



Blind Willie Johnson

January 25, 1897 - September 18, 1945

Beaumont, Texas

Blind Willie Johnson - American gospel-blues singer and guitarist whose slide playing and thunderous voice still haunt modern recordings - died in Beaumont, Texas, on September 18, 1945. He was forty-eight. Born January 25, 1897, near Pendleton, Texas, he lost his sight as a child and made sacred song his livelihood: street corners, tent meetings, and a handful of Columbia sessions between 1927 and 1930 that captured "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground," "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed," and other sides that outlived the Depression that buried so many careers.

He sang as a preacher with a bottleneck, blending blues technique and gospel urgency until the categories failed. Later musicians - rock, folk, ambient - sampled and covered him; NASA's Voyager Golden Record carried "Dark Was the Night" into interstellar space as a wordless American cry. In life he remained poor. After a fire destroyed his Beaumont home in 1945, he slept in the ruins, fell ill with pneumonia and fever, and was refused hospital care; he died soon after.

The death certificate and city directories fix the date; the recordings fix the immortality. Beaumont's House of Prayer address is a thin paper trail for a voice that needed none.

He died in Beaumont on September 18, 1945. Every generation that rediscovers the Columbia sides finds the same shock: how much spirit fits on a 78.

Johnson's gift was sacred intensity - guitar and voice fused into prayer that never asked permission. Notice Nearby keeps the death date so September 18 remembers the Texas evangelist whose music left the planet.

Services

Died in Beaumont, Texas, September 18, 1945. Gospel-blues guitarist and singer; Columbia Records sessions 1927-1930; "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground" included on the Voyager Golden Record.

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