

Son House, performer
Jeff Titon, transcriber

Son House: Two Narratives

Transcriber's Introduction

One of the few living singers who made race records before the Depression, Eddie "Son" House is living proof that one cannot be interviewed to death; quite the opposite. Meeting him on several occasions after his 1964 "rediscovery," I became intrigued as much by his storytelling as his singing. Responding to my questions about his life and music, he habitually cast his experience directly into sustained autobiographical narrative. And sometimes autobiography shaded into drama as he played out the various roles: landlord, preacher, sheriff, and so on.

A devout Christian until his mid-twenties when he took up blues, his early song lyrics (and recent conversation) reveal a personal conflict between the church and the devil's music: "just puttin your hands on a guitar," he told me, "looked to me like that was a sin." He was a sometime preacher in the 1930s, the same decade that he was best known throughout the Mississippi delta as a blues singer. His "Conversion Experience Narrative" is an excerpt from a tape-recorded conversation Son House had with me in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the Gopher Campus Motor Lodge, on May 8, 1971. I had asked him why he waited so long before taking up blues, and he replied with a reminiscence of his Christian conversion experience.

His career as a blues singer has been the subject of numerous published articles. His nine 1930 Paramount sides — only six of which have been found — are splendid examples of the Delta blues style which formed the music of two of his better known pupils, Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson. "The Death of Robert Johnson" is a narrative which preceded and introduced a song, "Levee Camp Moan," at the first Ann Arbor (Mich.) Blues Festival; I transcribed it from a tape recording I made in the audience on Aug. 3, 1969.

I tried to render both narratives in a prescriptive notation to capture something of their stress and flow: space (reading across from left to right) suggests time, while typeface indicates volume and intonation pattern, as follows:

Double-spaces between words: pause briefly, perhaps ½ sec.

Triple-spaces between words: pause briefly, perhaps ¾ sec.

Spaces between successive words (e.g., in the field an): slow the tempo.

New line: pause/break, perhaps 1 sec.

Double-spacing before new line: pause/break, perhaps 1½ sec.

Triple-spacing before new line: pause/break, perhaps 2 sec.

Boldface type: increase volume and expand intonation range.

Normal type: ordinary speech volume and intonation range.

Italic type: decrease volume and compress intonation range.

The notation is deliberately simple; it is meant as an aid for performance, not analysis; and it should, ideally, be used in conjunction with a recording.

Conversion Experience Narrative

When I was a
kid, a youngster up —
teen —
a young teenager

and
up like that I was more churchified.

*Then that's mostly all I could see into.
Cause they'd had us go — we'd had to go to the Sabbath School, uh.
Every Sunday we didn't miss goin to no Sabbath School. We'd be into that and uh
then and uh —*

in this church there some of the

ones a little larger than me and like that and it come time of year for em to run revival meetin, uh,
some pastor come to open up the revival meetin,

oh, for a week or more.

[Coughs.] Well,
*we'd all be goin to the
thing they call the mourners' bench.*

*Gettin on your knees, you know, and lettin the old folks
pray for you.*

Yeah an
in a couple of days or weeks somebody'd come up, holler out they had something.

They had religion; they'd squall round, man, go on. So they left me

that away I guess

oh about

near bout

six or eight months *sometime*.

Uh I didn't fall for it because I —I figured they was puttin on and I didn't want to be puttin on.

I wanted mine to be real and so I just kept on until finally,

[clears throat] the next session,

I said, "Is there — this one time I'm just gone see is — is any any way
to get this thing *religion they goin round here talkin about*,

puttin on and goin on."

I prayed and pray — commenced prayin man, every night;
workin

in the field an

plowin the mule and every thing. Work all day **hard** an
go on home (*whew*) tryin to pray,
tryin to pray an work.

So finally I kept on like that until

they

uh come back home that night,

middle of the night after the pastor turned out.

So I went on home and I was livin *down in the lower part the*

place from where my daddy an them stayed, down to my cousin's.

Went down there; I didn't want to be up there around the old folks.

And man I went out *back of the house*

little bit in

in this old alfalka
fie —field out there.

I had been scared of **snakes**
cause snakes would be bad in the summertime, you know, *crawlin through them weeds and things.*
But I wasn't studyin them snakes then.
I'd say they —they better get out of the way if they don't want to get their heads mashed off [laughs].

I went on; I was there in that
alfalka *field and I got down*
pray gettin on my knees

in that alfalfa.

Dew was fallin.

And man I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and

for wait awhile,
man, I hollered out.

*Found out then; I said, "Yes it is somethin to be got, too, cause I got it **now!**"*
[Laughs.] Sure did.

Went on back there to that house and told my cousin Robert and all them bout that and went
walked about
two miles and a little better

and up to another white fellow's house

and woke **him** up and told **him** all about it.

An we was workin for him, too.

But I wouldn't care

how tough he was or whatnot. "Get up out of that bed and listen to what I got to say." [Laughs.] He thought I was crazy!

Yeah.

Name was —

we all called him Mister Keaton, T. F. Keaton.

Yeah.

I say, "Oh yeah!"

Found out better now.

The Death of Robert Johnson

Yeah this blues business

it's a killer!

Yooo!

Yessirree Bob.

Yeah.

Yes it is.

You understand it good.

Now

let's see. This fellow here

he worked on the levee once.

Old Mississippi River

levee

camp.

I used to work on it myself.

He worked on it.