in Los Angeles in 1940, leaving behind a lot of diamonds and the deal she struck with the devil once upon a time, which means that Old Scratch will be coming soon to collect Morton's soul. Morton rushes frantically to

California to claim the diamonds and meet his doom, arriving just in time to be fleeced yet again by Anita Gonzalez (where did she get all those diamonds she's wearing on her fingers when she talks to Lomax?) when he returns to her like a dog to its vomit. But Pastras convincingly recasts the story: Morton returned to California because he was blessed, not cursed, by the conversion into a serious artist that he underwent there. Precisely because he was sick, broke, and frustrated, Morton staked everything on a last bid to get back to Gonzalez and California, the ground of his being as an artist, and make one last fresh start. "Ganjam" and other late compositions then become proof that the gambit worked, even if he did not make any money and his health failed him in the end. Pastras argues that, rather than robbing Morton, Gonzalez may well have bankrolled as well as inspired this final comeback attempt.

"[W]hy bother with the sometimes petty, sometimes sordid details of Morton's last days?" asks Pastras. Because, as his book shows, in those details can be found the materials of a new account of Morton as an artist, an account that confirms his musical greatness by striking through the brittle texture of fairy tales about Jelly Roll Morton's soul. One of the infuriating things about Lomax's treatment of Morton is his unwillingness to bother with even the most cursory reportorial treatment of the petty and not-so-petty factual details of Morton's life. "It has proved vain to try to check or correct Jelly's story," Lomax airily asserts, then follows up with a bon mot instead of evidence that he bothered to try: "Jazz musicians are strong on downbeats but weak on dates." It may be that Pastras swings too far in the other direction to correct for Lomax's tendencies. Trying to tease out the meaning of a confirmed fact, he will sometimes venture too far out on a weak branch, letting speculative logic give way to outright conjecture. And at times the reader quails before an over-explanatory passage: yet another earnest decoding of hep talk ("*jelly roll* can be understood on four distinct levels: first, on the literal level, it is the pastry found in bakeries. . .") or yet another elaborate rationale for Morton's habit of bragging on himself and dismissing other musicians (and saying unkind and untrue things about their

female relatives, which, you'll be relieved to learn, is okay and even admirable because it's all part of an African American ritual tradition of performative masculinity). But Pastras is absolutely right to look behind the conventional Morton for the makings of a more fully realized, more human character who more subtly inhabits his time and place—and he starts where he should, with what we can know of Morton's life.

♦ ♦ ♦

A pact-with-the-devil story is like the sudden downward dip of the dowser's wand: dig here, it says. Beneath the surface of the tale move hidden currents. A pact-with-the-devil story does not try to explain anything; it serves as a placeholder for an explanation, a burlesque of a useful account of artistic inspiration and its encounter with the marketplace. It provides a way to talk about and not talk about genius—where inspiration comes from and how it takes form in a particular time and place, how an extraordinary talent shapes a life and vice versa, the tension between the self-regarding inchoateness of genius and the channels of commerce and culture along which it must necessarily flow in order to gain public recognition. In the case of Robert Johnson, the relentless repetition of the crossroads story suggests a widely shared unwillingness to reckon forthrightly with what moves beneath it. As Wald's book argues, to look beneath the crossroads story is to confront touchy matters such as the invention of roots music as a usable past or the differences between what he labels as distinct white and black blues traditions. In the case of Jelly Roll Morton, the pact-with-the-devil story forms part of the Storyville fairy tale that has for a long time screened off the daunting messiness of struggles over ownership of musical compositions and the subtleties of a merely talented man's transformation into an artist for the ages.

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