

# FOREFATHERS AND EARLY INFLUENCES



**JIMMIE RODGERS**  
September 8th, 1897  
Meridian, Mississippi  
Died May 26th, 1933  
New York City

If Jimmie Rodgers is generally thought of as the Father of Country Music, he must be rock's great-grandfather. In the six years that preceded Rodgers' death, from 1927 to 1933, he was a major part of the fledgling phonograph-music industry. Whether singing tales of the railroad, celebrating the West, bringing the blues around to a new folk form or touching on more pop elements, his yodel has come down to us as *the* seminal influence, the touchstone, where it all began.

Rodgers went to work with his father on the railroad at age fourteen. Absorbing work songs and chants from the men on his father's crew, he stayed on as a brakeman until tuberculosis forced him to retire. Unable to work on the railroad anymore, he turned to music, playing in a medicine show and performing in blackface for a time.

By 1927, the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers were preparing to meet Victor talent scout Ralph S. Peer. Peer advised Jimmie to go it alone, and on August 4th, 1927, he first put his voice to wax. The "Blue Yodels" that came out of those and subsequent sessions were an indication of the kind of musical cross-fertilization that has since become America's music: mournful Appalachian hill ballads, soulful black spirituals, blues and white mainstream pop — all harbingers of rock.

He held the tuberculosis at bay for another six years. Hoping to provide for his family, he entered Victor's Twenty-fourth Street Studios in New York to sing his last sides, resting on a cot between takes. On May 26th, 1933, his lonesome locomotive whistle disappeared into the far horizon, the blue yodel of them all.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**  
May 8th, 1911  
Hazelhurst, Mississippi  
Died August 16th, 1938  
Greenwood, Mississippi

Robert Johnson stands at the crossroads of American music, much as it is rumored that he once stood at a Mississippi crossroads and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his unique musical gifts. His life and art, hopelessly intermingled because of the few facts we know about him, are symbolic of the folk blues as they passed from the delta to the secular world, and of the psychic toll exacted on those who embraced a dark midnight, knowing they would never witness the dawn to follow.

It is easy to romanticize Johnson's life, and, indeed, part of his perennial attraction lies in his stark, melodramatic legend rather than the undeniable power of his music. Yet he is the link between the hard-core rural blues preserved in field recordings from the Twenties and the more sophisticated city blues that blossomed in the wake of World War II.

Born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, in 1911, Johnson learned at the knee of Son House before beginning his wandering ways. The first modern bluesman, he was influenced as much by what he heard from records (alluded to in his "Phonograph Blues") as he did from his contemporaries. On November 23rd, 1936, in a San Antonio, Texas, hotel room, he made his first recordings: such classics as "Terraplane Blues" (equating sexuality with an automobile) and "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." In "Crossroads Blues," he pleads for "mercy, save poor Bob, if you please." His anguish would become literally terrifying by the time he recorded "Hell Hound on My Trail," "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Love in Vain," among others, in Dallas on June 19th, 1937. It would be his final session.

In August 1938, he was poisoned by a jealous husband. When John Hammond searched for Johnson to join his landmark *Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall, the bluesman was already buried off Highway 7. Rumors that Johnson was playing an electric guitar and leading a small band before his death must be counted as just that — mere hearsay — unless one looks at the careers of Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. Who knows how the fine print in that crossroads contract might have read?



**JIMMY YANCEY**  
February 20th, 1898  
Chicago, Illinois  
Died September 17th, 1951

Jimmy Yancey put the boogie-woogie in rock and roll. This rhythmic accompaniment for a blues melody was an important piano style of the 1920s and '30s that took root in Chicago, where its bottom-edged beat made it a favorite backdrop for rent parties and renegade jazz jams alike.

Yancey, who had hits like "State Street Special" and "Yancey's Stomp," played a version of barrelhouse piano that was dance music, pure and simple. Using repetitive cross-rhythmic patterns that seemed more xylophonic than pianistic, Yancey bounced the percussive accents of his right hand off the rolling bass of his left, creating a dissonance and glissando that stemmed directly from the African tributary of America's pop river. He polished his act as a buck-and-wing dancer in vaudeville, but in 1925, at age twenty-seven, he left the stage to become a groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox.

When boogie-woogie was popularized by Vocalion's 1928 release of "Pine Top's Boogie Woogie," it was Clarence Smith who popped the cork on the champagne. Yancey was still working alongside such contemporary keyboard giants as Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons — and he played many a "Five O'Clock Blues" to welcome the dawn at nocturnal affairs — but he didn't record until May 1939, when barkeeper Dan Quayley set up one of the first home recorders to capture his magic.

By then, Yancey had smoothed out the rougher edges of his brand of boogie and given it a litig, melodic lift that gracefully enhanced the surging boogie-woogie power of such classics as "Midnight Stomp" and "Death Letter Blues." On September 17th, 1951, never having strayed far from his native Windy City, Yancey went to that great after-hours joint in the sky.